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February 20, 2008: Theology of Public Life versus Public Theology

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Title: Theology of Public Life versus Public Theology

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2/20/2008--Here is a blog entry about another book I have not read. (There is a new book about how to discuss books that one has not read--Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*—but I haven't read it). The recent Report of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College contains a story about a panel discussion of Charles Mathewes' new book, *A Theology of Public Life*. Professor Mathewes, who spoke on the panel, distinguishes public theology, which asks what God has to do with politics, from theology of public life, which asks what politics has to do with God. The latter is the only proper perspective for a Christian because it puts the demands of God first. The former risks accommodation with the evils of the day. Only God properly orients us to himself and to our neighbor. Ronald Thieman of Harvard Divinity School, another member of the panel, reportedly made the obvious observation that Mathewes' book is for Christians and that his perspective fails to address the rest of us, whether we are secular, alternatively religious, or just imperfectly Christian. Public theology in this sense is more helpfully inclusive than is theology of public life. This is a continuing problem that affects every aspect of Hallowed Secularism. How can we learn from a religion when we are without its faith? So let me here set forth a faith claim of my own. Insofar as Our Religions are great—as opposed to cults, let's say—they touch on a part of the truth of human life that is available to all. But you cannot get to that universal without going directly through the particular. Or, to put it another way, only old fashioned Christian theology can teach the rest of us what is universal about the Christian message. So, Mathewes is more right than Thieman. Even if the goal of the believer is to speak to all, and not just to fellow believers, that speaking must remain within the language of the religious community. The rest of us must figure out how to engage and appropriate what we can of that wisdom. The task of translation is for the secularist, not the believer.