

Public Theology Facing a Planet in Turmoil



Abstract: The interview given by Ted Peters who pursues *Public Theology* at the intersection of science, religion, ethics, and public policy. Peters is an emeritus professor at the Graduate Theological Union, where he co-edits the journal, *Theology and Science*, on behalf of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, in Berkeley, California, USA. His book, *God in Cosmic History*, traces the rise of the Axial religions 2500 years ago. He previously authored *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom?* (Routledge, 2nd ed., 2002) as well as *Science, Theology, and Ethics* (Ashgate 2003). He is editor of *AI and IA: Utopia or Extinction?* (ATF 2019). Along with Arvin Gouw and Brian Patrick Green, he co-edited the new book, *Religious Transhumanism and Its Critics* hot off the press (Roman and Littlefield/Lexington, 2022). Soon he will publish *The Voice of Christian Public Theology* (ATF 2022). See his websites: TedsTimelyTake.com and <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/publictheology/>.

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Konrad Szocik: Let's start with the situation in the US. How would you be to define the cultural and social situation in the U.S. from the point of view of theology and philosophy? One of the recently discussed topics is the tightening of abortion laws. How can this be reconciled with traditional American freedom, which is often a model for the world?

Ted Peters: We in America fear we might be inundated with an anti-intellectualism that would reject *a priori* any contributions offered by theologians to public discourse. Gone are the Reinhold Niebuhrs to whom the wider public listened for wisdom.

We're living in a postmodern nightmare (deconstructionist, not holistic, postmodern nightmare) where everything is adversarial, perspectival, and power-grabbing. There is no room for neutrality, fairness, or rational adjudication. In my judgment, social media has contributed significantly to the wind of ill will that is blowing across our society. See my recent blog post: "[The Chaos Machine, Social Media, and Public Theology.](#)"

The connection between the Republican Party and American evangelical Christians is most disturbing. It appears that Republican leaders have fooled the faithful in the churches. If the party supports the "pro-life" position on abortion, then the Christians should vote accordingly. No matter how heartlessly the Republicans treat penniless immigrants, victims of mass shootings, and the fragility of our environment, Christians are expected to fall in line. I find this as unfathomable as detestable.

Konrad Szocik: One of the most serious challenges facing the world is climate change. Radical critics accuse capitalism of being the root of all evil. But can we imagine any other economic, and social,

model than capitalism? And while remaining in capitalist structures, can we hope to stop environmental degradation at all?

Ted Peters: You're right in connecting economics and ecology. The problem is not merely global economic exchange. The problem includes an ideology that justifies it. My colleague at the University of California at Berkeley, economist Richard Norgaard, has labeled this ideology, the "church of economism." Functionally, economism is a religion.

The problem within economism which cries out for reform is found in both its form and substance. The amoral form of economism is found in the categories it imposes on our thinking, on our false consciousness. According to economism, everything becomes subjected to cost-benefit categories. Thereby, this marginalizes the tender values of intimacy, caring, sharing, and building. Similarly, the amoral substance of economism fosters just the opposite of what the Christian religion advocates: greed instead of charity, individual freedom without responsibility for the common good, anarchy without unity. If economism is in fact a religion, then it needs at least a reformation if not a supersession.

The [public theologian](#) needs to lift up a vision of a global common good in terms of a just, sustainable, participatory, and global society of moral deliberation. I lay out the details in a series of Patheos posts on [economism versus the common good](#).

Konrad Szocik: The war in Ukraine has shocked the world, especially the Western world, which seems to have "forgotten" the traditional wars waged on European territory. How can philosophy and public theology help us understand this war, and what role can they have to play?

Ted Peters: I'm glad you ask how the philosopher and theologian can "understand" the war. I'd rather put an end to it. But, "understand" may be the length to which I could go.

This is Putin's war. Pure and simple. His attempt at self-justification by appealing to "Mother Russia" and such is so transparently fake that everyone in the world recognizes the fraud. Everyone except Putin himself.

In Ukraine, the populace cowers in subway tunnels and under bridges to protect themselves from callous missile strikes on civilian targets. The Russian military seems heartless, ruthless, murderous.

So, what does the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia do? Does Patriarch Kirill intervene with President Putin to plead for peace? To stop the war? To reconcile Russians with Ukrainians? No.

Rather, Kirill uses his bully pulpit to excoriate the people of Ukraine for holding gay pride parades. Kirill called the military action in Ukraine a conflict about matters "far more important than politics." And, he insinuated that the embrace of progressive western values would lead to the end of civilization.

Are you kidding? No, I'm not kidding. I'm not spreading false news. This is a dark day in global Christian leadership. See: "[Moscow: The Worst Public Theology](#)."

Konrad Szocik: Finally, it is worth asking whether the West can or should do more than it is doing so far in helping Ukraine. The discussion has been, as is usually the case, appropriated and dominated by politicians and the military. However, let's take the point of view of philosophy and public theology. Can we talk about the existence of special duties to those affected, and is there any universal morality to which we should adhere?

Ted Peters: As of this moment, the Ukrainian military is mounting a significant counter-offensive and reclaiming lost territory. The whole world is waving Ukrainian flags and cheering for the victims.

It appears to me that President Joe Biden and his NATO allies have been prudent. On the one hand, they wish Ukraine well. On the other hand, they wish to avoid raising the ire of Vladimir Putin any further. At all cost, NATO wants to avoid precipitating World War III. Because Ukraine is not yet a member of NATO, would it be illegal for NATO to send troops against Russia? Would it be legal to send weapons and advisors, but no troops? It seems the latter has been acceptable to Putin. NATO is walking a tight rope.

I'm grateful that we have thus far avoided World War III. Might it be possible to save Ukraine as well? As a philosopher and theologian and not a soldier, the best I can do is turn to prayer.