

Public Theology

Public theology is a term coined by Martin Marty (b. 1928) to describe the sort of theology exemplified by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), who spoke addressed theological reflection not only to the **church** but also and intentionally to communities (such as the nation) outside the church. As a public theologian, Niebuhr interpreted these communities and their experiences in the light of Christian convictions, with the aim of bringing about transformation according to God's will. Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. interpreted America's experience with race in terms of the Bible's call for justice and liberation and joined that interpretation to an agenda for social change. Likewise, the representatives of the Religious Right in American politics were engaged in public theology in so far as they offered a theological interpretation of America combined with a reform agenda for politics. Public theology is therefore closely associated with **Christian ethics**.

Theology is always addressed to concrete situations and is thus **contextualized**. Proponents of public theology argue that theology's context is broader than the church and that it includes the communities outside the church. Narrowly confessional theologies and **postliberal** theologies, on the contrary, see the church as theology's only context. Whereas public theologians typically ask how God is working in their nation's experience (as, with Martin Luther King, in the civil rights movement), post-liberal theologians generally see the nation only as a problem for the church and therefore call on the church to distinguish itself from the nation.

David Tracy (b. 1939) has offered a further articulation of public theology by noting that theologians address three publics: the church, the intellectual community (the "academy"), and society at large. The implication, for Tracy, is that Christian theology is in part a dialog with audiences outside the church. As such, theologians must abide by public criteria of rationality and may also draw on sources of truth that are not overtly Christian. Paul Tillich's (1886-1965) theology illustrates this approach. He drew not only on the Christian tradition but also on insights from psychology, philosophy and art. The view represented by Tracy and Tillich is opposed by postliberal theologians, who believe that Christian theology should employ only Christian norms of rationality and that its one and only source of truth is **revelation**.

Much discussion about public theology is concerned with methodological issues, such as theology's sources and norms. However, sometimes public theology is simply a matter of the church presenting its message for public consideration, as in the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops' official statements on **justice** and on **war**. In such cases, the Christian community declares its convictions to the public at large with the intent of changing public opinion and policy and bringing them into conformity with God's will.