

Institution: University of St Andrews



Unit of Assessment: 33 – Theology and Religious Studies

Title of case study: Bible, Church and Politics: *The Politics of Christmas Report***1. Summary of the impact** (indicative maximum 100 words)

Dr Stephen Holmes was commissioned by the Westminster think-tank Theos to write a report under the title *The Politics of Christmas* (2011). The report generated extensive discussion and reflection in the traditional media, online, and in church journals, in the UK and overseas, with the following impacts:

1. Widespread increased awareness and discussion at an international level of the political context and claims of the gospel narratives;
2. Changed attitudes and practices in churches in regard to the celebration of Christmas.

**2. Underpinning research** (indicative maximum 500 words)

Dr Holmes joined the University of St Andrews in 2005. His report, *The Politics of Christmas*, drew upon two longstanding research directions within the School of Divinity. First, under the distinguished leadership of Prof. Richard Bauckham, FBA (Professor of New Testament Studies 1992-2007, now Emeritus Professor), and involving work by other scholars in the School, including Prof. Trevor Hart (1995-2013, now Honorary Professor), a distinctive methodology for using biblical narratives to address political and social questions was developed at the University of St Andrews from the mid-1990s onwards [1,2,3 below]. The methodology stemmed in part from the School's general research interests in pursuing cross-disciplinary links between theology and biblical studies, but it applied that concern in a specific way by developing suitable approaches for intellectually serious applications of ancient sacred texts to particular contemporary issues of politics, economics, social justice, ecology, and personal ethics. The research sought to demonstrate how biblical texts should *not* be appealed to in support of political positions, and through several academically rigorous case-studies (including a number of monographs) it developed a positive hermeneutical proposal for the *appropriate* application of biblical texts to modern political questions.

Second, from 2005 onwards, Dr Holmes directed from the University of St Andrews an international research project under the title 'Public Theology in Cultural Engagement'. With funding of around £50k from charitable bodies and trusts, the enterprise found natural synergies with the School's established research strengths in the Bible and politics. Aiming to develop modes of engagement with public issues that remained authentically theological whilst being relevant to, and comprehensible within, the public square, the research proceeded by examining and critiquing available theological accounts of culture, and by considering case-studies that seemed to exemplify successful attempts to treat cultural and political questions. These included, *inter alia*, drugs policy, education, and issues of national identity [4]. Out of these examinations, a new account of *how to think theologically* about cultural and political realities was presented, with exploration of the consequences for an adequately theological approach to public engagement. The project involved popular seminars in London, Heidelberg and Seattle to consider the impact of Christian theological claims on public policy debates; it climaxed in 2008 with the publication of *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement*, edited by Holmes [4]. The project coalesced with other developments in public advocacy work in the UK by bodies such as the British and Foreign Bible Society, which in November 2006 set up Theos, an ecumenical Public Theology Think-tank in Westminster. As a consultant researcher for Theos, Holmes was invited to write a report which would bring some of the political implications of the public theology project into sharp focus on a classic issue of popular interest: the meaning of Christmas [5].

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Drawing upon the methodological advances described above, the *Politics of Christmas* report reconsidered the New Testament's nativity narratives in a way that offered intellectually serious yet accessible commentary on a number of contentious political debates, including the proper treatment of asylum seekers, housing policy, and taxation. The impact of the report depended entirely upon its being both academically credible and culturally relevant, and so upon the research outcomes outlined above.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Bauckham, R.J., *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (WJKP, 2002). Available from the University library.
2. Bauckham, R.J. & Hart, T.A., *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (DLT, 1999). Available from the University library.
3. Bauckham, R.J., *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Baylor University Press, 2010). Available from the University library.
4. Holmes, S.R. (ed.), *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement* (Paternoster, 2008). Available from the University library.
5. Holmes, S.R. *The Politics of Christmas* (Theos, 2011).
<http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/files/files/Reports/ThePoliticsOfChristmas.pdf>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The Politics of Christmas report was widely read and discussed, indicating changed levels of awareness of the topics considered, and changed public discourse; it also led to changed practices around the celebration of Christmas in churches in the UK (at least).

1. *Widespread increased awareness and discussion at an international level of the political context and claims of the gospel narratives*

a. *Changed international awareness*

The Politics of Christmas [5] report attracted immediate media attention, including an extensive article in the *Daily Telegraph* [S4], a comment piece in *The New Statesman*, and online reports in the *Huffington Post* and elsewhere. At least eight BBC local radio stations carried items on the report in the weekend after its release, which strategically came in the run-up to Christmas. As a result of the publication, Holmes was invited to write reflective pieces drawing on the report for *The Times* (appeared online 9/12/11), for politics.co.uk [S5], and for the Australian Broadcasting Company's prestigious religion and ethics website; he was interviewed by BBC Radio Manchester, Radio Rhema in New Zealand, and several faith-based media sources, including an interview resulting in an article covering the whole front page of the *Baptist Times*, subsequently highlighted as one of the most significant stories of the year in that newspaper's annual review. This story was picked up and republished by the American *Ethics Daily*. Other articles appeared on the CNN website in the USA, in church news stories in the Irish Republic, in the leading Tanzanian newspaper *The Citizen*, and extensively across the internet. The Director of Theos attests that their data demonstrate significant take-up by 'a variety of communities beyond academia: believers and non-believers, a range of age groups and genders' [S1]. The extent of this media and public engagement demonstrates a widespread impact on awareness and understanding of political themes within the biblical nativity narratives.

b. *Changed international discourse*

More direct public responses to *The Politics of Christmas* report included a somewhat hostile response from *Daily Telegraph* comment writer, Peter Mullen [S6], whose piece received several hundred comments (since edited down to just over 130) online, and many other online discussions. The energy of some of these discussions – particularly in response to Mullen – demonstrates that the report succeeded in generating widespread public discussion on the themes it treated. Analysis of the comments on the online versions of news reports indicate that the range of those reached included a wide variety of age groups, and people of varying religious affiliations, including many people of no religious affiliation [S1]. Discussions took place on sites serving communities from all over the world: local media from New Zealand to Manchester, on at least four continents [S1].

Mullen's article was shared over 300 times on social media sites [S4], which is indicative of wide readership, interest, and engagement (this figure is considerably higher than many other articles from the same website). Theos estimate that social media content referencing the report reached 15,000 [S3]. There can be little doubt that the awareness of these themes across a substantial audience – plausibly numbered into the hundreds of thousands, given the known reach of the various media outlets – was increased; given the relative invisibility of such themes in popular culture prior to the publication of the report, as demonstrated by polling data included in the report (only 19% of the population saw any political relevance in the Christmas story, a figure that did not change significantly with different levels of religious commitment), the increase was significant. Theos state that the report '*distinctively coloured public conversations about the practice of Christmas for the final months of 2011*' [S1]. The report was included in a resource pack produced by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 2012 for schools and churches to engage the Christmas story. The inclusion of the report in this pack, extensively disseminated across the UK, is another indication of its reach, encompassing the younger generation, addressing schools and children as well as churches and adults [S10].

2. Changed practices in churches

There are a number of examples from individuals indicating changed practices, mostly from Christian ministers (including bishops), suggesting that their public celebrations of Christmas were revised as a result of their reading of the report [S1; S2]. Leaders spoke of how the report had informed their sermons, and how positive comments from many congregation members had indicated that this had changed their thinking and their practice in celebrating Christmas [S1; S2]. Given that the change of practice of one minister will lead to a changed experience for one or several congregations which may each number into the hundreds, and given the significance of the celebration of Christmas in the liturgical year of many Christian denominations, but particularly the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, even a small number of changes of practice like this suggests a substantial impact in terms of changed experience of numbers of people at a significant moment in their cultural and religious life. Since the available evidence of changed practices comes simply from those who chose to contact the author and/or publisher of the report to express gratitude, it is almost certain that the number of people, and hence congregations, celebrating Christmas differently as a result of the research is in fact significantly larger than can yet be demonstrated in statistical terms [S1]. There is evidence of some level of changes in practice in regard to core issues of religious and cultural celebration [S1], and reason to suppose that this change in practice may well have been extensive.

By demonstrating what it does and does not mean to read foundational New Testament narratives with an eye to their political content, the report had significantly increased awareness of the reality that the birth of Jesus was –irreducibly and with radical implications – a political event [S1; S2]. In offering a popular window on scholarly research on what the Bible might *actually* be saying about Christian origins, it had led a wide range of people to rethink their notions of Christmas as merely a celebration of domesticity or an opportunity for excess. One influential church leader in England commented that her preaching was specifically '*informed*' by the report: '*I talked about how Christmas isn't just to be a cozy family time, but should incorporate an outward focus and that we should not be nervous of being overtly political at Christmas time. Many people said how helpful that was*' [S2].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[S1] Statement from the Director of Theos.

[S2] Statement from an English church leader.

[S3] Additional statement from the Director of Theos.

[S4] *Daily Telegraph* report 2/12/2011, p.12, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/8929397/Christmas-should-be-celebrated-as-a-political-event-says-academic.html> [demonstrates UK media attention and engagement through online discussion]

[S5] <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/12/christmas-injustice-story-luke> [a follow-up opinion piece in the *New Statesman*, demonstrating media engagement and discussion]

[S6] <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/petermullen/100121686/why-im-sick-of-being-force-fed-the->

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- [political-message-of-the-christmas-story-by-trendy-clerics-and-think-tanks/](#) [one example of media engagement with the report, and of public engagement following in the comments section]
- [S7] <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/12/20/my-take-reclaiming-the-politics-of-christmas/> [a CNN comment piece on the research, demonstrating the impact of the report in the USA]
- [S8] <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2011/12/21/re-politicizing-christmas/> [a blog discussion on the report from *First Things*, a significant US journal covering issues of faith and culture, demonstrating the impact of the report in the USA]
- [S9]] <http://allafrica.com/stories/201112280831.html> [a report from a Tanzanian newspaper, demonstrating engagement in Africa]
- [S10] <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/news/schools-and-churches-take-a-fresh-look-at-christmas-with-nativity-resources-from-bible-society/> [a news release indicating the inclusion of the report as a part of a resource pack for schools and churches]