The Role of Public Theology in a Crisis
Lauren Jackson, NY Times 3.22.26

A friend and I were sitting at a table this week, talking in hushed tones about something heavy and hard she had been going through. (Hospitals, lots of hospitals.) She told me that in the bleaker moments, she'd been surprised she was reading more religious texts. She lowered her voice to a whisper, raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes. "You just need something more when it's really bad," she said. "Something more meaningful." It was as though she were disclosing some big secret. But she's hardly alone.

When people are struggling with something, they often go looking for answers to big, hard questions. But what about when a whole society is facing a crisis — war, economic collapse, political upheaval, revolution. What voices and sources help us navigate our collective struggle? That's where public theology comes in.

What is public theology? People have always talked of God in the public square. Faith leaders, scholars, activists and politicians all bring religion to bear on otherwise secular issues, like public policy, economics and social norms. Around the middle of the 20th century, academics named that phenomenon "public theology."

This was not just pastors sharing their religious views outside their pulpits. It was high-profile Christians using the reasoning of religious traditions to address the world wars, the Great Depression and, later, the civil rights movement. Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the most famous American theologian, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were the two most visible examples. This wasn't evangelism. It was about saying: Religion has been thinking about poverty, power, suffering and justice for a very long time, and it has something to offer contemporary politics that purely secular frameworks do not. By the beginning of the 21st century, though, religious rhetoric became less welcome and germane in the public sphere and theology mostly returned to religious studies departments and houses of worship.

The pendulum appears to be swinging back. Religion is hyper-visible in public life right now. It's the currency and vernacular of modern conservatism. It courses through conversations in the online manosphere, as well as the White House. But it's also popping up more in Silicon Valley and Hollywood.

Like my friend wrestling with grief, people seem to be seeking solutions that go deeper than the logic of liberalism, utilitarian ethics and technocratic policy debates. They email me asking about meaning, about suffering, about what we owe one another and why. Those are inherently theological questions.

Augustine wrote "The City of God" after Rome, the eternal city, was sacked. Ibn Khaldun, the 14th-century Islamic political theorist, developed his vision for a better society as a plague swept Tunisia. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh rose to prominence protesting the Vietnam War. The prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Bible is almost entirely addressed to respond to political catastrophes.

Today, we have James Talarico, the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate from Texas, pioneering a new Christian populism from the left. Pema Chodron, the Buddhist nun, is guiding how we think about suffering. Eboo Patel of Interfaith America is discussing pluralism. Esau McCaulley at Wheaton College is writing about African American biblical interpretation. And the professor and author Kate Bowler is studying the stories we tell ourselves — and how they shape us.

Does all of this amount to a revival of public theology? "We need to redefine that term for today," said Liz Bucar, a professor of religion at Northeastern University and the author of a new book on religious innovation. What public theology should not include, she said, is people simply espousing their religious convictions to a million Instagram followers, or using religion to fuel polarization. Instead, Bucar said, it should be about people trying to start conversations about public affairs that are inclusive of religious and spiritual concerns. Conversations that are thoughtful and deliberative that favor openness over outrage.

Charles Mathewes and Paul Dafydd Jones, religious studies professors at the University of Virginia, wrote an important article about modern public theology a few years back. "Our deepest commitments are better off being visible and legible to the world," they argued, "for not to know about those commitments is not to know something civically important about us." At its best, they said, public theology is a form of civic participation. One "that combines contemplation, prudence and a hopeful democratic sensibility," they wrote. That, Mathewes told me, is an antidote to even the most serious crises.

One place public theology is happening, Bucar pointed out, is right here at The New York Times on "The Interview." It's a weekly conversation, usually with famous people, hosted by David Marchese and Lulu Garcia-Navarro. I asked David what he thought that was all about. He said this: In my interview with the economist Herman Daly, I was expecting to talk solely about the concept of economic growth, but we wound our way to talking about spiritual and religious purpose. And then when I spoke with the "Hamnet" director Chloé Zhao, what I'd been thinking was going to be a discussion largely about her films turned into a conversation much more about, in her words, "what it means to be human."

I asked: Is there something in your background that inclines you to guide conversations in this direction? His response: I am atheist, but I consider myself Jewish. I had a bar mitzvah. We used to go to high holidays. My dad converted to Judaism. He was born in Italy, and his whole side of the family is Catholic. So I've also been to Mass a bunch of times. Religion has always, in some way, been in my life. And I don't really have a relationship with my father anymore, but when I still did, he got really into sort of esoteric occult stuff, like Rosicrucianism and numerology and kabbalah. I think it may be an outgrowth of the dissolution of our relationship. When you lose a central relationship, you go looking for answers: What is the good life? Where do you find meaning?

I also once read about an environmental activist who said the front page of every newspaper should have in big text somewhere: "None of this is as important as the climate crisis." There's a parallel with these topics. Nothing is as important as how we decide what makes lives good and worthwhile and what gives us morality.