

The Search for a Public Christianity?

*In recent decades, a number of organisations have been established to explore the intersection of faith and Christianity. An early example, the Zadok Centre, was founded in Canberra in 1976 by its inaugural director Dr David Millikan. He co-edited the influential early compendium *The Shape of Belief: Christianity in Australia* (1982), and also developed the TV series *The Sunburnt Soul* (1981). A more recent example is the *Ethos Institute* (not to be confused with the Australian organisation) formed in Singapore in 2014.*

The base for the groups is usually Protestant and evangelical in theological orientation. These organisations often have a different understanding of the place of the Church in the world compared to many mainstream Christian groups. They often see themselves in distinction to contemporary culture rather than as a part of it. In comparison, many Catholic organisations, orders and dioceses have internal groups or commissions that consider the public interface of the Christian faith, within a Catholic understanding and Catholic moral theology.

At another level, the development of these organisations over recent decades reflects the interdenominational co-operation that is prevalent in evangelical circles. But they have also emerged from an awareness of the changed position in society of this section of the church in general, and especially evangelical Christianity. They involve concerted attempts to initiate conversation, firstly within their own constituency about contemporary issues, but more importantly, within the wider public sphere.

The following is a brief overview of several groups working in the arena of public Christianity.

England

London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC): <http://www.licc.org.uk/>

The LICC was founded in 1982 by Christian author and preacher John Stott. The website states that LICC

exists to envision and equip Christians and their churches for whole-life missionary discipleship in the world. We seek to serve them with biblical frameworks, practical resources, training and models so that they flourish as followers of Jesus and grow as whole-life discipling communities.

LICC has a particular focus on helping Christians understand contemporary culture, and holds seminars on many areas, including visual media. There is also a focus on the nature of 'work'. LICC sees this issue as a frontline for apologetic contact today for ordinary Christians. It seeks to enhance their involvement and help Christians take seriously their calling and ministry in a wide variety of areas.

Theos think tank: <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/home>

Theos was established in 2006 and positions itself firmly as a 'religious think tank', stating that it seeks 'to inform the debate about the place of religion in society, challenging ill-informed thinking through our research, events and media comment'. Theos argues that England is in a 'post-secular age', but believes there is still deep interest in spiritual matters and an increasingly diverse and religious landscape. Importantly they argue that

it is impossible to understand the modern world without an understanding of religion. We also believe that much of the debate about the role and place of religion has been unnecessarily emotive and ill-informed. We reject the notion of any possible 'neutral' perspective on these issues.

Its first report established the focus: "Doing God"; a Future for Faith in the Public Square written by Nick Spencer: <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/files/files/Reports/TheosBookletfinal.pdf>

Areas of work include chaplaincy, sport, multiculturalism, Christian education, and religious liberty. It has also addressed a very particular English issue: religious representation in the House of Lords. Other areas of interest include religion and the law, examination of ethics and values in economic policy and the practice and role of religion in international affairs.

Scotland

Solas Centre for Public Christianity: <http://www.solas-cpc.org/>

Solas was founded in 2010 and highlights its more modern approach by outlining that some people may think they are involved in 'apologetics', but they prefer the term 'persuasive evangelism'. A verse in 1 Peter 3: 15 is highlighted:

¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (NIV).

Solas seeks to bring the gospel to bear on all areas of public life: politics, art, and the workplace. It seeks to engage the church and wider society, especially through university debates, cafe discussions,

newspaper articles, government white papers, social media, and arts. Its Solas Papers on contemporary issues in Scotland are available in pdf booklets.

Singapore

ETHOS Institute: <http://ethosinstitute.sg/about-ethos/>

ETHOS Institute™ was formed in 2014 by a number of Christian organisations: the National Council of Churches in Singapore, Trinity Theological College and The Bible Society of Singapore. It seeks to serve church and society by engaging contemporary issues and trends from the Christian perspective, offering lectures, seminars and resources.

Two major areas of focus are:

- Education and Society (A Christian vision of public education in Singapore) – first Engage Series Book produced in July 2015.
- Children and Youth. A report was released in August 2015 to help 'identify and describe the scope and nature of ministry to children and youth which presently exists in' Singapore.

Australia

In Australia there are two prominent public Christianity groups:

Ethos Centre for Christianity and Society: <http://www.ethos.org.au/>

Ethos was formed by the merging of the Zadok Institute for Christianity and Society and the Evangelical Alliance's Department of Public Theology. EA established a Public Theology Department in 2004, producing resources and comment on contemporary issues for its members and the wider church. The Zadok Institute for Christianity and Society was an independent organisation (originally the Zadok Centre) and has a long tradition of working with lay people to develop informed opinion, especially on spirituality, work and life following a Christian world-view. Zadok was well-known for its *Perspectives Magazine* and *Papers* on specialist topics. Ethos now produces these publications as well as organising conference and seminars, including visiting speakers to highlight current issues and trends in the church and society. The director of Ethos is the theologian and writer, Dr Gordon Preece.

Centre for Public Christianity (CPX): <https://publicchristianity.org/>

CPX is a not-for-profit independent and non-denominational media company founded in 2007 that offers Christian perspectives on contemporary issues. It has a particular focus on generating and developing public contact and awareness of

the relevance and importance of the Christian faith and providing positions on issues. It does this by engaging, through its staff and research fellows, mainstream media and the general public with media articles, book and film reviews, video interviews and podcasts. It also uses high-profile Australian and visiting Christian scholars in its activities. Its staff contribute frequently to newspaper and media publications including the ABC media and are often quoted. CPX has a high profile, notably through its founding director, John Dickson, and Executive Director, Simon Smart. CPX hosts the Annual Richard Johnson Lecture in Sydney and sponsors a number of events and conferences. In the past 2 years, it has notably connected with Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf, the author of *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*.

Conclusion

Christian think tanks may be seen as a new form of mission group, different from the apologetic 'open-air campaigners' of the past. They have a more intellectual and cerebral form of engagement. But they are also similar in that they want to reach out to and engage with members of contemporary society. They use contemporary technology. A common element in these groups is significant contact with mainstream media and thus direct input into the media, including high-profile media programs. For example in Australia, John Dickson has been on the flagship ABC program Q & A.

In past decades, Christian comment in the media often came from Church leaders and officials. Today, comment is often provided by public Christianity figures who are seeking to engage the wider public. Sometimes secular media seek out these groups for their perspectives, perhaps partly because of their ability to put their views coherently, but perhaps also because they do not see them as representing specific denominational traditions.

Peter Bentley

SAVE THE DATE
Friday 3rd June 2016
CRA Dinner celebrating Philip Hughes' ministry with the CRA over 31 years.
Friday 29th January 2016
Youth Ministry Directions roundtable at Eastern College (formerly Tabor (Vic)).
Saturday 30th January 2016
Training Day for Youth Leaders at Eastern College.