Author Meets Critics: A Theology of Public Life

Response by **Ronald Thiemann**
Bussey Professor of Theology
Harvard Divinity School

BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE
BOSTON COLLEGE, CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS
OCTOBER 11, 2007

1. *Appreciation*. I'm pleased and honored to be a part of this discussion of Charles Mathewes' new book. *A Theology of Public Life* is a learned, erudite, and creative contribution to current discussions about religion's role in public life. In contrast to many books that deal with this subject matter Mathewes' book is resolutely theological in outlook – eschewing the tired clichés that often cling to works in this genre – and offering the reader a robust, bold, and thoroughly Augustinian theology of public life. This is an important book that deserves the attention and scrutiny it will surely receive. I congratulate the organizers of this symposium for recognizing the significance of this book by launching this public discussion. I will admit from the outset that the book engages many issues on which I have written extensively and that I found myself in broad sympathy with much that Mathewes has written. At the same time this is a book of strong arguments that demands careful reading and equally strong engagement. So it is from a deeply appreciative and sympathetic perspective that I offer my critical remarks this afternoon.

2. *Public theology/Theology of public life.* So what exactly *is* "a theology of public life?" Mathewes makes clear at the outset that is it *not* a "public theology," for "public theologies are," he remarks, "self-destructively accommodationist" because "they let the 'larger' secular world's self-understanding set the terms and then ask how religious faith contributes to the purposes of public life, so understood." As the author of two books which might well be considered "public theology" this sentence, which appears on the first page of the book, obviously caught my attention.

I want to be clear that this isn't just a grumpy quibble. Rather it goes to the heart of questions about the function of theological discourse in public settings. When we theologians write books we do indeed have a primary audience in mind for our writings. If the primary audience is ecclesial we can take certain things for granted: the audience will be familiar with Christian language and Christian practices so we don't have to go into extended explanations of such things. If the primary audience is "secular" then we may have to take more time to explicate particular Christian claims simply to bring that audience along. But care in

appropriation" of positions he finally opposes. I remain puzzled as to why liberalism does not receive the same kind of treatment.

One of the differences between my own views and those of Mathewes may go to the distinction he draws between believers and unbelievers and thus between theologies of the public and public theologies. For myself the believer/unbeliever distinction is far more ambiguous than sharp, far more blurred than distinct. On this question I take my stand beside one of the 20th century's most famous theological polemicists, Karl Barth. Barth was relentless in his critique and rhetorical bluster against those Christian theologians whom he believed undermined the fundamental

which he gives to himself?" Having seen liberals such as John Rawls dramatically change

the cross would suggest, that it could be fruitful … Only by accepting the worst for what it is, not as a convenient springboard for leaping beyond it, can one hope to surpass it. Only by accepting this as the last word about the human condition can it cease to be the last word … It was precisely this bereftness, savoured to the last bitter drop, which in a classically tragic rhythm could then become the source of renewed life." I know of no theologian, not even Augustine, who could have said it better.

In conclusion I want to begin where I started with deep and ge