

Author Meets Critics: A Theology of Public Life

Opening remarks by **Erik Owens**

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We are here today to discuss a provocative and important new book by Charles Mathewes, entitled *A Theology of Public Life*. In it he lays out an Augustinian model by which Christians should understand the relationship of religion and public life. He explains why Christians should care about public life—a realm much broader than mere politics—how they should engage this realm, and what will happen to them as Christians when they do so. It asks not, as Mathewes puts it, “What does God have to do with politics?” but rather “What does politics have to do with God?” This distinction hints at the important difference he sees between a “public theology” (the typical version of which, he argues, self-destructively accommodationist) and a “theology of public life” more completely rooted in Christian theology.

To discuss the concept of public theology, and the many other issues raised in this extraordinarily rich book, I am pleased to introduce our all-star panel of theological ethicists, each of whom has helped to shape the current discourse on public theology in important ways.

Charles Mathewes is Associate Professor of Religious Ethics and the History of Christian Thought at the University of Virginia, and a faculty fellow at UVA’s Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. His research interests, as anyone who knows him can attest, are extraordinarily wide-ranging, but all his work is grounded in a deep Augustinian sensibility that we will hear more about today. In addition to *A Theology of Public Life*, he is the author of *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (also from Cambridge press, relatively recently out in paperback). He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

David Hollenbach, S.J. is the Margaret O'Brien Flatley Professor of Theology at Boston College, and Director of BC's Center for Human Rights and International Justice. A Jesuit priest, Fr. Hollenbach is the author of *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, and was a key force behind the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' seminal 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*. Fr. Hollenbach teaches regularly at Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya, and his practical and theoretical work on refugee issues can be read in several recent books and articles, including his 2003 book *The Global Face of Public Faith: Politics, Human Rights, and Christian Ethics*. For these and other reasons in 1998 he received the Catholic Theological Society's John Courtney Murray Award for distinguished achievement in theology—an honor named after another great public theologian. He holds a Ph.D. in Religious Ethics from Yale University.

Ronald Thiemann is Bussey Professor at Harvard Divinity School, but is also affiliated with Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and the Kennedy School's Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, where he serves on the steering committee of the center's Joint Program in Religion and Public Life. An ordained Lutheran and a specialist on the role of religion in public life, Thiemann helped to define the contemporary conversation about public theology with his 1991 book *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*. He is also the author of *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy*, and most recently *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (2005). He is presently at work on a book entitled *Prisoners of Conscience: Public Intellectuals in a Time of Crisis*. Professor Thiemann's Ph.D. is also from Yale University.

Our goal is to allow the author to meet his critics on this panel and in the audience, so we will leave plenty of time for discussion. Chuck will begin with a 5-minute introduction, to be followed by 15-minute comments by David and Ron. Chuck will then have 10-15 minutes to respond to the comments, leaving about 45 minutes for discussion. So let's get started.