Going beyond Faith: Kierkegaard’s Critical Contribution to Public Theology

Joshua Furnal
Radboud University, The Netherlands

Abstract
In this article, I argue that Kierkegaard’s distinction between a genius and an apostle sheds light on the role of public theology in society. For Kierkegaard, the act and content of faith are rooted in testimonial knowledge which can be shared, and yet also bear witness to divine authority in word and deed. In the first section, I suggest that the contemporary conflict of approaches in public theology is rooted in a basic question in theology regarding the primacy of faith or reason when justifying a concrete, non-theological definition of the common good. In the second section, I rehearse Kierkegaard’s famous distinction between a genius and an apostle to draw attention to how the role of the public theologian in society is regulated by the theological negotiation of faith and reason for the common good in the form of testimony. The upshot of my argument is to uncover the unjustified neglect of the rich resources in Kierkegaard’s writings for current debates about public theology.

Keywords
Kierkegaard, public theology, ethico-religious, authority, testimony, revelation, secular reason

Introduction
Can Christian theology ever universalise or generalise its values without losing its particular distinctiveness? This is a fundamental question that debates in public theology leave unanswered when it is applied as a version of social ethics to wider topics in economics, politics or ecology. By leaving this fundamental question unresolved, definitions

1. For example, see the approach outlined in Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (eds), A Companion to Public Theology (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

Corresponding author:
Joshua Furnal, Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, Radboud University, P.O. Box 9103, Nijmegen, NL-6500 HD, The Netherlands.
Email: j.furnal@ftr.ru.nl
and approaches to public theology have become manifold with as many blind spots as applications.²

After surveying competing approaches in public theology, I turn to the posthumously published work, *The Book on Adler* by Søren Kierkegaard, which dramatises a fundamental problem with the basic aim of public theology. In particular, I examine Kierkegaard’s famous distinction between a genius and an apostle to illustrate the core tension of a particular religious tradition with a universalising project that resists becoming irrelevant through the instrumentalisation and assimilation of that distinctiveness into a counterfeit universal. Like the apostle and unlike the genius, Kierkegaard reminds us that the core concern of public theology is the communication of the Christian message to many non-Christian audiences in many different contexts in a way that can be understood and either appropriated or rejected. Yet the challenge that remains for public theology is not the formulation of a coherent socio-ethical system but rather to communicate the Christian message so it can be appropriated. What Kierkegaard offers to current debates in public theology is a view of freedom that invites the individual to use their freedom to accept or reject the particular message, which simultaneously holds open the core tension of universalisation and yet fulfils the basic apologetic aim of Christianity.

It seems uncontroversial to say that to communicate the Christian message properly, it must first be understood and appropriated. The challenge in every society is to adapt the presentation of this message to fit the context of the intended audience. Achieving mutual understanding sometimes requires a translator when the transmission occurs between two different languages. Indeed, it is the responsibility of the translator to render a statement truthfully as the *de facto* authority for those who do not speak the foreign language. To elicit appropriation, the message must be seen to fit the relevant situation and have a transformative bearing on the course of one’s life and actions.³ Things can go awry in transmission when there is disagreement about the truthful rendering of a message or the transformative relevance to one’s situation.

In current debates about public theology, it would seem that since the Christian faith is like a language that must be translated into another language, it is an experience that must be described univocally so that it can be shared by everyone. For instance, Sebastian Kim argues that in order to reach a non-Christian audience, public theologians must find ‘concepts that are acceptable to and understandable by the general public and specific academic disciplines’ when translating Christian values into public policy and public discourse amid different social contexts.⁴ In what follows, I want to raise the question of whether the public theologian can achieve this goal given their own understanding of the

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² Consider the observations and approaches surveyed in Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Florian Höhne and Tobias Reitmeier (eds), *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology: Proceedings from the Bamberg Conference, Theologie in der Öffentlichkeit* (Berlin: LIT, 2013).


task of public theology. It would seem that the task of translation and emancipation requires an extraordinary natural endowment to accomplish this goal in every context, which would effectively limit the number of public theologians with such a status to translate the Christian message authoritatively for society.

On one hand, the public theologian must be understood sufficiently by the audience, which suggests a particular context or situation. On the other hand, the greater the number of audiences and contexts in a given set, the greater the skill and talent of the public theologian must be in order to satisfy the basic aim of public theology. Thus the problem arises from the start: it is impossible for the public theologian (or a talented set of theologically informed polyglots) to achieve the basic universalising aim of public theology.

The question that Kierkegaard wants to raise is whether the public theologian is meant to be a genius or an apostle. It is clear that both share the same task: to be understood sufficiently in a particular situation and to repeat this task in every context. However, the difference is that for the apostle the aim is not to determine the lowest common denominator in a given set, but rather to communicate the Christian faith sufficiently in each particular situation. The genius might be able to produce an algorithm that could successfully predict how future obstacles might be accounted for in a socio-ethical system. But the apostle always faces the possibility of rejection and thus the free response of protest that invites shaking off the dust of their failed presentations (Acts 13:51; 18:6; 22:23). Kierkegaard’s distinction between the genius and the apostle is worth remembering precisely because it leaves open the possibility of free response that the socio-ethical system seeks to eliminate. But this already anticipates section two before we have introduced section one.

In the next section, I examine the current definition of the term ‘public theology’ to identify both the role and targets of the public theologian in society. The societal problem of competing definitions of the common good in public discourse invites the perceived solution of reducing the status of communities of divine revelation to one particular subculture among many with the shared task of providing a non-theological justification for their contribution to human flourishing. As we shall see later, for Kierkegaard, the apostolic aim is primarily to communicate the faith and indirectly contribute to the common good or human flourishing—although Kierkegaard would be clear to say that human flourishing cannot be used as a reason to prohibit the communication of the faith. However, I suggest that this solution is only apparent and this can be seen when evaluating two conflicting approaches in public theology that unsuccessfully resolve the crisis of authority.

**Framing Public Theology**

Although the term itself is contested, Elaine Graham has provided a working definition of public theology as ‘the study of the public relevance of religious thought and practice’. Sebastian Kim has defined the role of public theologians as ‘Christians engaging in theological reflection on the implications of divine revelation for the common good of all humanity’.

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in dialogue with those outside church circles on various issues of common interest’ so that Christians may contribute ‘to the formation of personal decisions and collective policy-making in economic, political, religious, and social realms’. In other words, theologians ‘go public’ (or become socially-engaged public intellectuals) when they attempt to enhance public discourse by demonstrating the relevance of theological literacy regarding matters of societal interest in a widely accessible way that gains a hearing beyond the Church and academy. Thus, public theology seeks to overturn conventional assumptions such as: (i) that there is a distinct separation between the Church and the rest of society; or (ii) that society is a pathological ‘bundle of social sinfulness’ in need of redemption; or (iii) that the Church is insulated from critique by possessing some ‘immutable and transcendent truth’.

Public theology begins with the noble aim of proclaiming the truth claims of the Christian faith without colonising all non-Christian sub-cultures into one monolithic narrative or audience. The task of public theologians is to engage a diverse audience outside the classroom or church service in order to demonstrate the relevance of theological literacy and advance the common good for all citizens. This intellectual task can be accomplished in various ways: as an op-ed columnist, a social media influencer, a pundit on the news, a member of a think-tank shaping public policy, or an activist protesting on the street. The guiding principle appears to be that since the social responsibility of the Church matches the social responsibility of a non-profit non-governmental organisation, the Church requires assistance in communicating its faith, mission and values in terms of an NGO so that it can lobby for influence over government. For example, Max Stackhouse celebrates the separation of religious membership from citizenship in a liberal democracy because it ‘actually leaves the door wide open for public, interfaith theological debate about the basic moral and spiritual fabric of the common life, especially in its pre-political dimensions! And that will deeply shape politics’.

However, this raises a question about the authoritative status of the theological use of reason in public. In other words, should claims about divine revelation have a necessary or contingent relationship to the presentation and realisation of human flourishing? If theology is understood as merely a niche topic in cultural studies, then normativity can be negotiated without recourse to the contingent attribute of the theological. However, if God has indeed spoken and revealed himself to a community, then the theological claims of those communities cannot be restricted to the private sphere, but must be brought out into the light for a hearing for the sake of human flourishing. In what follows, I will contrast two approaches to public theology: (i) the apologetic approach; and (ii) the accommodationist approach. These two approaches in contemporary debates in public

theology are mentioned because they provide a striking resemblance to Kierkegaard’s description of the apostle and genius as we shall see later.

Two Contrasting Approaches: Apologetic and Accommodationist

One way of framing contemporary debates about the status of the theological use of reason in public theology is in terms of two competing approaches to answering a perennial question in theology: whether faith or secular reason takes priority when a concrete definition of the common good is pressed for a non-theological justification.\(^{10}\) The answer to this question can shed light on the public theologian’s role in the liberation of a society.

**Apologetic approach.** On one hand, there are public theologians who privilege the appeal to divine revelation as an indispensable resource for defining the nature of the common good in a particular situation. The rationale is that the Church bears witness to the divine testimonial knowledge it has received from God’s self-communication in Christ to unify society and unite humanity with God.\(^{11}\) The presupposition is that a liberal democratic society is not yet fully redeemed and still needs what the Church offers, like nature needs grace. Whether the transition between the divine universal and human particular occurs through or beyond the Church is a matter of academic debate. For example, Jürgen Moltmann describes the common good in terms of the liberation of society, which he argues is a concrete sign of the kingdom of God that exceeds ecclesial boundaries;\(^ {12} \) whereas Max Stackhouse defines the kingdom-oriented task of public theology in terms of interpreting relevant societal issues and proposing ethical norms that bear witness to the transformative possibilities for individual citizens and society as a whole.\(^{13}\) In both cases, the argumentative stance is apologetic in nature when the public theologian’s role in society is to ground the ethical particular of a liberal democracy in the theological universal of God’s kingdom.

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11. For a recent defence of understanding divine revelation in terms of testimonial knowledge, see Mats Wahlberg, *Revelation as Testimony: A Philosophical-Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).


13. Max Stackhouse, ‘Reflection on How and Why We Go Public’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 1.1 (2007), pp. 421–30. See also Stackhouse, *Globalization and Grace*, pp. 77–115. Stackhouse says that the purpose of public theology is ‘to identify those genuinely universalistic dimensions of divine reality and of human existence that are indispensable aspects of theology and that are, often just below the surface of the present, shaping global developments. Moreover, public theology will seek to ethically guide, repair, or resist, those developments that have proven to be deceptive, unjust or misdirected’ (*Globalization and Grace*, pp. 84–85).
**Accommodationist approach.** On the other hand, there are public theologians that marshal theological reasons for appealing to secular reason when defining the nature of the common good in concrete situations. The rationale is that because grace is always already operative in every material culture, the theological particular is not violated but retains its integrity when it yields to the ethical universal of a shared rationality among all citizens. Thus, public debates must be democratised in order to include the particular experience of any citizen. For instance, Elaine Graham argues that:

The salvation of the world, and not the survival of the Church, is and should be the guiding principle of public theology. Against the contention that any autonomous human reason capable of discerning God renders revelation redundant, we have the alternative view that human reason and culture, however flawed, are occasions of grace through which revelation is mediated. To look for God’s becoming amidst the human and material is quintessentially an affirmation of the incarnational and sacramental nature of reality.14

A more radical version of Graham’s position has been put forward recently by Christiane Alpers. Following the work of Edward Schillebeeckx, Alpers argues that even ‘atheist solutions to societal problems are to be seen as being on the same level as theological ones’ since God’s grace is universal and exceeds any Christian perspective, which is mired by sin.15 On this view, there is a (theological) universal epistemic limit generating competition among particular (ethical) viewpoints fuelled by self-assertion and self-preservation. Following Schillebeeckx, Alpers argues that the only way out of the dominant-submissive dialectic is for public theologians to embrace the diminishment and withdrawal that secularism imposes because even a ‘reductive ontology still mediate[s] God’s grace’.16 On this uneven view, a reductive atheistic ontology is allowed to mediate God’s grace but not concrete expressions of Christian charity: ‘Christians cannot promise to perfect the extra-ecclesial public in any direct way by their own good works, but that they can only participate in the redemption of the world as “graced sinners”. God’s action must always purify and surpass Christian action.’17


16. Alpers, *A Politics of Grace*, p. 132. Following Schillebeeckx, Alpers continues the dominant-submissive dialectic when she claims that theologians can discern but not determine the common good in concrete situations: ‘The theological task is, then, to discern with society the best project in each particular situation . . . [but] Schillebeeckx refrains from advocating a central role for Christian theology in the determination of the social order’ (p. 135; original emphasis).

17. Alpers, *A Politics of Grace*, p. 120.
In short, the argumentative movement of accommodation runs in reverse to the apologetic stance: the divine universal must be accommodated to the human particular. The presupposition is that a liberal democratic society is self-sufficient to confront ethical problems and requires no particular contribution from faith communities to define concretely the common good. In its most radical form, a separation between the divine universal and the human particular is invoked as an ontology. We must await God’s action to redeem society since every human attempt is already predetermined to be a failure. Either way, both the apologetic and accommodationist approach to public theology eventually understand claims based in divine revelation to be subordinate to claims based on secular reason. The apologetic approach sees revelation as a transformative possibility awaiting translation (a priori), whereas the accommodationist approach sees revelation as one proposal among many to be discovered (a posteriori). Whether or not one adopts an a priori or a posteriori approach to claims about divine revelation, the shared task of emancipating society becomes an impossible goal to fulfil from a faith perspective if one must always go beyond faith.

To sum up, in the section above I examined briefly two available yet contrasting approaches in contemporary debates about public theology: (i) the apologetic approach views society in terms of a deficit or in need of the redemption proclaimed by the Church community, which is the site of the futural salvific transition between the divine universal of God’s kingdom and the human particular of liberal democracy; and (ii) the accommodationist approach which views society in terms of surplus or already possessing the necessary resources for the unity of the divine universal and human particular.

By placing the emphasis on the proclamation of societal redemption in the apologetic approach, the Church becomes the particular means by which society makes up for its deficit of not being the kingdom of God. By placing the emphasis upon the omnipresence of grace in the accommodationist approach, a (liberal democratic) society becomes the particular means by which the Church makes up for its deficit for not being the kingdom of God.

My claim is that in their current forms, both views do not resolve but rather displace the proper relation of faith and reason by going beyond faith to privilege secular reason, which threatens to instrumentalise the Church community as the handmaiden of liberal democracy—which becomes synonymous with the term ‘kingdom of God’. By neglecting this basic theological issue, the wider question regarding the role of the public theologian is left unresolved. We shall now turn to the Danish provocateur and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, to illustrate and clarify the unresolved dilemma of going beyond faith in public theology. For who has the authority to announce the unity of the divine universal and human particular: a genius or an apostle?

**The Role of the Public Theologian: A Genius or Apostle?**

In this section, I rehearse briefly Kierkegaard’s distinction between a genius and an apostle to illustrate and clarify the unresolved dilemma of the basic aim of public theology. I suggest that Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Petrus Minor offers three important contributions to help clarify the role of public theology. First, the paradoxical relation of eternity-in-time holds the divine universal and the human particular in tension without dissolving
one into the other, which is the temptation of public theology. Second, regarding the primacy of either faith or reason, Kierkegaard offers the justification of the theological use of reason on the basis of testimonial knowledge, which incorporates both the act of faith and reasoning. Finally, Kierkegaard puts forward the apostolic task of representing the unrepresentable God as the basic aim of public theology.

The Authority of Revelation: Adler’s Testimony

Far from being an anachronistic link to the basic aim of public theology, Kierkegaard’s *The Book on Adler* (1847) was written precisely because of a conflict between a claim about revelation and the authority of that claim.18 Kierkegaard personally knew Adolph Peter Adler (1817–1869) as a Danish theologian, pastor and writer who gave philosophy lectures at the University of Copenhagen in 1840. In 1843, Adler published a controversial preface to a collection of his sermons in which he claimed to have received a revelation from Jesus Christ. Adler later renounced his claim as not genuine but rather a ‘work of genius’ and the Bishop dismissed him from the pastorate and gave him a pension.

The problem in the case of Adler is that this dispassionate aesthetic-intellectual stance is taken up in the form of rhetorical brilliance and flourishes in his published homilies, but then he turns around and claims that he has received a revelation. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Petrus Minor, laments how ‘erroneous exegesis and speculative thought’ confuse ‘the essentially Christian’ when they ‘aestheticise’, or take a dispassionate stance of observation toward ‘the paradoxical-religious’, which requires existential commitment (BA 173). For Petrus Minor, Adler’s abandonment of the revelation claim reflects a double confusion: (i) taking an aesthetic-intellectual stance toward something that demands an ethico-religious stance that has a direct bearing on the course of one’s life;19 and (ii) a failure to understand the distinctively Christian view of authority and revelation. To clarify matters, Petrus Minor introduces the distinction between someone possessing an exceptional talent for innovation and an apostolic vocation:

> When the sphere of the paradoxical-religious is now abolished or is explained back into the aesthetic, an apostle becomes neither more nor less than a genius, and then good night to Christianity. Brilliance [*Aandrighed*] and spirit [*Aand*], revelation and originality, the call from God and genius, an apostle and a genius—all this ends up being just about one and the same. (BA 173)

In other words, it is a categorical mistake to resolve the existential dilemma of the act of faith as if it were the same thing as an intellectual problem that could be resolved dispassionately and fully understood without appropriating the message and apostolic authority.


of the Christian faith. It might be perfectly acceptable for scholars to observe Christianity dispassionately, but the real problem came about when Adler made his claim about receiving a revelation from God. This raises a philosophical question about how a transmission from eternity can be received in time without introducing any change in its authoritative status.

**Distinguishing the Authority of a Genius and an Apostle**

From an historical perspective, both the genius and apostle stand out to us but for different reasons. For instance, Petrus Minor claims that ‘a genius and an apostle are qualitatively different’ when one considers their fundamental aims. The apostle represents the distinctively Christian, the one who is sent on a mission from Jesus; whereas the genius represents someone who stands out for their unparalleled expertise. Petrus Minor explains that the genius is who he is for an immanent and contingent reason: ‘he is what he is in himself’; whereas ‘the apostle is what he is by his divine authority’ (BA 175).

The genius acquires such a status by being born a genius—a contingent extension of the attribute of a natural talent across a finite life span, which necessarily passes away. As the genius goes through life, he makes a difference by bringing about that new thing that waited to pass him by. Once the genius has made such a difference, this difference will vanish as merely transitory when the next genius comes along to make a better difference in his own time. The special innovation that the genius brings about is quickly assimilated as the norm by the population and the distinctive authority of the individual genius is soon left behind as new prototypes emerge from other natural talents. Petrus Minor writes: ‘Perhaps a genius can be a century ahead of his time and therefore stand as a paradox, but ultimately the human race will assimilate the one-time paradoxical in such a way that it is no longer paradoxical’ (BA 176).

The apostle on the other hand does not receive this authoritative status because he was born an apostle, but rather he becomes an apostle when he ‘is called and appointed by God and sent by him on a mission’ (BA 176). And yet the apostle remains an apostle for his time and for all time. As an individual, the apostle is already born with his life out in front of him to lead and yet at the end of his life, he will still remain an apostle. The divine call comes as an episode in his adult life and yet as a divine call it transcends his life span.

The difference with the apostle is that he remains for all eternity an apostle and there is no advancement beyond his mission from one generation to the next. With the genius, things could always be otherwise with the next generation; but with the apostle, every subsequent generation paradoxically stands in a necessary and contingent relation to his testimony. Importantly, the uniqueness of the apostle’s testimony is not a contingent extension of an attribute across a finite life span, but rather one that is present to, spans, and norms all other finite life spans. Petrus Minor argues that the difference between extraordinary talent and divine authority is important to recognise if Christianity will not be replaced eventually by the next fad or a cleverer genius.

The difference that the apostle makes is not a fleeting extension of his natural talent but a sacramental enactment of God’s presence—the encounter of time and eternity has a beginning but no end. Petrus Minor concludes that even if some genius could eventually restate the apostle’s teaching in a non-plagiarised form, what remains qualitatively
unassimilable is ‘the way in which the doctrine came into the world, because the essential paradox is specifically the protest against immanence’ (BA 176). This reference to the paradox of divine teaching in the form of human testimony raises the question about how the apostle himself might resist the charge of plagiarism.

**Justification of Divine Authority and Revelation**

How would we know whether or not the apostle is speaking on behalf of God? All we have access to is his testimony. Here Petrus Minor says that the distinction between a genius and apostle is also valid at this epistemic level. For the genius, the justification of his brilliant conclusion is his natural intellectual endowment. For the apostle, the justification of his testimony is divine authority. Petrus Minor says that ‘I am not to listen to Paul because he is brilliant or matchlessly brilliant, but I am to submit to Paul because he has divine authority’ (BA 177). To the sceptic, this seems like an opportunity to dismiss the apostle’s claims on the basis of circular reasoning. But Petrus Minor’s point is that the apostle can do nothing else but to assert that he has received a revelation of divine teaching and that he has the authority to proclaim it as such. Unlike Adler, Petrus Minor imagines the apostle saying to the sceptic:

> I cannot, I dare not compel you to obey, but through the relationship of your conscience to God, I make you eternally responsible for your relationship to this doctrine by my having proclaimed it as revealed to me and therefore by having proclaimed it with divine authority. (BA 177)

The apostle appeals to the sceptic’s freedom to accept or reject what is freely proclaimed. For Petrus Minor, the objective authority of the speaker is decisive when subjectively receiving the speaker’s utterance as authoritative. The poet might obtain authority as a poet because of the aesthetic brilliance of his poetry, but the sovereign has authority in a different way and it doesn’t matter if the sovereign is a brilliant poet—our response to the utterance of the poet and the sovereign are qualitatively different. Petrus Minor offers this analogy:

> What is it that has radically confused the essentially Christian but this, that in doubt we have first become almost uncertain whether a God exists and then in rebelliousness against all authorities have forgotten what authority is and its dialectic. A king exists physically in such a way that one can physically assure oneself of it, and if it is necessary perhaps the king can very physically assure one that he exists. But God does not exist in that way. Doubt has made use of this to place God on the same level with all those who have no authority, on the same level with geniuses, poets, and thinkers, whose utterances are simply evaluated only aesthetically or philosophically; and if it is said well, then the man is a genius—and if it said exceptionally and extremely well, then it is God who has said it!!! In this manner God is actually smuggled away. (BA 178)

In other words, God is not a cultural artifact that can be dispassionately examined. Rather, God is the Act of Being itself upon which reason ultimately depends to draw its conclusion about beings and the regions of being—the object of faith that truly yet
inadequately refers to ‘the point outside the world [that] also moves the whole world’.\(^{20}\)

Not even a miracle would help establish the apostle’s authenticity for the dispassionate observer because the miracle requires faith in divine authority. The point is that it actually matters which stance one takes toward the apostle’s testimony: whether one decides from the start that this needs to be examined by a dispassionate observer, or whether one obeys the speaker’s utterance because the speaker is a credible and trustworthy authority.

Authority, however, is something that remains unchanged, something that one cannot acquire by having perfectly understood the doctrine. Authority is a specific quality that enters from somewhere else and qualitatively asserts itself precisely when the content of the statement or the act is made a matter of indifference aesthetically. (BA 179)\(^{21}\)

Thus, when viewing the ethico-religious difference interpersonally, authorities can change temporarily and injustices can be resolved on the basis of the common humanity that each individual shares. But with the relationship between God and human beings, there is ‘an eternal essential qualitative difference’ because the authority does not change and pertains to faith (BA 181). Importantly, these two relations of authority (immanent and transcendent) are not the same and the only reason we know that they are not identical is because ‘God appoints a specific human being to have divine authority—with regard, note well, to what God has entrusted to him’ (BA 181; original emphasis). It is with the apostle’s testimony and divine authority that transcendence genuinely and paradoxically appears as making a difference even though it appears to be indistinguishable from any other form of human testimony.

When Christ says, ‘There is an eternal life’, and when theological graduate Petersen says, ‘There is an eternal life’, both are saying the same thing . . . aesthetically, both statements are equally good. And yet there certainly is an eternal qualitative difference! (BA 182)

Petrus Minor argues that the apostle’s utterance is beyond dispute because of divine authority: they are Christ’s words given to him to proclaim on his behalf. If we think human testimony is a problem when considering the intellectual merit of the apostle’s utterance, then we will not get far with recognising the divine authority of the Incarnate Word. The apostle and his successors are consecrated in persona Christi—not like an actor might dedicate all her talent to recite the lines of the character Hamlet, but rather as God’s emissary sacramentally makes the invisible God present in word and deed.\(^{22}\)

What is decisive consists not in the statement but in the fact that it is Christ who has said it; but what is confounding is that in order, as it were, to lure people into believing, one says something about profundity and the profound . . . The point, however, is this. Doubt and disbelie, which

\(^{20}\) Kierkegaard’s *Journal* NB 16:60 [1850].

\(^{21}\) Original emphasis.

make faith worthless, have, among other things, also made people ashamed of obeying, of submitting to authority. (BA 184)

In short, the existential (ethico-religious) stance of obedience toward the object of faith is what is decisive, not the epistemic (aesthetic-intellectual) stance toward the utterance or the speaker. 23 But this raises the question of how anyone could demonstrate that existential stance outside of their own testimony. Here Petrus Minor makes a striking observation that the transitory human authority is recognisable by power and coercion; whereas divine authority is demonstrated by the proclamation in word and deed. If the apostle uses coercion then the apostle forfeits his cause as a transitory human authority. 24 Petrus Minor says that ‘an apostle has no other evidence than his own statement, and at most his willingness to suffer everything joyfully for the sake of that statement’ (BA 186).

To sum up, the apostle is a human being who is called by God and sent on a mission to proclaim God’s salvation to each new generation with authority. For the genius, their own self-development is their own life goal, but for the apostle the apostolic vocation is an other-directed life goal. For Petrus Minor, the genius represents a self-absorbed epistemic stance toward life, which judges normativity solely in an aesthetic-intellectual way. Yet the apostle represents an outward facing stance of being for others, which judges normativity in an ethico-religious way. The genius may accomplish a great deal in life but ultimately he ‘lives within himself’ focusing on his talent ‘without regard for whether others benefit from it or not’ (BA 187). The aesthetic brilliance of the nightingale’s song makes no demands of the rabble and has no concern for them. This stance will not withstand ‘the power-craving crowd’ that ‘wants the genius to express that he exists for’ them and ‘nullify the apostle’s existence’ (BA 188). Thus, whether or not the life goal of the genius stands at odds with the public, the genius will be surpassed and set aside. But not so for the apostle, whose life goal transcends the public and is indeed for the public to such an extent that he is willing to be put to death by that public in order to bear witness to the truth. What I have been suggesting is that Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the ethico-religious is useful for the self-understanding of the public theologian when contemporary approaches in public theology only emphasise the aesthetic-intellectual task.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, my point of departure is the core concern of public theology: to communicate the Christian message to non-Christian audiences in many different contexts so that it can be understood and either appropriated or rejected. I turn to Kierkegaard’s writings to dramatise the paradoxical nature of universalising this basic aim. As I have suggested, the challenge that remains for public theology is not the formulation of a coherent


socio-ethical system that is universally acceptable but rather to communicate the Christian faith so it can be appropriated in each particular context. I suggest that Kierkegaard’s contribution to current debates in public theology is an understanding of freedom that allows the individual to freely respond to the claims of the Christian faith by accepting or rejecting the particular message presented to them, which simultaneously holds open the core tension of universalisation and yet fulfils the basic apologetic aim of Christianity.

In other words, public theology mainly has an apostolic task. Like the apostle, the public theologian presents the Christian faith to non-Christian and secular audiences so that this particular audience may freely accept or reject the faith. The juxtaposition of the genius to the apostle illustrates that human authority either coerces the audience by the use of power or it tries to attract and persuade them by exhibiting aesthetic beauty. Divine authority, by contrast, has no other means than an appeal that is freely addressed and the goal of a free response. Thus, for Kierkegaard, the act of faith cannot be coerced or bypassed, but only freely proclaimed by humble servants to a particular audience that freely receives the faith by grace or freely rejects faith in offence.

Bringing Kierkegaard into debates about the role of public theology seems odd at first. But we must remember that it was actually Jürgen Habermas himself, in his 1987 Copenhagen lecture, who identified Kierkegaard’s existential thought as an important impetus for a translation of private faith to public discourse in a way that successfully resists the nationalism and fundamentalism lurking behind any absolutisation of social ethics.25 In light of the influence of Habermas on public theology, it seems strange that Kierkegaard would be overlooked as a conversation partner.26 One exception worth noting is a recent essay by Christoph Hübenthal, who explicitly links the project of Habermas and Kierkegaard.27 Rather than a voluntaristic emphasis on self-making or fatalistic obedience to the call of a primordial cultural identity, Kierkegaard offers a theological perspective of the human creature’s dependence upon the God who freely creates and makes all things new.28

Whether the public theologian adopts an apologetic or accommodationist approach, the fundamental question of whether divine revelation can contribute anything unique or concrete to a shared definition of the common good is left unresolved unless the theological claim is ‘translated’ into ethical terms. For public theologians, faith communities can provide particular answers to universal questions in the form of an ethical code, a

28. For more, see Jürgen Habermas, Europe: The Faltering Project, English edn (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), ch. 2.
wider context for dialogue, or empowerment for the marginalised, but any particular theological proposal for the sinful creature must be adapted to fit the universal ethical framework for all citizens. Is it the case that divine revelation only discloses the universal ethical framework to a particular religious community, such that theological discourse cannot be understood and appropriated unless it is transposed into an ethical description? Precisely where the Church community is needed as a transition between particular and universal, the need for translation introduces a vanishing point: if a faith perspective is already determined by the norms of the society in which it has come to understand itself, then there is no unique moral perspective for faith to proclaim that may criticise or contribute to society. Following Kierkegaard, the task of translation is not merely an aesthetic-intellectual achievement but rather an existential one.

Whether or not one thinks that the kingdom of God has arrived, there still remains the problem that the universal dignity of all human beings is not wholly self-evident and the common good is not automatic. So, there are political ramifications to be confronted: whether and how should we preserve, reform, or issue a revolutionary alternative to the status quo? From a sociological perspective, the problem is that both the Christian faith and secular reason have contingent historical beginnings, which inevitably produce concrete disagreements about the authority of particular cultural artifacts and universal ontological assertions. This enables at least two possible strategies for seeking the common good: either to narrate a particular shared theological inheritance in history that enables harmonious differentiation, or to justify an ethical framework that can be shared univocally by all citizens—secular and religious alike. The question remains for approaches in public theology: must these two strategies be mutually exclusive? What I have been suggesting is that Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the ethico-religious task should be seen as a resource to the public theologian’s role in society.

However, the fundamental question that keeps resurfacing between accommodationist and apologetic approaches is whether and how divine revelation can contribute anything unique to our understanding of the common good. If divine revelation implies a community that receives this unique revelation that is meant for everyone, then there must be someone who proclaims this message in word and deed in every context to both the baptised and the unbaptised. The task remains for the public theologian not to universalise one ideological faction above all others, but rather to bring unity to all transnational particulars by virtue of this unique revelation.

What I have suggested here is that the contemporary conflict of approaches in public theology is rooted in a basic question in theology regarding the primacy of faith or reason. This becomes evident when public theologians are pressed to justify a concrete, non-theological definition of the common good. To overcome the current neglect of Kierkegaard in public theology, I rehearse Kierkegaard’s famous distinction between a genius and an apostle to draw attention to the role of the public theologian in society. My claim is that this role is regulated by the theological negotiation of faith and reason for the common good. The upshot of my argument is to draw attention to the unjustified neglect of the rich resources in Kierkegaard’s writings for current debates about public theology.