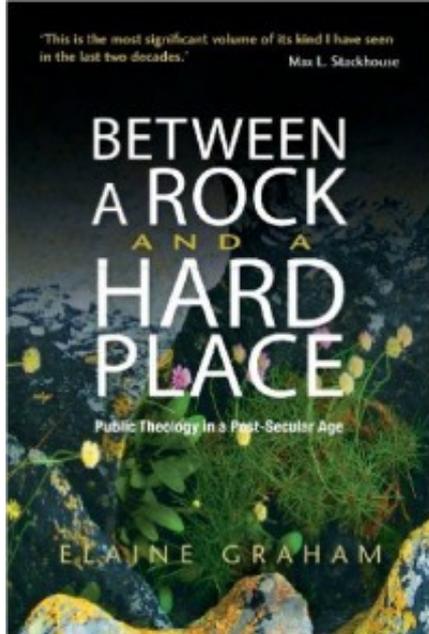


## Book Review: 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place' by Elaine Graham

Review of 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age' by Elaine Graham (London: SCM, 2013).



Greens Senator Larissa Waters asked in parliamentary question time, on Monday 22 June 2015, if Prime Minister Tony Abbott, being a Catholic and someone who trained for the priesthood, would listen to Pope Francis' recent encyclical which called for an urgent moral response to climate change..<sup>[1]</sup> The President of the Senate stated that it was not in order to refer to a Senator's religion, so ruled that part of the question out of order. The Deputy Government leader in the Senate, George Brandis, representing the Prime Minister, responded by suggesting that reflecting on the religious beliefs of any member of parliament is 'disgusting'.

It seems the cultural script that religion and politics should not mix is alive and well in Canberra.

What is the role, then, of religions and religious leaders in public discourse? Is faith merely a private devotional matter with no relevance for the public world of civic leadership, or is it part of a potentially valuable and values-based contribution? What is the basis of listening to one another's perspectives –religious leaders learning from other sectors; secular leaders attending to faith?

Sitting with these questions, I welcomed this new resource on public theology *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*. Elaine Graham is Grosvenor Research Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Chester and a leading advocate in the UK and internationally for the public relevance of theology for the common good. She offers a compelling vision for the appropriate

place of religious and theological voices on public and political issues.

Graham explains that we live in a society where institutional religion is declining, yet there is a new visibility of religion in public affairs. Moreover, interest in spirituality is growing. Many subscribe to 'no religion', the so-called 'apatheists'. Yet Generation Y could be aptly labelled 'generation SBNR', spiritual but not religious. Contrary to secularization predictions, we live in a 'post-secular' era where religion is still present yet its place and contribution is contested.

The purely secular response is to argue religion has no place in the public square, and that to suggest otherwise is 'disgusting' or at least unenlightened.

Some special interest political groups with religious motivation seek to restore supposed Christian values. They want to re-assert the privileged place the Church held in Christendom and its right to impose its morality. Conservative groups conspire against aggressive secularism, dangerous multiculturalism and radical Islam, fostering a narrative of persecution. Graham explains this is a form of identity politics. Some individuals in Europe are going to court for discrimination for religious dress or stances on moral issues, often not prepared for reasonable negotiation out of court and preferring to present themselves as fighting a crusade for values under siege. In Australia certain preachers have relished court appearances to defend their racial and religious vilification, apparently despising those who take a more progressive position on tolerance and inclusion.

Graham addresses what she critiques as inadequate responses – from secular critics of religion in public life and also from religious leaders asserting their position as privileged over others. She presents a high view of 'public theology' as studying and communicating the relevance of Christian thought and practice for public life and the common good. Public theology, she suggests, negotiates between the apparently immovable 'rock' of religious resurgence and the irresistible 'hard place' of secularism and institutional decline, or between faithfulness to Christian tradition and openness to diverse and critical conversation in the public domain. Graham's portrayal of apologetics is refreshingly recast to include not primarily rational argument for the veracity of propositional claims, but an appeal to live well and act justly for the common good of society.

Graham does not claim a place of privilege as if church was the centre of society. She maintains that Christian thought and practice offers resources for addressing the violence and consumerism, competition and lack of character evident in the world. She urges drawing on a transcendent grounding from religious tradition for concepts of justice, human dignity and the relief of suffering. But she warns religious leaders to speak and translate relevantly and understandably, rather than risk withdrawing into an unintelligible ghetto.

A strength of the book is its breadth of engagement with the literature on how religion influences society, or in missional terms, how gospel engages culture. As well as conservative appeals for the restoration of Christendom values, there are more emancipatory contributions from Catholic Social Teaching on the common good and from Anglican social thought. Graham explains different writers and schools of thought – conservative, liberal, post-liberal and radical orthodoxy.

Among the writers she discussed, I was inspired to read more of Graham Ward's cultural apologetics; Luke Bretherton's praxis of citizenship including attentive listening to the world's cry for justice and human flourishing; Max Stackhouse's appeal for the apologetic function of public theology as dialogue about practical wisdom and contribution to the common good; and Gustavo Gutiérrez's concern not just for the 'non-believer' but for justice and liberation for the 'non-person' on the margins of society.

Graham concludes with words that answer Senator Brandis' suggestion that to speak of a parliamentarian's faith is 'disgusting', as if that should be separate from the political process:

'Actions may speak louder than words, but the nature of post-secular condition suggests that while practical care and service constitutes the essential praxis of public theology, faith-based contributions must not be marginalized by their own hesitancy to speak of faith in public. Public theology is not only concerned to do theology about public issues, but called to do its theology in public, with a sense of transparency to those of other faiths and none. While there may be times when the Church speaks and people do not listen, that is never a reason for not speaking at all. I am calling, therefore, for public theology ... to underpin the vocation of the public Church as it is called to speak truth to power and seek the welfare of the city.' (pp.232-3)

The place of religion and public theology is not taken for granted today, but people of faith must nevertheless resist pressure to 'bracket out' moral or religious convictions.

Prof. Elaine Graham offers a valuable resource for navigating the development and communication of public theology in Western post-secular society. *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* will prove to be a seminal book on public theology, and insightful for anyone interested in the place of religion in contemporary Western society.

This review was previously published on the Baptist Union of Victoria Blog: <http://www.buv.com.au/buvblog/entry/religion-and-public-discourse-the-basis-for-listening-to-the-perspectives-of-others>

[1] "Liberals 'disgusted' after Larissa Waters asks if Tony Abbott will listen to Pope on climate change – video", Monday 22 June, 2015, [http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/video/2015/jun/22/liberals-disgusted-after-greens-larissa-waters-asks-if-catholic-tony-abbott-will-listen-to-pope-on-climate-change-video?CMP=soc\\_567](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/video/2015/jun/22/liberals-disgusted-after-greens-larissa-waters-asks-if-catholic-tony-abbott-will-listen-to-pope-on-climate-change-video?CMP=soc_567)