

THOUGHTS ON CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Vern S. Poythress

Winslow Homer, *Eight Bells* (1886)

Editor's Note: The following article was adapted from a note Dr. Poythress shared with the faculty and administration in 2019. Although this note was not initially intended for publication, Dr. Poythress has graciously allowed Westminster Magazine permission to share it with readers because of the valuable insight into the genesis of Westminster's emphasis on public theology that we believe it provides.

What is public theology? Should Westminster Theological Seminary be involved in public theology, and if so, how? I would like to suggest a possible foundational framework for public theology and pastoral leadership. This framework would suggest ways in which the unique cluster of resources that WTS has inherited might be used in the service of public theology.

Resources at Westminster

Many quarters of evangelicalism would like to engage in a theology related to the “public sphere.” But WTS has a depth of resources that make it valuable to think about what our distinctive contribution might be. We have a rich theological heritage in Reformed theology. We have a rich heritage of redemptive-historical interpretation of the Bible, and the use of biblical theology (from Geerhardus Vos and his followers). These potentially provide further depth in interacting with contemporary controversies. We have Van Tilian apologetics, which provides a framework for critical analysis of ideas coming out of the surrounding culture. Apologetics also instructs us on how to communicate with those who disagree. Finally, our heritage in biblical counseling, and its interaction with psychotherapy, gives us one key example of how fruitfully to interact with a cultural issue in a biblically grounded way, and not to lose our bearings in the process.

The challenge of starting further back

So how do we proceed? In my view, one of the keys is not to be too narrow with the foundation we provide for our interaction with the world. Public theology is part of a larger whole. It is not going to be done right if we are just reacting to current events or

to hot topics. We want biblical analysis, theological analysis, and cultural analysis as a wider context. Pastors have to present a biblical worldview as a background for specific exhortations.

For example, the biblical view on homosexuality or on sexual identity or on chastity will make no sense to elite culture in the West unless there is a background of a biblically based worldview. God created the world. God created mankind. God created sexuality. God created male and female. God rules history. God has a purpose for mankind as a whole and for each individual in particular. The moral law is real. God has spoken in Scripture. The message of redemption addresses the reality of human need with divine, consummate wisdom. And so on.

It strikes me also that, although one of the issues that pastors face is that of statism and church-state relations, the ethical questions are much broader. There is a danger that we would hastily focus almost wholly on the political sphere, to the neglect of other aspects of culture.¹

Main resources

So, what should go into our foundation? It should go without saying that we have as our basis the Bible itself. Subordinate to the Bible, we have the confessional standards of the seminary, the Westminster Standards. These are basic. But then what should we think about in addition, as a foundation for doing public theology? I suggest a framework for cultural analysis.

A focus on cultural analysis by itself is not the complete story. I think that it is right that we focus on pastoral leadership. We are training pastors, and they should not be left without resources for helping people to see the relation of the Christian faith to the cultural movements around them, including, pointedly, the pressures that the culture may bring to bear to suppress the gospel and the church. Though threats of removing accreditation or imposing excessive fines or criminalizing parts of the Bible are fairly new in the West, the hostility of Western elite culture to orthodox Christianity, and with it the attempt to marginalize and suppress, have been going on for decades, even a century. Middle-class people now feel it is not polite to “proselytize.” And that is the West. Because of WTS’s international character,

we ought not to forget the variegated pressures that exist in other countries.

Stimulus: Christian views of how to do history

Now what would a sound cultural analysis look like? My springboard for reflection comes from a book I have just finished reading: Jay D. Green, *Christian Historiography: Five Rival Versions* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015). It struck me that the “five rival versions” of historical analysis that the book discusses can be mapped by analogy into “five rival versions” of *cultural analysis* (though he may, in fact, articulate seven versions).² These versions got me thinking because we don’t want to be trapped in a version of cultural analysis that is not sufficiently Christian and not sufficiently robust. The only way that we are going to avoid an unhealthy dominance of philosophical speculation or neutralist sociological and cultural analysis is if we use the full resources of theology. And this includes biblical theology, which encourages us to use major biblical themes in a flexible way that brings them to bear on culture. Such use may take us beyond the superficial level of piecemeal observations based on piecemeal treatment of texts, or general principles from systematic theology. So (no surprise to those who know me), my suggestions about foundations look perspectival. The approaches Green discussed can be reshaped into perspectives. (And, of course, the “neutralist” approach will no longer be religiously neutral, but will focus on common grace benefits in existing secular approaches.)

The Creator/creature distinction is basic. But in our knowledge, the knowledge of Creator and the knowledge of creature go together. We don’t know one except in the context of the other. Because of the unity of knowledge, the following foundational areas are interpenetrating, rather than representing separable boxes. They represent aspects of the WTS heritage, plus areas that could be further developed ontologically and epistemologically, develop some specific principles for bridging this theology to the culture, and apply these foundations to cultural analysis. Special application of these principles should be made to the relationship of church and state and to our communication.

Finally, we should observe that critical sociology in

the secular world has been largely taken over by Marxist and neo-Marxist secular religion. It is religious because people give it deep commitments. It offers a counterfeit way of salvation. It is a mistake to appropriate pieces out of it, as if the pieces were independent of the religious fervor that drives it. A biblically and theologically informed approach to critical analysis of culture builds an alternative framework, not an imitative framework. Of course, there will be points of contact, because secular critical sociology has no way to be plausible except by counterfeiting the truth. (The example of biblical counseling is relevant. Biblical counseling is not just “integration” of insights here and there, nor is it an adaptation of a secular framework to give it a “biblical-looking” overlay.)

¹ I am not altogether happy about the term “public theology,” because “public” might suggest “political.” I looked at the website publictheology.us, and found near the top a kind of subtitle: “Religion | Politics | Culture.” Why is “Politics” the second term in the list? Why does that especially come to mind?

If one of our faculty writes a book, is not the book “public”? So does all theology become public as soon as it is in a book or on the internet? And even before a book or blog goes out, the pastor and the seminary professor are engaging not only with the Bible but at least indirectly with voices outside, including non-Christian voices. Everything has an apologetic dimension. So the term “public theology” could be either too broad (anything theological) or too narrow (a Christian approach to politics).

² 1. Cultural Study That Takes Religion Seriously (not marginalized as a mere epiphenomenon, as many secularist cultural analysts tend to do). 2. Cultural Study through the Lens of Christian Faith Commitments (worldview—including neo-Kuyperians) 3. Cultural Study as Applied Christian Ethics (moral evaluations and moral lessons) 4. Cultural Study as Christian Apologetics (commending Christianity by observing its cultural benefits) 5. Cultural Study as Search for God (seeing God’s hand of providence) 6. Neutralist cultural study. 7. Cultural study as vocation (potentially interpreted as supporting any one of 1-6).



Vern S. Poythress (PhD, Harvard; DTh, Stellenbosch) is Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Biblical Interpretation, and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, where he has taught for 44 years. Dr. Poythress is also an ordained teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).