

John Atherton – An Academic Appreciation

By Chris Baker

David Tracy, the great American Catholic public theologian said that there were three publics with which a public theologian should engage: The church, the academy and the public. John's work engaged all three in long and very distinguished academic career, which was also notable for its ground-breaking interdisciplinarity. John combined a theological grounding born out of his practice and training as a parish priest, with a deep knowledge and insight of economics (following his doctorate on Tawney's political economic thought obtained at the London School of Economics and Political Science). This love of economics deepened for the rest of his life and was augmented by a deep knowledge of social ethics and political philosophy (John's Christian social ethics course at Manchester University where Augustine, Niebuhr and Rawls clashed like Titans was the stuff of legend and inspired countless thousands of students over a 30-year period), psychology (including happiness and human flourishing), political philosophy, religious studies, church history and local social history.

John's career had two distinct phases. The first, from the mid 70s through to the mid 90s was located primarily within a British and Christian context where his public theology grounded in the Temple and Tawney tradition fed at the deepest level the social and political actions of all the mainstream denominations in that era. John was of course rooted deeply within Methodism, and in the Anglican tradition, but his work had huge impact on free church and Catholic traditions, where his fan base was particularly strong. During this period from the 1970s to the 1990s with publications such as *The Scandal of Poverty: Priorities for the Emerging Church* (1983), *Social Christianity: A Reader* (1994) and *Faith in the Nation: Christian Vision for Britain* (1988) *Christianity and the Market: Christian Social Thought for Our Times*

(1992) his authority as the go-to man for the Church on issues of economy, social ethics and policy was unsurpassed. This was the era when John tirelessly lectured and facilitated all the Boards of social responsibility (including the national BSR in the Church of England) and Industrial Mission Associations across the UK. The William Temple Foundation under his directorship undertook research for and with Local authorities, trades unions, NGOs on issues as diverse as community development, employment, youth justice, short-term contracts and home working, women in employment. Little wonder then that John was invited to be a major consultant and drafter of the Faith in the City Report in 1985. At this time, John would have been regarded as the foremost public theologian in this period. His work was synonymous with the huge upheavals to church and nation in the late 70s – through to the early 90s – as Britain emerged from an industrial past into a very uncertain and risky post-industrial future. It was also deeply synonymous with what became known as the Manchester school of public theology, arcing back from Temple's time as Bishop of Manchester through the work of Ronald Preston and Tony Dyson, and carried on for a while by Elaine Graham and myself. What is the Manchester school? I would define it as an empirical form of public theology, rooted in an interdisciplinary, critical but progressive enquiry into political, social, cultural and economic change, and the role of religion, theology and the church in those changes, all deeply embedded in the spirit and study of Manchester as a global city and how its ebb and flow illuminates our understanding of the world. In a book chapter co-written by Elaine Graham and myself for a volume entitled Pathways to the Public Square, John wrote. In taking Manchester as a case study of what it means to do theology in public, we identify three ways in which it provides a striking archetypal example of the key factors to which public theology must attend:

- 1) The realities of economic growth and political economy

- 2) Human dimensions in terms of marginalisation
- 3) Church as implicated in changing forms of urban life.

Those three tenets stayed with him throughout his life.

But there was also a second shift in John's academic trajectory probably around the late 90s. This second phase was global, engaging religious studies and beliefs beyond Christianity, universal in its reach one might say although still rooted within a deep Christian realism. This shift for John was the emergence of global capitalism. He wanted to understand how religion and globalisation intertwined and how it could begin to generate positive rather than negative impacts. Perhaps his best known book and most cited book *Public Theology for Changing times* published in 2000 captures this shifting zeitgeist perfectly.

Its imperious sweep of global and national change from the 60s to the dawning of the information age challenges, he said theology to a corresponding deep shift. In his now famous typology of political economy and theology he charts the shift from the age of Voluntarism and Atonement, through the age of the State and Incarnation to what he called the Age of Partnership and reconciliation.

In this increasingly interconnected but also risky and unequal world he wrote, It is as though this new age is requiring increasingly our ability to construct connections between perspectives and with others. It is about finding ways of holding together often profound difference for our own self-sufficiency for our future living on earth.

And that is what he spent his last 16 years on earth doing. His work thereafter deeply and wisely explores this challenge, increasingly across faith traditions and engaging with what he

saw as the fundamental issue that could save our planet - namely how to combine religious and secular ethics and imaginaries, with economics, to create both human and non-human flourishing and well-being. *Public Theology for Changing Times* (2000), *Marginalisation* (2003), *Transfiguring Capitalism: an enquiry into religion and global change* (2008), *Through the Eye of a Needle: theological conversations over political economy* (edited with Hannah Skinner) (2007), *The Practices of Happiness: Political economy, religion and well-being* (edited with Elaine Graham and Ian Steedman) (2010), *Christianity and the New Social Order* (written with Chris Baker and John Reader) (2011) and finally *Challenging Religious Studies – The Wealth, Wellbeing and Inequalities of Nations* (2014) all address these themes. The depth and consistency of his work was also beginning to break into international recognition. In addition to giving the Ferguson Lecture in 2003 at the University of Manchester and the Baillie Lecture in 2004 at the University of Edinburgh, he was Visiting Professor at the University of Uppsala, where he was also awarded an Honorary Doctorate. More recently he was the William Scheide Fellow in Theology at the Centre for Theological Inquiry in Princeton, USA and was also conferred as a Visiting Research Professor in Economics and Religion at the University of Chester.

His period at Princeton in the Spring of 2013 at the behest of professor William Storrar generated his final published work – *Challenging Religious Studies – The Wealth, Wellbeing and Inequalities of Nations*. It was influenced by several dialogues with Professor Angus Deaton, Professor of Economics at Princeton who went on to win the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2015. There quickly emerged a mutual admiration and clarity of thought. Angus Deaton writes of John's last volume 'Relations between economics and religion have long been fractious, to the detriment of both. While economists have broadened their interests,

the centrality of religion to human wellbeing is rarely recognized, On the other side, many theologians brand economics as a soulless doctrine of materialism. Such polarizes views hurt both economics and religious studies, and have long been due for change. John Atherton builds a splendid bridge across the divide and lays out a path for a richer, more productive and more sympathetic collaboration Bravo!

Not a bad endorsement for a lad from Bolton.

One of John's favorite words (apart from buggeration factor of course) was capacious – he believed like Tempe before him in a capacious God – he was capacious in his love and friendship and enthusiasm. I see his academic work as an immense tree – a bit like the mustard tree in the parables of Jesus, that spread wide and far and offered shade, hospitality and enrichment for all sorts birds of different plumage and sojourners on the way. There is even more work to come that John managed to complete in the last year of his life, and to be honest, his later work hasn't even become to be mined properly for the richness, depth and scholarly wisdom that lies therein. This is the task set before us to which we will gladly rise in the months and years that lie ahead. Thanks John so much for all you have given us – for the legacy you have bequeathed us. Amen.