

Response to Timothy Beach-Verhey, Pamela Cooper-White, and Elizabeth Johnson

I find it hard to define what theology is. Mostly, I only have to define it to my students, who come to me with little knowledge of what theology is. Lately, I've been thinking that academic disciplines are all means of making arguments. Theology, then, is the practice of making arguments that will be convincing to Christians. The definition is imperfect, to be sure, but I like how it highlights the range of levels at which theology operates; students come to my class having already done theology, perhaps without realizing it. From there, they can spend the semester building on those abilities.

The definition also highlights the form of theology I most appreciate: the *ad hoc* over the systematic. System-builders aim less to convince than to explain and instruct, developing new insights in the process. Systematic theology is in a sense defensive; it seeks to fill in the gaps between doctrines, or between scripture and liturgy, and so on. An *ad hoc* argument, on the other hand, needs to get inside its audience's system, breaking it open and reforming it.

In my essay I tried to get inside the assumptions American Christians have about the visibility of their faith, showing how these assumptions align Christian witness with the culture of competitive self-promotion, ultimately threatening Christian identity's authenticity. As a remedy, I proposed that American Christians should conceal their religious identity from the public as a means of protecting and refreshing Christianity's distinctiveness in the culture.

Judging from the above responses to my essay—responses for which I am most grateful—my diagnosis of American Christianity's illness was convincing, but my prescription was not. In breaking open the relevant assumptions, perhaps I don't do enough to reconstitute the theological and pastoral principles that underwrite responsible forms of Christian political witness.

My teaching at a Catholic liberal arts college, where students with varying religious commitments are training to be teachers, accountants, and physician assistants, puts me in less direct contact with pastors and the everyday life of the church than does the teaching of my interlocutors here. I may as a result be insufficiently attuned to questions about what my proposal, if implemented, would actually do to the concrete lives of churches and Christians. I appreciate the opportunity to hear responses from those working in different sectors of the church and academy; in the end, these responses can only help me make better arguments.

In the remainder of my response to Beach-Verhey, Cooper-White, and Johnson, I will try to make one last *ad hoc* stab at convincing readers to take seriously both the need to re-examine our assumptions about public Christianity and the genuine undercurrent in Christian tradition that has recommended forms of secrecy in response to Christian identity's abuse in political and social arenas.

Pamela Cooper-White is absolutely correct that "American Christianity," even "American Presbyterianism" or "American evangelicalism," is a very broad term that encompasses great theological and political diversity. Displays of piety serve as public currency in some sectors of American society, but not all. Still, those sectors are widespread enough that it would probably be worth the while of a Decatur businessperson to place ads touting his or Christian bona fides

on TV or billboards, where everyone can see them, even if the city's more secular residents wouldn't find such a pitch compelling. This is similar to the case of the kind of television broadcasts I watch: relatively few football viewers can afford the luxury cars advertised during the games, but no other programs capture quite as much of the luxury-car-buying public's attention. The fact that I will probably never buy a Cadillac or a Lexus doesn't matter. The message still reaches everyone who will.

On a related note, my interlocutors point out that not all American Christians make public displays of their faith as it is; if they are not the problem, then why should they adopt so drastic a solution? I have painted with a fairly broad brush in part out of a sort of Kantian impulse to forestall any one of us from making an exception for himself or herself. Cooper-White calls for discerning when speech and secrecy are appropriate for Christians in the public square, but what criteria for discernment are appropriate? We could say, "Don't promote your Christian identity to get ahead in the world," but that dictum cannot penetrate the many layers of self-justification worn by the very people we direct it toward. After all, in their minds, they're not promoting themselves; they're just spreading the Word of God, trying to be a light to others.

While I absolutely agree with Beach-Verhey and Cooper-White that better Christian public discourse is (ultimately) needed, I worry that fighting more brazen words with more modest ones will only contribute to the problem we all agree exists. With more voices, we just end up with cacophony, in which the loudest and most consistent—and not necessarily the most reasonable or faithful—voices win. While the Davidson College campus population is small, its constituents more or less united in a common goal of learning, so that thoughtful, moderate voices can be heard and even carry the day, the American public arena is, shall we say, not currently constituted so as to listen respectfully to thoughtful but tentative arguments.

In this context, and I speak only to this context, I think the rules that Christians play by need to change in order to bring about conditions in which people like those thoughtful but tentative Davidson students could be heard.

In making this contention, I draw inspiration from Kierkegaard, whose method of indirect communication was meant to shift cultural conditions by "taking something away" from the overstuffed bourgeois church and society of his context. As he writes in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, feeding a person whose mouth is "so full of food that ... he cannot eat" entails first removing some of that food. Kierkegaard adds that when everyone assumes that they know what "Christian truth" is, and "it has gradually become ... a triviality," then we can only communicate real truth by first negating all of the untruth that's in the way.¹ In our context, we cannot hear what true witnesses have to say, because our ears are too full of our and others' noisy self-promotion. A little silence may now be the better part of wisdom.

Beach-Verhey worries that Christian secrecy, as a way of taking Christian identity out of the public, "will abandon the world to the spirits of the age." This doesn't have to be the case. The secrecy I advocate does not equal disengagement from society, merely the removal of distinctive markers of Christian identity from one's social engagement. I do not recommend that Christians

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 275, fn.

remove themselves to Christian-only enclaves, shutting out the world. Rather, I imagine them worshiping mostly out of the public eye and loving others in it, just without drawing attention to the fact that they are doing it out of a Christian motivation (Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* beautifully discusses this possibility). In no sense do they abandon the world or ignore its brokenness. They simply remove one of their own occasions for sin while they do good works.

A church that saw itself as a collection of secret disciples might, as Cooper-White fears, run the risk of groupthink. But this danger can be mitigated, too, simply by the very ideological and demographic diversity that she recognizes within the church. The church need not carry on every one of its activities in the open in order for it to maintain diverse perspectives within its bounds. It merely needs to be open to a Pauline understanding of heterogeneous membership. Christians who are engaged with the world in various ways will bring their worldviews to the internal church conversation, challenging and enriching others' outlooks.

Incidentally, this line of thinking underwrites for me a general suspicion of church-shopping, which mirrors the wider culture's economic and ideological self-sorting. It is far too easy, especially for members of the highly mobile American bourgeoisie, to seek out churches filled with people just like themselves, stifling the perspectival diversity that forestalls groupthink and leaves space for the voice of the Spirit. For this reason, the old Catholic principle that you should simply go to your territorial parish makes a lot of sense—even if those territories were originally divided by ethnicity.

In the end, Christianity is about revelation, not hiddenness. As Johnson notes, Mark's Jesus (or, rather, Mark himself) conceals only to reveal. Recognizing this, I see the form of concealment I advocate as a temporary measure, albeit an open-ended one. Indeed, Christians are called to make "public witness," whether it be "imperfect, inarticulate, and ambiguous" (as Beach-Verhey characterizes it) or "vigorous and critically informed" (as Cooper-White does). But that need not entail making one's witness all public, all the time. Secrecy is a powerful political and psychological tool. It can both help and harm. The same is true of publicity. Even if Christians finally must be committed to publicity, it seems practically foolish not to consider using secrecy at all when and where it can advance the church's mission. I see Cyril of Jerusalem as a political and pastoral genius for using this tool so cleverly at a time when the cynical abuse of Christian identity was rampant.

If Christians are called to witness, then they are called to martyrdom, an issue both Johnson and Cooper-White raise. Christianity is counter-cultural and, in Johnson's term, confrontational, in part because it sees martyrdom as a sort of ideal. Secrecy used to be Christians' means of trying not to be martyred, even when some within the church aspired to becoming martyrs.

Some today think that being visible as a Christian in a supposedly anti-Christian America is, if not martyrdom, then perhaps political suicide. This is plainly absurd. To take one prominent example, people who hate Sarah Palin do not hate her because she's a Christian. They hate her because they see her as obnoxious, self-righteous, self-important, aggressively uninformed, and committed to ill-conceived policy. In fact, it may be her forthright appeal to Christian language and symbolism that keeps her popularity afloat amid all her shortcomings as a public figure.

Palin eagerly puts on the mantle of martyrdom, but, quite perversely, her doing so only enhances her standing among her admirers, which ultimately makes her a bigger draw as a public speaker and sells more of her books and keeps her on television.

Martyrdom absolutely must be acknowledged as the consequence of Christian discipleship. Following Christ leads to Calvary before it leads to resurrection. But what if you live in a historical moment where proclaiming the gospel *doesn't* pose any serious risks to the person's public image, much less his or her life? In such a context, is martyrdom still an intelligible model for Christian engagement with the world?

Two of my intellectual heroes, Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, both of them from prominent families, struggled with this question. Each saw but two options for bourgeois discipleship: martyrdom or secrecy, two sides of the same coin. Each option runs counter to the fusion of the church with the public arena that they saw as the signal ecclesial crisis of their times. While Bonhoeffer's political activity did lead to his death (and he is, consequently, often thought of as a martyr), Kierkegaard lived in a more moderate age. In mid-nineteenth century Copenhagen, the danger was less that being Christian would get you killed, than it was that Christianity itself would wither into bland irrelevance through its merger with culture. So Kierkegaard set himself up as an outsider, hiding his identity behind a panoply of pseudonyms, confronting church and society alike.

Though theologians today so often look to Bonhoeffer to develop the best Christian response to our time, Kierkegaard may have the more instructive example, as American mass culture looks quite a bit more like Danish mass culture did, and quite a bit less like Nazi-era mass culture. American Christians can't be martyrs—not the way Bonhoeffer was, anyway. In our context, secrecy is at least worth considering.