

Book Review

Stephen R. Holmes (editor), *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement. Thinking Faith Series*. Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2008.

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In the extraordinary collection of previously published works, Stephen Holmes edits papers from symposia over the years hosted by The Bible Society to produce a working theology of culture: *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement*. This book provides unique and well crafted arguments that revive the importance of scripture as a public tool in a modern/postmodern environment as well as for engaging various cultural issues.

With a forward and an introduction into the nine chapters, the first chapter is brought by Stephen Holmes: “Can Theology Engage with Culture”? Holmes builds a clear foundation for the Bible as a cultural artifact that is inspired and relevant. In the second chapter, Colin J.D. Green’s “Christology, Redemption and Culture” analyzes how Christ is unveiled in each of the gospels, given the audience and theological differences. He aims at providing a Christo-centric understanding of culture that “can once again glorify the triune God” (47). In the third chapter, Robert Jensen illustrates a clever approach to “Election and Culture: from Babylon to Jerusalem” by engaging with God’s election of the Jews that “opened” to the Gentiles with Christ’s crucifixion, death, and resurrection, and how the Spirit calls cultures to Him in order to make all things new. More importantly, Jensen reminds readers that structure and discipleship were integral aspects

of the catechesis that assisted new converts with the development and survival of the church during patristic times; the contemporary church seems to have forgotten the importance of this. In the fourth chapter, Stephen Holmes returns to offer “Torah, Christ and Culture,” which argues for different “themes for a theological account that grow[s] out of this recognition that Torah is a cultural description” (78). In the fifth chapter, Colin Gunton brings “Reformation Accounts of the Church’s Response to Human Culture” by recalling the philosophical movements that sparked Reformers to reconsider the church’s stance on the natural sciences as well as the Enlightenment. Gunton suggests that an ecclesiology would do well to re-imagine a Christological Pneumatology that highlights cultural redemption instead of cultural restraint.

The next section of the book shifts to engage with cultural issues. In the sixth chapter, Luke Bretherton addresses “Consuming the Body: Contemporary Patterns of Drug Use and Theological Anthropology”; it elaborates on how drug use promotes a modern, consumer driven lifestyle that can do more harm than good. More importantly, there is recognition that an oppressed body can be redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. In the seventh chapter, Colin J.D. Greene shares “Culture and the End of Religion,” specifically that the scarcity of religion is due to the “ideological critique of religion” that has questioned the significance

and reliability of religion altogether (132). In short, the Church's lack of engagement with the natural sciences during the Enlightenment has put the Church behind, intellectually. In the eighth chapter, Brian Horne offers "The Legacy of Romanticism: Not Confusing Art and Religion." Horne suggests that art and religion have had such an intertwining, romantic, history that art can become a means of expressing faith, and thereby hints at the role aesthetics may have in drawing people to the faith. In the final chapter, Luke Bretherton returns to present "Valuing the Nation: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Theological Perspective," engaging with 'nations' as a biblical term versus an ideology that surpasses or becomes equal with God. Bretherton argues for a theological understanding of 'nation' in addition to a "theological affirmation of the socio-cultural and political reality that is 'the nation'" (172).

One of the most beneficial aspects of this collection of essays is that it encourages people to become self-critical in a constructive way that challenges presuppositions of culture, scripture, and the proper application of both. Additionally, the first chapter of this collection really sets a positive tone for reimagining culture theologically; it highlights the reality that Christ's work on the cross still redeems, offering hope to more than just lost souls; it offers hope of a better creation, world, country, state, and city. It acknowledges that God still calls out unto creation for its redemption so the Triune God can be glorified. A final benefit of this material is that it openly acknowledges the Church's historical lack of intellectual engagement. It does recognize that historically the church has not responded at times the way she should, struggling to be taken seriously with the other sciences. However, acknowledging this is the first of many steps to change the

intellectual perception of the Church so that she may mature in her public discourse.

I would add a critique to this already good collection: it could have used a stronger dose of interdisciplinary studies, especially in the areas of sociology and psychology. Yet, the editor did note that the material was deliberately theological in nature more than anything else, and thus the contributors in the volume had refrained from overstepping discipline boundaries. While I recognize the editor's point of view, the advantages of interdisciplinary discourses outweighs a single disciplinary project. Whether a project is secular or sacred, single disciplinary or interdisciplinary, it will have theological implications, and the church will need to wrestle with these trajectories sooner or later. Nonetheless, the compilation still serves as a good apology for a theological understanding of culture.

Overall, *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement* would be a great contribution for seminaries, given its attention to re-imagining scripture in a postmodern society and its response as to how the bible remains culturally relevant in a growing and diverse world.