The Berkeley Public Theology Program – Summary

The Berkeley Public Theology Program was inaugurated in 2016 with generous funding from the Henry Luce Foundation. The one-million-dollar funding supported a four-year initiative that integrated robust academic research, student engagement, public programming and public outreach. The grant's programming activities follow.

Academic Research

Public Theology Inquiry Group: This group was critical to the planning, launch and overall success of the grant. Throughout the grant, this faculty collaborative research group oversaw the Berkeley Public Theology Program and developed ambitious research projects, international conferences, and workshops. Invited scholars came to Berkeley with the aim of changing how to think about and study theology in a public university setting.

Theology and the Public University: This initiative included two multi-day workshops that brought together leading scholars and intellectuals from around the world to participate in intensive discussions of comparative approaches to theology. The two workshops, "Vernacular Theologies" and "Theology and Its Publics" culminated in a major international conference held at Berkeley in spring 2019, "Theology and the Public University." Participants in this initiative included J. Kameron Carter (Duke), Constance Furey (Indiana University), Tomoko Masuzawa (University of Michigan), Susannah Heschel (Dartmouth), Munir Jiwa (Graduate Theological Union), Shaul Magid (Indiana University), Charles Marsh (University of Virginia), Ebrahim Moosa (Notre Dame), Armando Salvatore (McGill), Thomas Schmidt, (Goethe University Frankfurt), Gauri Viswanathan (Columbia) and Andrea White (Union Theological Seminary).

Theology and East Asian Traditions: Starting from the premise that theology is not restricted to specific traditions, research must include theologies of traditions with no familial connection to an Abrahamic god. "Theology and East Asian Traditions," a pair of international workshops, examined how a public university could engage the rich and multi-vocal canons that influenced two thousand years of East Asian civilization. Workshop participants included Gregory Blue (University fVictoria), Anthony Clark (Whitworth), Lionel Jensen (Notre Dame), Tiziana Lippiello (Ca'Foscari University of Venice), Thierry Meynard (Sun Yat-sen University), Peter Park (University of Texas, Dallas), Franklin Perkins (University of Hawai'i), Paul Rule (Latrobe), Nicolas Standaert (Leuven), Alexander Statman (Stanford), Wu Huiyi (Needham Research Institute), and Zhang Qiong (Wake Forest).

The Berkeley Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Public Theology: The Public Theology Inquiry Group recruited two early-career post doctorates in relevant fields to come to Berkeley with the goal of shaping the future direction of research in theology. Both organized and held day-long workshops: Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins "The Critique of Secularism," and Yunus Telliel "Thinking about Science, Technology, and Secularism."

Student Impact

New Directions in Public Theology Fellowships: One of the most successful initiatives of the Program was the New Directions in Public Theology Fellowships. Each year, eight graduate students were identified and organized into an interdisciplinary cohort for two semesters. Students received supplemental funding to their graduate school packages, and attended biweekly meetings convened by faculty members from the Public Theology Inquiry Group, including Mark Csikszentmihalyi, Niklaus Largier, Susanna Elm, Charles Hirschkind, David Marno, and Jonathan Sheehan. Faculty developed syllabi of relevant reading, provided guidance for research projects, and catalyzed a diverse group of students into a community of inquiry. New Directions' success inspired the development and approval of a Designated Emphasis (similar to a minor in an undergraduate program) in the Study of Religion. Launch of the DE in the Study of Religion (DESR) is expected in 2021.

Theology in the Curriculum: The Curriculum Planning Committee began the work of ascertaining student interest and demand in the revival of an undergraduate major in religion at UC Berkeley. The committee, led by Ethan Shagan (History) analyzed the volume, enrollment history, and frequency of undergraduate offerings on religion in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The Committee's discussions also contributed to shaping and refining the requirements for the Designated Emphasis in the Study of Religion.

Public Programming and Outreach

Berkeley Lectures in Public Theology: Berkeley Lectures in Public Theology offered the community outside of Berkeley a means to participate in conversations with innovative thinkers and public figures. The lectures were designed to complement two existing lecture series "Berkeley Lecture on Religious Tolerance" and "Arts and Religion." Berkeley Lectures in Public Theology supported eleven unique speakers whose topics ranged from "Innocence and Violence: The Theology of a Gun Culture" (Dominic Erdozain, freelance writer) to "How to Use and Not to Use the Bible in Contemporary Public Issues" (Konrad Schmid, Professor of Old Testament Science and Early Jewish Religious History at the University of Zurich).

Sacred Texts, Public Talks: In order to capitalize on the *public* university, this final aspect of the Program included smaller collaborations with local scholars and community members from Bay Area religious institutions and colleges.

Research Integration

Faculty-Led Research Projects: Even without the presence of a Religious Studies academic program, Berkeley faculty have pioneered studies in the practices of religious life for years. The Berkeley Public Theology Program encouraged integration between existing faculty research and planned projects, giving coordination and structure to ongoing and future academic work. The following projects are some examples of the faculty-led research efforts:

- **Religion and Humanitarianism in the Age of the New Age of Nationalism (Tom Lacquer, History):** Questions presented and addressed at this workshop included: What is the relationship between established ecclesiastical authority and religious violence?

Has the erosion of ecclesiastical authority in recent times escalated conflict and/or fueled populism?

- **Technologies and Media of Religion (Niklaus Largier, German and David Marno, English):** Religions are communicated things—they move between people in mediated fashions, and their transmissions are technologically enabled. These technologies have an enormous range, from prayer books to digital media. This project asked the question: How do these media and technologies create different forms of religious community and experience?

- **Object Histories: Religion in Translation (Beate Fricke, History of Art):** Religious objects circulate in time and space. In this process of translation, they often come unmoored from the traditions and cultural systems that produced them. Liturgical uses, contexts of making, theological meaning: these fragile attributes of the religious object are often lost in this translation.

- **The Religious Sensorium (Charles Hirschkind, Anthropology):** Within religious traditions, human attunement to the demands of piety and religious virtue is not just a matter of belief but entails the honing of a religious sensorium. The capacities of hearing, sight, taste, smell, and touch—as well as their synesthetic permutations—orient religious adherents to the task of living in accord with their faith. The project explored three key dimensions of this sensorium: Epistemology, Ethics and Technology.

- **Dealing with Infinity: Art and the Transformation of the Symbolic Order (David Marno, English):** examined the genealogy of aesthetic experience through two parallel hypotheses. The first hypothesis was "Art" reflects the common condition that characterizes each cultural moment. The second was "Art" reflects the corresponding transformations of a public space. Discussing the genealogy of aesthetic experience in this double regard required the participants to consider the transformations of the common condition (the symbolic order), and the corresponding transformations in the formation of a public space.

- **The Late (Wild) Augustine (Susanna Elm, History):** Invited international scholars examined the work of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa, during the later Roman Empire. Participants assessed Augustine's positions on original sin, grace, redemption and free will as they developed over the latter part of his life.

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The Berkeley Public Theology Program allowed the Berkeley Center for the Study of Religion (BCSR) to realize the potential of an interdisciplinary model in the research, teaching, and study of religion. For Berkeley faculty, a long-held paradigm of religious studies shifted, bringing the subject of theology and religion to a more central and public space for broader and more inclusive inquiry and research. For the public, the Program demonstrated that Berkeley is, once again, a place to have transformative conversations where students and faculty and the community are welcome. And perhaps most importantly, the Program has reinvigorated a curiosity in the study of religion, which has found a place where challenging, and profound intellectual work will thrive.

Moving Forward

BCSR is inspired to continue the momentum established by the Berkeley Public Theology Program, and has received Henry Luce Foundation's support for its next initiative, the Berkeley Democracy and Public Theology Program. As with the first grant, this project will integrate academic research, student engagement, BCSR programming, and public outreach. The goal for this project is to confront the question of how theology has shaped, and continues to shape, democratic thought and experiment in the United States and beyond. Building on the successful interdisciplinary approach from the last four years, BCSR will extend its reach broadly to new and established scholars across the humanities and social sciences, and to the public. We are proud that Berkeley will continue to be a hub where teaching and talking about religion is meaningful in ways we could only once imagine.