

Publics, Apologetics, and Ethics: An Interview with Max L. Stackhouse

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Interviewed by Dr. Ken Chase, Director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics, on the Wheaton College campus, March 16, 2001.

On Public Theologians

Chase: *One of your contributions over the years has been in the area of public theology. Consequently, you also have written about the role of the public intellectual. Sometimes we think of public intellectuals as people who can provide sound bits on nightly news programs or talk shows, and yet you have a richer concept of the public intellectual. What do you see as the role of public intellectuals today? In particular, what is the role of the public theologian?*

Stackhouse: Well, there is an increasingly popular tradition for the public intellectual; very often, an historian or a political scientist becomes a commentator who gives a wise interpretation of current events in a pithy form. One of them—you would recognize if I named him—once told me, “Here’s how to become a public intellectual. When they say they want to interview you, you take out a 3x5 card, and you write down what you want to say in a couple of clever sentences. They will always come back for more. And when they ask you a question, you pay no attention to the question, but you get in your sound bite, artfully delivered, for they can retape their question to fit your answer and get what they want.” My view of a public theologian is really quite different. It also differs from a religious commentator. Martin Marty, for example, makes many pertinent comments on current events in religion. He doesn’t claim to be a public theologian. He is a commentator on public events from a religious point of view. Public theology, as I understand it—and several of us are trying to develop the concept—is one in which the motifs of theological discourse—the critical concepts that are basic to the faith—are held to be not esoteric. These motifs are not for believers in the sense that you have to be totally on the inside of the faith in order to even understand the vocabulary. Rather, what we are talking about can be discussed with nonbelievers and believers in other faiths. We can carry on a dialogue, a dispute, an argument, an apology; we can preach in ways and speak in ways that can make sense because there is a certain profound *logos* that is behind the way you speak of *theos*. So a *theos logos* (the profound coherence of the true divine reality) has a certain capacity to communicate if done with care. Of course, you don’t toss immediately to a nonbeliever complex debates about the relationship between apocalyptic imagery and eschatological probability. This is not how you talk in public. But you can carry on a conversation with the idea that you live under certain absolute principles and toward certain ultimate purposes that are beyond our capacity to discuss or accomplish without reference to God.

Chase: *Of course, when we talk about having conversations in today’s climate, at least in late modernism or postmodernism, this usually involves concepts of dialogue. Many people advocate that when we enter into dialogue with others we must be open, we must learn, we must grow, we must be willing to change our viewpoints as we hear the better idea expressed by a dialogue participant. Yet a public theologian must maintain convictions, and you have mentioned that there is an apologetic function of a public theologian. How do you reconcile the desire to maintain an apologetic stance with the desire to participate in dialogue?*

Stackhouse: From very early on one of the meanings of apologetics was that you enter into another person’s vocabulary and worldview as best you can, and the very fact that we can do that in some

measure suggests that there is some deep contact between humans. Some profound creational theology is behind that: we are all children of God, whether everyone acknowledges it or not, and we can enter into one another's vocabulary and begin to articulate the most profound things that we think are really true. And we can acknowledge when they say things that are close, and we can adapt ourselves into it. I am very impressed with one of my friend's books. Lamin Sanneh's *Translating the Message* points out that wherever missionaries have gone, the first thing they do is sit at the feet of the people and learn the language. After they learn the language, they translate the scriptures into the language. I guess the theological explanation of this would be that the Holy Spirit has gone before the missionaries so all the words you need to talk about God and Christ are already present in the language of the people, in the other's discourse. I say this is also true in certain forms of philosophical theology, which is what you do when you do apologetics.

Chase: *So, you are actually looking for keys or insights in the languages of contemporary philosophy or contemporary culture.*

Stackhouse: And other cultures around the world. Our public is much expanded now in a global era so we are not just speaking of western philosophy.

Chase: *So you use those languages as touchstones, or as apologetic jumping-off points, to move into public theological proclamations. Is that correct?*

Stackhouse: Well, actually we move into theological persuasion. When you are doing apologetics, there is one form of it that I do not think is the right way to go. That is to knock down every other possibility and to lay down your own understanding as the noble and complete truth. That should not be seen as apologetics; it is more "polemics." I don't think very many theologians know everything about the total truth of the gospel or the truth of God. But you can enter into the recognition of truth where you can find it, knowing that it is in the theological framework out of the Biblical heritage. You can recognize truth when it is there. That is the kind of capacity for recognition, of value, worth, dignity in people's thoughts, cultures, and so forth. I think there are traces of that already in the scriptural record itself.

Chase: *In what sense is that dialogic? This sounds more like an advocacy position, although sensitively articulated.*

Stackhouse: Oh, I think that it is possible in the long run that everyone who entered into this process could be persuaded to become a Buddhist. I don't think it is likely. I really think there is a different objective here. When we say, "Christ is Lord, and God is just," we are making claims that are defensible in discourse in the face of those who don't believe those things. And I think that there are better reasons for Buddhists to become Christians than there are for Christians to become Buddhists. Public theology at one level will test this conviction by engaging in that discourse.

Understanding the Public

Chase: *One of the terms that we have been using here is 'public'—public intellectuals and public theology. And yet one of your contributions to theology, specifically in your recent work on God and globalization, is that you are moving away from a concept of public and into a concept of different spheres involving powers and dominions and authorities.*

Stackhouse: This is our attempt to speak of a wider definition of public.

Chase: *Okay, say a little bit more about why we need to broaden our concept of public and, in particular, how you broaden that concept.*

Stackhouse: The ordinary way that many people think of public is the distinction of public and private. In fact, when they say public, they often mean political. And I don't mean that, and as a matter of fact, in a global world, a governmental function is not universal. It is neither general nor public enough. It is our government or somebody else's specific government, and therefore it is culturally, socially, and geographically confined. But other areas of life are more public. One example we can use is the simple notion of a publicly owned corporation. Arabs, Japanese, Westerners, and Europeans can own it. All kinds of combinations of people can participate in that, and that is, in a sense, more public than any government. But, it is also the case that there is a variety of spheres—sectors of life—in which people interact. This is the real public in which people often live, and it includes such things as family life. We think family life is incredibly private, but in fact, the structure of family existence is a public reality in every culture, every society, and every known history, and Christians respect the integrity of a decent family no matter what the religion of the husband, wife, and kids. Yes, I know there are some differences in the way family is put together, but you can recognize people who are married when you are in any culture. It is an institution. It is a public reality, and there are cross-cultural marriages of various kinds. Many today talk about globalization as a public reality. It is not only economic, but technological and legal, and it is increasingly a public factor. The Internet is fantastic in this regard. The last time I was in China, I'd turn on the television and you'd have CNN out of Atlanta. That is a public now, creating a new kind of media public that is broader than any governmental agency. So, there are a number of spheres of human interaction that are the real societal— or civilization-wide public. We have not attended to that dimension as closely.

Chase: *You emphasize, therefore, that rather than simply isolating a public or trying to identify a public, other powers can be identified that animate our shared life together.*

Stackhouse: That's right. There are several publics.

Chase: *And you break down these powers into different areas or divisions,*

Stackhouse: Yes, I do.

Chase: *and to each you give a different status. You have described them as authorities, as principalities, as dominions. All of these are powers.*

Stackhouse: Correct! They are powers that can take a shape, and they need housing. To go back to the family example, we could use the example of eros. Eros is the drive of desire, sexual desire, and it needs a proper housing—what Catholics call a sacramental and Protestants call a covenantal bonding. It needs guidance, containment, and celebration, so that it give glory to God and serves the well-being of the human community and neither masters nor distorts these. And that is true with mammon. Mammon can become a god if it lacks housing, but properly contained in a well-regulated and well-run corporation working in a fair market and under just laws, there you've got a housing. And mammon can be tamed and contained; always perhaps a temptation to some, but nevertheless, there is an arena and that becomes a kind of public, a structure that houses this kind of power and potency.

Chase: *Let me ask you about the status of those concepts—eros and mammon, for instance. We can talk about human drives and human institutions, yet you prefer to talk about dominions or principalities or authorities.*

Stackhouse: Well, I do.

Chase: *Why that shift?*

Stackhouse: The reason is because the Pauline letters recognize that these things are spiritually and morally labeled. They are not just neutral forces. These are not mechanical, although they have mechanical and structural phenomena that can be properly analyzed by social scientists. They also have this psycho-spiritual potency for us that we are not acknowledging, and hence they sometimes possess us and possess aspects of a society.

Chase: *So by eros, you not only get the human potency, but you also get the spiritual dimension, the moral dimension.*

Stackhouse: It points towards the necessity of that inclusion, if you really want to understand the dynamics of it.

Chase: *So when Paul speaks about principalities and authorities, he is not merely speaking of a supernatural, spiritual world, and he is clearly not merely speaking of . . .*

Stackhouse: . . . of nothing

Chase: . . . or of merely natural human processes.

Stackhouse: He is acknowledging it, pointing us to the fact that these things are real human historical psychosocial realities, and they have spiritual pertinence. And they can tempt us away from Christ. And Christ is putting them under the control of God where they belong, and from whom they have declared independence and tempt us all to fall into chaos.

Chase: *Is there a specific scriptural basis for the way that you have developed your concepts of authorities, dominions or principalities?*

Stackhouse: Yes, Ephesians has four or five references. Colossians has three or four. And those texts are really potent. There are about thirty references to this in the New Testament alone and maybe ten or twelve in the Old Testament. The Biblical scholar Walter Wink in his series on "Naming the Powers" has written this up in a very interesting way. So did John Howard Yoder before his death. Their Biblical scholarship, in my view, is stronger than the Anabaptist conclusions they draw from their scholarship, but they are on to something. Wink, for instance, concludes, basically, "we should avoid them and resist them." I don't think the texts point in that direction. It is much more, "allow yourself, under Christ, to encounter and transform them." So I have a more engaged perspective. He is engaged in a negative oppositional way, I am trying to persuade people that the more authentic Biblical way, the theological way to go, is to engage the powers. Don't avoid these things, but by the grace of God, enter into participation and transformation of them to the glory of God.

Chase: *In fact, the way you work with these concepts is consistent with your statement on public theology.*

Stackhouse: Exactly, I hope it is in sync.

Christian Ethics

Chase: *In an article titled “Humanism After Tillich” published in First Things (72 [April 1997]: 24-28; an earlier version was presented as the Tillich memorial lecture at Harvard University) you advocated rejuvenating or reconstructing, at this strategic historical moment, a humanism along theological lines. As part of this argument, you raised two questions. One of the questions you asked is, “What kind of faith and morals ought to be universal?” How would you answer that?*

Stackhouse: I think that is what Christian public theology is about; it tries to make the case if it can. That is one of the reasons I turned in that article to Paul Tillich. He was very important in my personal development. There are not a lot of people who say they were converted to Christianity by Paul Tillich, but I happen to be one of them. I was raised in a Christian family and dropped it, and he sort of re-converted me. I thought that you either had to be faithful or you had to be intellectually honest. Tillich was the man who taught me by his own struggles that you could be both faithful and intellectually honest. He believed that there was a place in faith for doubt because the faith could comprehend and finally override the doubt, even though the doubting had to be acknowledged. I was going through that at a certain stage in my life. And I do think Christian theology is the most compelling way to face profound doubt, and so did he. Tillich’s *Systematic Theology* is a great work, and it is seldom noted as being organized according to the doctrine of Trinity. So the world in which we live, its being and our existence, has to do, of course, with the creator, and Christ and the crisis of death is the topic of the second long volume, and the third volume, which is even longer, is on the Holy Spirit and has to do with the dynamics of historical change toward what God has promised.

Chase: *So the answer to the question “What kind of faith and morals ought be universal?” is straightforward. It is Christian faith and the morality embedded in it.*

Stackhouse: Christian Trinitarian Theology. Yes. But let me go back one step. Why take up the question of a Christian humanism? It is because of a public theological interest. Today in postmodern thought it is doubted that you can do anything cross-culturally or “cross-group.” Everything is highly specific and so radically contextualized and particularized that there is doubt whether there is a common humanity as well as a common Divine. Christians have to argue, and I think the empirical evidence is overwhelming, that it makes sense to use the word “human.”

Chase: *There is a human agent acting in the world, and we have to preserve that notion.*

Stackhouse: And it is simply a racist concept that says, “We are people, and others are less people.” That confines “human” to some particular “us.” That idea is false.

Chase: *And certainly you would believe that Christian ethical teaching supports that concept.*

Stackhouse: The image of God in all is one key concept. Christ is the new Adam, which is the concept that applies to all humanity. He takes all humanity into Himself in the new Adam concept.

Chase: *The second question you asked in that article was, “What authentic personal transformations or conversions are required of us?” How would you answer you own question?*

Stackhouse: The mainline church of which I am a part (and in some ways to which I remain loyal) has forgotten the absolute necessity of personal conversion. This means a fundamental change of consciousness at some time. The evangelical tradition is stronger in presenting that. And you know I have some criticism of the evangelical tradition for not being adequately public in the way in which evangelicals argue their case. But the personal coming to conviction is indispensable and critical. This

involves a process of repentance and an awareness of justification and, I am enough of a Calvinist to say, a beginning along the road to sanctification.

Chase: *Finally, what are some of the writings on Christian ethics that you consider to be touchstone? When you teach a general Christian ethics course at Princeton, what is on your syllabus?*

Stackhouse: Augustine's *City of God*. Sections from the "Secunda Secundae" of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, particularly on the theological virtues where he spells out the relationship between what the Catholics call natural law and love, a very significant topic. Obviously, Calvin. And Bullinger, who happens to be one of my favorites, and he is neglected. The little book he has done on the covenant is just terrific [editor's note: Heinrich Bullinger's book, *The One and Eternal Covenant of God* (1534), is available in Charles McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism* (Westminster/John Knox, 1991)]. Also I take up Jonathan Edwards; he is key in my own thought, and aspects of his more evangelical ontology parallel Paul Tillich's in surprising ways. Abraham Kuyper: I almost always mention him. That conservative Dutch Calvinist was, interestingly enough, a friend of Ernst Troeltsch. So you have a liberal Lutheran Ernst Troeltsch, teacher of Paul Tillich, and you have a conservative Calvinist Kuyper, and they were friends, and I am a friend of both of them. Then the twentieth century figures that have played a role, especially in my own thinking, would be, not only Paul Tillich, whom we have mentioned—though I am really not a Tillichian always—but also Reinhold Niebuhr and, in some ways his brother, H. Richard.

Chase: *Which work of Reinhold Niebuhr's would you recommend?*

Stackhouse: *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, the famous two volume Gifford lectures that he gave in 1939/40/41. It came out in '41 in the midst of the war years. He knew how to face crisis and the reality of evil, and sin. His treatment of sin seems to me to be quite correct. A concept of sin is indispensable to doing ethics if you don't want to become a false idealist. You have to be somewhat realistic about these things. Well, that is a list of the classics. If I could construct a longer list I would mention many colleagues who are alive and writing today whom I greatly admire.

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