

**Faith and Public Life:
Biblical Contributions to a Public Theology of
Engagement in Eastern European Context**

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**ABSTRACT
OF HABILITATION THESIS**

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ABSTRACT

The habilitation thesis entitled “**Faith and Public Life: Biblical Contributions to a Public Theology of Engagement in Eastern European Context**” has been elaborated as part of requirement for the process of habilitation in the field of theology and is done in conformity to the Romanian law of higher education and the subsequent academic regulations. As such it presents: 1) the academic, scientific and professional achievements of the author following his doctoral research as they show the evolution and main directions of development in his research in the international and global context of research in the author’s domain of specialization; 2) plans for development of the author’s professional, scientific and academic career, i.e. main directions or research and teaching; 3) the main bibliographical references associated with the present thesis.

In my doctoral thesis, *The social significance of reconciliation in Paul’s theology with reference to the Romanian context*, I have explored the social dimension of reconciliation in Paul’s theology and argued that Paul used a rich symbolism to describe reconciliation as a multifaceted reality that encompasses reconciliation with God and reconciliation between human beings, forming together an inseparable reality. I have shown that Paul expresses the social dimension of reconciliation in various ways: as genuine love for one another and for enemies, as welcoming the weak and powerless, as affirming the other, as blessing one’s persecutors, as overcoming evil with good and living at peace with all. Following my doctoral work, I continued to explore various ways in which the biblical faith represents not only an invitation to, but an imperative for Christians to engage meaningfully in society and “seek the welfare of the city”. My research has developed in several related areas that have to do with faith and public life in society. As a biblical scholar I have engaged mostly with the biblical, and more narrowly New Testament, contributions for faith and public life. The various avenues of inquiry and research converge towards discovering a larger biblical foundation for a public theology of engagement in society.

This habilitation thesis brings together all these various facets of research on faith and public life and presents them as coherent, biblical contributions to a public theology of engagement in society in the context of Eastern Europe. The thesis itself is structured in three main chapters. The first, larger chapter, “**Bible, faith and society**”, establishes the biblical basis for an understanding of Christian faith as being concerned with and addressing issue of everyday life in society. Acknowledging an international growing consensus regarding the public dimension of Biblical witness, the main contributions through publications and research I have conducted in this area, highlight in various ways, the pervasive power of Scripture to address afresh issues facing Christians in their everyday life, and the centrality of the Bible not simply for our Christian living in the world but for the life of contemporary culture and society in general. In dialogue with the international community of scholars from various cultures and Christian traditions I have offered biblical perspectives on various issues facing Christians in the contemporary society: faith and learning; faith and family, faith and work, faith and social work, faith and politics. The emphasis throughout the research was to promote a responsible biblical interpretation done not in an exclusivist and abstract biblical scholarship but in permanent dialogue with other disciplines and in sensible awareness of both the contributions and dangers of contemporary

categories of thought. I illustrated, as a case study, with the Pauline the concept of Powers and showed how useful this is in providing a way to integrate into a holistic picture Paul's understanding of reality, of God's dealing with the world and humanity. And thus it highlights clearly they way in which the Bible makes a significant contribution to a public theology which helps in dealing more adequately with the more general questions of gospel and culture, church and society, Christianity and politics.

The second chapter, ***“Encountering the other: hospitality, welcome and reconciliation as biblical imperatives”***, brings to light the author's contributions in a vital and sensible issue of life in our pluralist, multicultural, multireligious contemporary society, namely the question of *otherness* and the way people are to live together despite their deepest differences. Given the vital importance of reconciliation for theological reflection and church's ministry of reconciliation in a broken world, I have explored in my research various aspects of identity, otherness and reconciliation in the writings of Paul as well as the close topics of hospitality and welcome. I have shown that a study of Paul' writing, particularly those with a specific emphasis on welcome and reconciling practices, offers a strong starting point and a solid basis for reflecting on, and engaging with, “the other” as a vital aspect of a public theology of engagement in society. Building on the Pauline understanding of hospitality, welcome and reconciliation, churches in Romania can make a contribution to the social reality in their context.

The third chapter of thesis, ***“Towards a public theology in Eastern European context”***, ties even closer these lines of inquiry and makes a proposal for a public theology in this geographical context with a particular emphasis on the biblical contributions to such an endeavour. Through the research done in this are I have shown that public theology is a theology done in public, seeking the welfare of the city. By exploring three fundamental issues of justice, work and politics, from a biblical perspective, this section shows the vital role and the significant contributions that the Bible makes to a public theology of engagement in the service of common good and human flourishing. My research has also shown that in order for the potential of faith to bring about hope, compassion, reconciliation, and social healing, it is mandatory that faith is integrated within the whole of life and explicated in ways that are relevant to the concrete social and political realities of communities. All these illustrates well the complexity of Christian faith and that this is no simply a ‘private’ but rather a ‘public’ faith that influences the entire human existence. Understood in this way, faith becomes a vital resource for a meaningful life and for human flourishing.

The last section of the thesis, ***“Scientific, Professional and Academic Career – Plans for Development”***, points to several directions for further research: the development of a responsible, contextual interpretation of the Bible in Eastern Europe; the need to explore and articulate clearly and forcefully those aspects of our faith which promote human dignity, justice, love, forgiveness, and reconciliation; the need to uncover and nurture a biblically based public theology conducive to the common good and human flourishing and which will best enable us to live authentically with our fellow human beings. Thus, in addition to the general directions of the development plan this part elaborates in greater detail two specific international research projects which the author coordinates for the next years, namely the *Central and Eastern European Bible Commentary Project* and *Gospel as Public Truth – Langham International Research and Training Project*.