

One New Book for the Preacher

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Mark Douglas, *Believing Aloud: Reflections on Being Religious in the Public Square* (Cascade Books: Eugene, OR, 2010).

There is some advice often quoted among preachers which is attributed to Karl Barth. He advised young theologians to “take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”¹ The theological assumptions underlying this difficult balancing act are profound.

“The strange world of the Bible,” as Barth described it in his famous commentary on Romans, *Der Römerbrief* (1919; *The Epistle to the Romans*), has something to say to the contemporary events which occur in our world and vice versa. The physical “balancing act” is tricky, to say the least, not to mention the challenge of letting the Bible be “a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.”²

Mark Douglas, in his book *Believing Aloud: Reflections on Being Religious in the Public Square*, gives us an excellent lesson in this critical “balancing act” of what it means to listen for God’s Word in the world. The book grew out of an experience he had when he was asked to be a regular guest columnist for *The Sunday Paper*. The book reflects on what is involved in discussing events and issues in the light of one’s faith. Scripture encourages us “to give an account of the hope that is in us” (cf. 1 Peter 3:15). For street preachers, this is easy. You just stand on the corner with a megaphone and shout out the “good news”—usually articulated with fire and brimstone. The problem with this form of “believing aloud” is that it is more offensive than persuasive.

Douglas is attempting, and in the process encouraging, a form of witness that gives expression to one’s faith in such a way that it invites others into the conversation. In a culture like ours that is “multi-everything,” to attempt to articulate your faith with integrity and in an invitational manner concerning what is happening in the world is a real challenge. (“Come, let us reason together.”)

Not only does Douglas discuss the process, the assumptions behind his work, and his own faith and commitments, but he also shares with us a rich selection of his columns during the first decade of the twenty-first century. I found the columns enjoyable to read, and they provided a welcome reminder of some of the things that have gone on recently and how we processed them through the lens of faith.

I found the interplay between theological reflection and practice to be insightful and engaging. The columns discuss a variety of issues such as waiting as a spiritual discipline in a culture that demands instant gratification. There is a good column on the much-debated argument over whether to wish people “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holiday.” There are also discussions of public policy issues in a world plagued by war, poverty, health care inequities, and other injustices. On a lighter note, living in a region where basketball is considered a religion for many, I am intrigued by the column which pointed out the virtues of March Madness.

My generation of pastors was beginning our seminary training when Harvey Cox

wrote *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*. The book made a bold claim that God was at work not only in church spaces but also in the world where, as Paul Lehmann put it, God is at work “to make and keep human life human.”³ Our mission, if we will accept it, is to join God there. There can be many varied ways to accept this challenge, but as followers of Christ, it is our responsibility to engage the world where God is already at work.

Isolation or withdrawal as a permanent strategy is not an option. The “secular world” is full of pain, suffering, and injustice. It is still the world God loves enough to send Christ to reclaim it. Douglas is encouraging us to engage in listening to what God might be saying to us in what is happening in the news and how we are called upon to respond with good news.

The book also contains a helpful foreword by Walter Brueggemann in which he discusses Douglas’ work in the light of the role of Reinhold Niebuhr’s legacy in addressing public life. I am intrigued that reading *Believing Aloud* has put me in touch with several valued teachers, especially Barth and Niebuhr. It was helpful to be reminded that faith encourages us to hold the Bible and world events together and listen for a word from the Lord. Our faith affirms, as Frederick Buechner puts it so well, “If there is a God who speaks anywhere, surely he speaks here: through waking up and working, through going away and coming back again, through people you read and books you meet, through falling asleep in the dark.”⁴ *Believing Aloud* is a helpful reminder of this reality.

I recommend this book as a good read for people of faith and particularly those who are called upon to articulate their faith in the pulpit and in the public square. Douglas invites us into a conversation about how such discussions can be helpful and hopeful.

Notes

1 “Theologians: Barth in Retirement,” *Time*, May 31, 1963, Vol. 81, No. 22, 60. Barth believed newspapers were so important that “I also pray for the sick, the poor, journalists, authorities of the state and the church—in that order.”

2 *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 60.

3 Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 351.

4 Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), 12.