

BOOK REVIEW

Okesson, Gregg. 2020. *A Public Missiology: How Local Churches Witness to a Complex World*

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
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Reviewed by James Butler

According to Okesson and his colleagues in the Public Missiology Working Group, it is time for missiology to go public. His book *A Public Missiology* carries the subtitle, “How local churches witness to a complex world” and he argues for a public missiology which moves from solely focusing on individual salvation and begins to understand what it means to witness to ‘publics’. This involves engaging with complexity, something Okesson terms ‘thickness’ – the interwoven nature of public life. Okesson’s thesis is that within the *missio Dei* there is a basis for understanding the witness of the local church not just as being aimed at individuals but as taking place in the midst of public life and witnessing to those publics. After all, Christians live the majority of their lives engaging with publics, be that in their working, shopping, eating or playing. What is more, any illusion that there might be some neat divide between public and private is increasingly broken down by media beamed into our homes, not to mention social media. Okesson recognizes that churches need to understand the realities they live in, and begin to see themselves as part of, and witnessing to, these publics, not just individuals. Drawing on his missiological studies and research, and many years of experience of mission in the United States, Kenya, Tanzania and Britain, Okesson provides an introduction to the theological basis and lived practice of public witness.

A public missiology, for Okesson, must be one which takes account of the thickness of public life and builds and weaves itself into that thickness. To do this it needs to see its life not as a single flow, but as a dynamic weaving, of coming in and going out. He bases this dynamic in the life of the internal relations of the Trinity and the way the Trinity engages with the world. These dynamics of going in and going out (and Okesson offers a number of different metaphors to understand this dynamic from

weaving, to dancing, to organisms in dynamic relations with their ecological environment) become the basis to understand churches' witness.

The book is made up of two parts: the first explores the theoretical and theological basis for a public missiology and the second provides case studies which illustrate what public witness might look like. Part 1 has five chapters. Okesson begins by laying out his terms and arguing the case for why there is a need to engage in the public realm and why the local church is his focus for that witness (chapter 1). There is a passion for the local church in his writings, something which he feels needs defending against a wave of negative feelings towards local churches in a lot of recent writing. He lays out a series of problems which he seeks to address in the book which are based around an enlightenment divide between public and private, the relegation of churches to the private space, the "thickness" of public life and the problem that "thin religion" has in witnessing to thick publics. Through part 1 he builds an understanding of what publics are (chapter 2), providing a helpful account of structural sin, or what he calls "complicated wickedness", and describing what "thickness" entails. He offers an account of the Trinity bringing thickness through their dynamic life (chapter 3), providing a model for churches. This is then developed further to offer an account of public missiology (chapter 4) and an explanation and exploration of "thick congregational witness" (chapter 5).

The introduction to the study of congregations (chapter 6) at the start of part 2 gives the book more of a textbook feel, and perhaps could have been better integrated into the rest of part 2 or offered in a much shorter form in an appendix. As it is, rather than opening up part 2 I felt it interrupted the flow of the argument. The remaining chapters of part 2 offer case studies from Kenya, Montreal and Nashville, to illustrate and illuminate a public missiology.

As I review the book I realize I have a complicated relationship with the book. I am drawn to its vision for public witness, its account of the thickness of public life and its engagement with structural sin. This is much needed, and I found the book stimulating my thinking around these areas. It is a compelling account which resonates with much of my own research, providing helpful language and metaphors for the kind of witness needed. I will definitely use the book in my teaching and encourage my students to think about the "thickness" of publics. What is more, given that Okesson's audience is likely to be evangelical, there is a boldness in the account in challenging accounts of solely individual sin and salvation which are to be welcomed and I hope they are engaged with. Complicated wickedness is a helpful and enriching concept. At the same time I find myself disagreeing and somewhat frustrated with the book. It definitely reads as an introductory text, and while it sought to base its

argument in Trinitarian theology and soteriology, I felt it never really got into the complexities of those conversations. Given its positioning, through chapter 6, within the field of practical theology and the qualitative study of the church, I found its divide between theory in part 1 and practice in part 2 to be misjudged. I was not completely convinced by the case studies, and while Okesson read them as engaging in thickness, I think another reading could easily have seen them as somewhat separated from the publics around them. I would have liked to have seen how his account of public missiology might have challenged these churches, not just affirmed them. I think some of that would have come had the case studies got beyond the accounts of the male leaders of the churches and have heard more clearly from the diversity of their membership.

This brings me to the biggest problem with the book; for all the emphasis on dynamics, of flowing in and flowing out, there was very little emphasis on relationships with those beyond the church, the kinds of broad-based public relationships encouraged by the likes of community organizing. If churches are to go public, then surely this means not just allowing the thickness of the world to shape how they engage, nor simply acknowledging that thickness in the life of the church, but to build those thick relationships with others who are not like them. There was very little about ecumenical relations let alone interreligious relations, and relations with charities, organizations, companies or public bodies. While the book advocated for a flow in and out to build thickness, a weaving with public life, this flow or weaving felt to be controlled and rather one way. The boundaries of the church may be porous, but little time was given to the way the world shaped churches. The challenge from the likes of Al Barrett for the flow of the church to be interrupted by its encounters in the world would be a helpful challenge to such a missiology, seeing how the life of the Spirit in the world might reshape the churches' witness. Similarly, Jenny Leith's work on *Political Formation* pushes further into this dynamic, challenging the metanarratives that good formation takes place in the church and bad formation takes place in the world, showing how the world might be forming Christians and churches for good. For all that the book encourages a bold approach to publics, the focus on sending parishioners to witness to publics could be seen as a reinforcing and slight adaptation of an evangelical approach to mission, rather than a more radical reimagining of witness to publics. I think a public missiology needs to go further and really embrace the thickness, messiness and complexity of being public.

In summary, this book is a welcome challenge to move from individual witness to public witness, and points the way for a public missiology, but there still feels a way to go. I want to celebrate this book as stimulating a vital conversation and testify to the way in which it has caused me to stop, reflect and deepen my thinking. I do

recommend the book as a good introduction to a compelling vision, but it is a vision which needs to continue to build and develop. I concur with the premise and direction of the book that churches and missiology need to go public and yet I wanted a bolder and riskier vision for witnessing to publics.

About the author

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