Sebastian Kim – On theology in the public square, and on Christianity as a world religion

College and University Class Resource

This resource is designed to help your classroom discussion. It has specific application questions appropriate to local church ministry contexts. Questions are ideal for paired discussions, group-forum style discussions, and personal reflective responses. Consider using a discussion method most suitable to your classroom setting. Select questions most appropriate to your group. Consider isolating particular themes.

Materials

1. Video: Sebastian Kim, 53 minutes.
2. Theme: On theology in the public square, and on Christianity as a world religion

Preliminary discussion

1. What were the major themes in Kim’s responses?
2. How does Kim describe public theology?
3. Discuss the difficulties of the content. What was difficult to understand? Was there anything you would like to clarify with the group?
4. Theological method: How is Kim’s theology informed and shaped by his practical ministry and context? What approaches does he take in understanding God in the context of his day-to-day experiences and discipling?

Explore and apply

Consider isolating a particular theme of interest for your classroom discussion. You might allocate topics or questions to particular groups or pairs. Or, raise particular questions in a forum style for group responses. Apply the answers to these questions in your own setting.

1. In “Theology in the Public Sphere,” Sebastian Kim discusses public theology, showing how theology engages the economic, political, and cultural spheres of common life. Why is he passionate about public theology?
2. Christian faith has often been privatized in the West. How do Christians participate more fully and confidently in the public domain, especially in a pluralistic, multicultural, multi-religious,
3. Why should public theology be humble, generous, and conversational?

4. Kim writes that, “Public theology is Christians engaging in dialogue with those outside church circles on various issues of common interest.” Why is dialogue/conversation the only viable option for theology in the public sphere?

5. How does good public theology promote critical inquiry and open debate?

6. What makes public theology distinguishable from political and/or liberation theologies?

7. How does Kim explain the four distinguishing marks of public theology?: (1) it attempts to create common ground for conversation on issues in the public sphere; (2) its guiding mechanism is searching for the public meaning of theology and for a theology of public life; (3) it posits itself as a reforming theology instead of a revolutionary one; and (4) major issues in public theology include not only inequality but also the increased privatization of religion that resulted in the dominance of the state, the market, and the media in the public sphere.

8. How does Global Christianity help us understand the Bible as a public book?

9. How does public theology draw authority and inspiration from the Bible (which has the power to speak to people of different faiths in different social contexts)?

10. How do different theologies help us understand the hermeneutical openness of the Bible in changing contexts? For example, liberation (Latin America), feminist (Africa/Asia), inter-textual (India/S. J. Samartha), and inculturation (Africa).

11. What does Kim mean when he says that the hermeneutical focus of public theology remind and challenge us to constantly discover, reinterpret, and appropriate the meaning of texts in the plurality of contexts?

12. Let's look at specific examples of public theology, from various contexts. How does eco-theology help us understand public theology as a social, creative, and holistic enterprise?

13. How did Latin America churches address economic injustices?

14. How does public theology play a role in peace-making, for example, the diverse response of the western churches to the Iraq War?

15. Now we’ve looked at these examples, how do the successes and failures of the church in these contexts show that “any public theology has to be constantly revised and shaped by new ideas and new situations otherwise it will cease to be an authentic public theology”?

16. In Kim’s book, he addresses the controversial cases of Rowan Williams's lecture on Sharia Law, the Danish cartoon controversy, and the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill in UK. What do these cases show us about the role of public theology as it relates to secularism and pluralism and religious life?

17. Kim says that churches have the capacity to contribute to common humanity more than secularism would seem to allow. What does he mean?

18. In “Christianity as a World Religion,” Kim describes the coming of world Christianity. What are the most striking things you see, as you observe the rise of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America?

19. How do communion, Bible, spirituality, and mission provide global meeting points?

20. What does “the world future of Christianity” look like?

21. What are some of the things that the churches of the Majority World teach the churches of the West today?
Classroom ministry

Facilitate an opportunity for students to respond to the video in light of the classroom discussion. Consider inviting students to write their responses to the following questions.

1. What is God encouraging our class and me, to do?

2. In response to the issues raised in the video, what are areas I want to ask God for forgiveness in? How do I need to change? What does God want me to stand up for?

3. How do I need God to minister to me and my community, for us to better engage with the contextual issues of our community?

4. How can I gain a better understanding of public theology today? What do we ask that God would do in our hearts?

Prayer

Spend time in prayer over what you’ve learnt. You may encourage your class to pray for one another. Or, in light of your discussion, you may choose to pray over your class.

Links

Website: www.theglobalchurchproject.com

Book: Graham Hill, GlobalChurch: Reshaping Our Conversations, Renewing Our Mission, Revitalizing Our Churches (IVP Academic, 2016)