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Walking with Turtles and Botanising on Asphalt: Chaplain as *flâneur* as Public Theologian

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This article contributes to practical theological conversations about the nature and practice of chaplaincy by envisioning chaplains as public theologians. Tracing a development from models rooted in traditional understandings of Christian ministry to more contextual and professionalised conceptions, it notes the resilience of 'loitering with intent' as a way of thinking about chaplaincy practice. The figure of the *flâneur* (stroller), particularly associated with Walter Benjamin and encountered in a range of disciplines (sociology, urban geography, critical and cultural theory), is used to give strategic significance to the sometimes marginal and liminal status of chaplains. Figuring the chaplain as *flâneur* achieves this by emphasising the importance of contextual experience, and describing the related practices of walking and reading the publicly significant institutions in which chaplains are embedded. This experience and the fruit of these practices (walking with turtles and botanising on asphalt) are shown to be valuable resources for public theology.

KEYWORDS chaplaincy, public theology, *flâneur*, Walter Benjamin, loitering with intent

Chaplains are embedded in some of the most significant institutions of contemporary society, including hospitals, schools, universities, shopping centres, prisons and the military. Whether literally or metaphorically, they walk the corridors of these contested spaces, in each of which is inscribed a wealth of insights into social and political life in the twenty-first century. What is more, the ways in which chaplains are (mis)understood by their institutions and those within them provide further clues to the place and perception of religion in contemporary life. In light of this, the contexts in which chaplains work and their experiences within these settings can be read and interpreted as valuable sources for public theology. In a recent report into the

potential significance of chaplaincy for the Church one chaplain observes that ‘the very honest and lived experiential theology that comes out of chaplaincy could have much to offer the church’ and the authors refer to the ‘[l]ived public theologies of health, employment, education and the economy’ (Todd *et al.*, 2014: 35). The figure of the *flâneur* offers a model for this interpretive and theologically generative dimension of chaplaincy work.

The *flâneur* is an eccentric and ambiguous figure who emerges in the arcades of nineteenth century Paris, itinerant yet rooted in place, immersed in the crowd whilst standing out from the multitude. Subsequently troped extensively in cultural and critical theory, we encounter the *flâneur* most vividly in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* which, as a vast collection of notes and observations for a project only partially completed, can be described as one of the largest books never written. Drawing on Benjamin’s work, chaplains figured as *flâneurs* can be understood as providing significant sources for a public theology only just starting to be written. So, as well as offering a new model for thinking about the nature and significance of chaplaincy, this is an argument for doing public theology utilising the insights of chaplains as *flâneurs*. I begin by surveying models used in thinking about chaplaincy before discussing the figure of the *flâneur* and arguing that this way of envisioning chaplains fills a significant gap in existing models, specifically as a way of articulating the relationship between chaplaincy and public theology.

Models of chaplaincy

Models are devices for exploring complex and contested ideas and practices. Avery Dulles’ *Models of the Church* (1987) became a classic text in ecclesiology because it enabled the conceptualisation of the complex and changing reality of the Church from different perspectives, using models for their explanatory and exploratory power (Dulles, 1987: 24). For Sallie McFague ‘a model is a metaphor with “staying power”’ (McFague, 1987: 34) and her work offers alternative models to the dominant monarchical model of God as King: ‘We are letting the metaphor of the world as God’s body try its chance’ (McFague, 1987: 69). This is what is meant by a heuristic approach to the use of models, playing with ideas to see how they illuminate experience. This is what I am doing with the chaplain as *flâneur*.

In making sense of the complexities of chaplaincy, which has fewer traditional resources on which to draw than more dominant forms of ministry, models are especially valuable. In Christian thinking about the nature and practice of ministry more generally there are models that chaplains may find useful. A pastoral model of chaplaincy has plentiful resources for critically reflective practice in the wide-ranging literature on pastoral care (Campbell, 1986; Leech, 1986; Pattison, 2000); there is much in more particular discussions of Christian ministry that may inform a priestly model of chaplaincy (Pritchard, 2007); and missiological perspectives provide a rich seam for chaplains to mine for mission-related models (Donovan, 1982; Slater, 2012). But what models are distinctive to chaplaincy? The history and development of different forms of chaplaincy as well as the range of contexts in which chaplains work today, both contribute to a diversity of models, the rise of multi-faith

chaplaincy adding further complexity. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern a movement from approaches rooted primarily in traditional forms of Christian ministry towards more contextual and professionalised understandings as chaplaincy has become more rooted in particular sectors against the backdrop of secularisation. This shift is demonstrated by examining two recent surveys of chaplaincy models, one relating to healthcare, the other generic. I then argue that despite these developments, there continue to be a number of models that coalesce around the perceived ambiguity of chaplaincy and relate to the problematic but persistent model of ‘loitering with intent’.

A review of models used in healthcare chaplaincy as part of the NHS Caring for the Spirit project (South Yorkshire Strategic Health Authority, subsequently SYSHA, 2006) notes that the earliest model of healthcare chaplaincy sees it as an extension of parochial ministry. Evolving from this model, other early approaches are closely related to traditional models of Christian ministry, such as Norman Autton’s pastoral and sacramental model of priestly presence and Heije Faber’s focus on the pastoral conversation, influenced by Clinical Pastoral Education (SYSHA, 2006: 6). Faber’s emphasis on listening to the patient is given a more institutional and contextual grounding in Michael Wilson’s model in which the chaplain fosters ‘a creative relationship between the hospital, community and organised religion’ (SYSHA, 2006: 7). A shift from this focus on the chaplain’s relationship to organised religion occurs in Peter Speck’s classic articulation of a model of pastoral care that, whilst influenced by Christianity, presupposes a distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ (Speck, 1988: 26–37). Since that time, a growing research base in spiritual care has been providing the foundations for chaplaincy as an evidence-based professional practice (SYSHA, 2006: 8–9) and models of chaplaincy have been increasingly contextual in focus (Cobb, 2004) leading to greater professionalisation in healthcare chaplaincy, reflected to a greater or lesser extent in other sectors.

Writing generically about chaplaincy, Miranda Threlfall-Holmes observes that chaplains generally work concurrently with different models (Threlfall-Holmes, 2011: 116) and affirms the importance of context by noting how the nature of the employer distinguishes chaplaincy from ecclesially oriented ministries. Her focus on four models of chaplaincy articulated from the employer’s perspective is evidence of the shift being described. The first of these models comes closest to traditional theological approaches, being a more-or-less secularised notion of pastoral care (Threlfall-Holmes, 2011: 122). Chaplains’ contributions to well-being in the institution are justified by the bottom line. Second, the ‘spiritual-care model’, as we have already seen, is particularly strong in healthcare and overlaps with the pastoral-care model and its more theological roots (Threlfall-Holmes, 2011: 123). It is with the ‘diversity model’ that something less clearly rooted in traditional Christian ministry begins to emerge. On this model, the chaplain is a religious professional who can help the institution engage with issues of diversity (Threlfall-Holmes, 2011: 124). A fourth model, particularly pertinent where there is a religious foundation, sees the chaplain as embodying the traditional heritage of the institution (Threlfall-Holmes, 2011: 124). Summing up these models under a ‘secular meta-model’ Threlfall-Holmes says that:

From the point of view of the employing institution, the chaplain is there to provide certain professional services, whether as a pastoral carer, a spiritual carer, an expert in faith and faiths or as an expert practitioner and guardian of a cultural tradition. (Threlfall-Holmes, 2011: 125)

A significant feature of this ‘meta-model’ is that it sees the chaplain primarily in relation to individual freedom of choice, hence expressing something significant about the way in which religion is perceived as a matter of personal choice and consumer demand in contemporary culture (Threlfall-Holmes, 2011: 125).

This brief survey reveals a broad trajectory that moves from models of chaplaincy rooted in traditional understandings of Christian (predominantly Anglican) ministry towards more contextual and professionalised (sometimes secular) conceptions of the chaplain’s role, albeit this is more marked in healthcare than some other settings such as higher education. Alongside this trajectory, however, is a strand of thinking about chaplaincy that reflects a tension between its beginning and its end, an ambiguity about the nature and role of the chaplain, an uncertainty about where she fits in the institution as well as in relation to the faith community. It is striking that Mark Cobb’s clear articulation of a professional, contextual model of chaplaincy that arises at the intersection of three communities — the healthcare, disciplinary (chaplaincy) and faith communities — still begins with an account of the apparent incongruity of chaplaincy (Cobb, 2004: 10). It is this sense of ambiguity and associated disorientation that is reflected in Christopher Moody’s portrayal of chaplaincy as a ‘wilderness ministry’ in which chaplaincy is likened to the cave on Patmos where John is said to have had his visions. Between the deeply religious monastery at the top of the hill and the secular world of tourism below, the cave itself ‘is both some way off the beaten track and the place of vision’ (Moody, 1999: 15). Moody’s emphasis on what is discovered in the disorienting wilderness environment is of course contextual, but the chaplain in this model is never completely at home in the context; this is a model rooted in the chaplain’s marginality, a liminal status further expressed in the images Moody uses to articulate the in-between, wilderness ministry of chaplains as shamans, watchers and resident aliens. The marginality of chaplains is embraced as something distinctive that chaplaincy offers, creating spaces of learning and discovery.

Christina Beardsley’s exploration of the clown as a model for healthcare chaplaincy (Beardsley, 2006) falls into the same category, recognising the intrinsic liminality of the chaplain. She notes that the emergence of the clown as an image for Christ and then developed as a model for ministry ‘surfaced as the Church became conscious of its marginalisation’ (Beardsley, 2006: 3). Beardsley uses the figure of the clown to explore some tensions faced by chaplains. Most significant here is the tension between the apparently amateur chaplain and the highly professionalised practice of medicine (Beardsley, 2006: 4). As with Moody’s reflections on the wilderness, the clown as a model for chaplaincy in Beardsley’s vision derives its value precisely from the marginality of the chaplain.

The ambiguity surrounding chaplaincy finds expression in the model of ‘loitering with intent’ which has a long tradition in Christian chaplaincy (Gilliat-Ray *et al.*, 2013: 85). Moody, for example, speaks of the chaplain being ‘able to loiter on the

edge of other people's lives' (Moody, 1999: 18); and in one study of healthcare chaplaincy 'creative loitering', a small part of what chaplains do, is seen as a way of 'being around' and offering spiritual care (Swinton and Mowat, 2007: 34, 37–38), and so is primarily pastoral in focus.

As both Dulles and McFague note in their discussion of models, an image that takes root in the imagination is one that is worthy of sustained attention. This is clearly the case with models of chaplaincy reflecting the sometimes marginal and ambiguous experience of chaplains. Something about this ambiguous figure loitering just will not go away, even though it felt dated when I worked as a university chaplain in the 1990s and is critiqued in contemporary writing about chaplaincy (Smith, 2015: 219, citing C of E, 2002: 28). Despite criticism of this model as undermining the professional identity of the chaplain, the fact it is still used and refuses to go away suggests it captures aspects of the experience of chaplaincy that are important to recognise and explore.

There are two distinct but related contributions that the *flâneur* can make to this ongoing discussion of the nature and practice of chaplaincy and of the models that help crystallise developing understandings of the role. The first relates to the surprising resilience of the 'loitering with intent' model. The figure of the *flâneur*, particularly in some later manifestations, captures something of this dimension of chaplaincy experience whilst articulating it in such a way as to make it more strategically important to the life of the institution and the life of the faith community. It achieves this when related to the second contribution, which concerns the role of the chaplain as public theologian. Some of the models in the *Caring for the Spirit* guidance notes come close to a recognition of the public theological significance of chaplaincy in their vision of healthcare chaplaincy as a site where social conceptions of illness are explored and investigated (SYSHA, 2006). And, as already noted, Todd, Slater and Dunlop in *The Church of England's Involvement in Chaplaincy* note the potential of chaplaincy for public theology. The *flâneur* as model for the chaplain as public theologian offers a way of articulating some of the specific practices associated with realising this potential.

The *flâneur*: walking with turtles and botanising on asphalt

Who or what, then, is a *flâneur*? The answer to this question is complicated by the many-layered complexity of the character's appearance in fiction and history as well as in critical and cultural theory. In what follows I paint a picture of this eccentric figure focusing on key features pertinent to the *flâneur* as a model for chaplains as public theologians.

The *flâneur*, 'stroller', is historically associated with the Parisian arcades of the early nineteenth century. Sometimes compared to but distinguished from dandies, *flâneurs* strolled the arcades observing, window-shopping, visually consuming. So slow were their perambulatory preferences that there were accounts of *flâneurs* walking with turtles or tortoises (Benjamin, 1999: 422). A dictionary definition of the time describes the popular usage as 'a lazybones, a loafer, a man of insufferable idleness, who doesn't know where to carry his trouble and his boredom' (Ferguson, 1994: 24).¹ The *flâneur*, on this account, is a figure of disapproval; and pictorial

representations do nothing to make the *flâneur* more attractive as a model for chaplains. They are portrayed with top hat and tails, casually leaning against a shop front, resting on a cane and looking through a pair of binoculars or smoking a cigar. Yet, eccentric though they may be, *flâneurs* are immersed in and integrally bound up with the context of modernity as manifested on the streets and in the arcades of Paris; and they subsequently come to represent a range of related activities from detective work to academic research where their pertinence for chaplaincy becomes more apparent.

The public theological potential of the *flâneur* is seen from as early as 1863 in one of the first writings evoking the figure, Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* (Baudelaire, 1995). The artist in question was the illustrator Constantin Guys who is a 'passionate lover of crowds and incognitos' (5), 'a great traveller and cosmopolitan' (6), who 'wants to know, understand and appreciate everything that happens on the surface of our globe' (7). He is a 'spiritual citizen of the universe' and 'the mainspring of his genius is curiosity' (7). Guys is likened in this respect to Edgar Allan Poe's *Man of the Crowd* who 'hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, in an instant, bewitched him' (7). He retains 'the genius of childhood — a genius for which no aspect of life has become stale', this genius being elaborated using the figure of the *flâneur*:

For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. (9)

There is nothing detached about this spectator who is inextricably implicated in that which is observed. The painter's deeply attentive immersion in the crowd subsequently inspires his artistic creativity so that 'the external world is reborn upon his paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator' (11). What makes Guys more than *just* a *flâneur* is that his strolling involves a searching for 'modernity', seeking to 'extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory' (12).

The *flânerie* that Baudelaire celebrates in Guys becomes a model for the poet's own interpretation of the city in the 1869 collection *Paris Spleen* with its 'poetic ... vision of the public places and spaces of Paris' (Tester, 1994: 1). Being more at home in public than in private (Tester, 1994: 2) is one of the characteristics of the *flâneur* that already lends itself to modelling public theology, but the potential is seen more clearly still in Benjamin's account.

Benjamin is known, among other things, for his unfinished *Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999), a study of nineteenth century Paris through a reading of its arcades, twenty-six of which were constructed from 1799 to 1855. It is in this context that the figure of the *flâneur* begins to be thematised as a figure of note in Benjamin's thinking. Observing that the 'streets are the dwelling place of the collective' (Benjamin, 1999: 423) he describes the *flâneur's* relationship to the social world thus:

The *flâneur* is the observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult science of industrial fluctuations. He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers. (Benjamin, 1999: 427)

We see here how the *flâneur* is related to a particular socio-economic world, Ferguson observing that the ‘reciprocity between the city and the *flâneur* is complete’ (Ferguson, 1994: 27). Particularly associated with Paris, the phenomenon of the *flâneur* has flourished more, or less, and differently, in different contexts. Reviewing Franz Hessel’s *Spazieren in Berlin*, Benjamin expresses surprise that *flânerie* was developing in a new way there as well as discussing why it emerged in Paris but not in Rome. It is in this review essay that one of Benjamin’s most theologically evocative descriptions of the *flâneur* occurs:

Now, if we recollect that not only people and animals but also spirits and above all images can inhabit a place, then we have a tangible idea of what concerns the *flâneur* and of what he looks for. Namely, images, wherever they lodge. The *flâneur* is the priest of the genius loci. This unassuming passer-by, with his clerical dignity, his detective’s intuition, and his omniscience, is not unlike Chesterton’s Father Brown, that master detective. (Benjamin, 1999ii: 264)

With its roots in classical Roman religion, the ‘genius loci’ refers to the guardian spirit or deity of a place and, subsequently, to the prevailing character of particular locations. The *flâneur*, then, is both priest and detective in this characterisation that comes closest in Benjamin’s writings to evoking what might customarily be associated with a chaplain’s role. But to what end is the *flâneur*’s strolling, observing and particular relation to place?

In terms of its pertinence for chaplaincy, this is best answered with reference to the *flâneur* as collector, described by Benjamin as ‘botanising on the asphalt’ (Benjamin, 1999: 372). Whereas a botanist collects specimens of plant-life to deepen our understanding of the natural world, the *flâneur* goes about ‘collecting and recording urban images, social interactions and social typifications’, this watchfulness lending support to the *flâneur* as signifier of ‘the detective, the artist of modernity, the journalist and certain types of urban sociologist’ (Frisby, 1994: 92). For Benjamin himself the fruit of this work, as noted, is seen in the *Arcades Project* which is a huge collection of quotations, observations and comments on the city, gained through his immersion in the literature and archives of nineteenth century Paris (Frisby, 1994: 97).

Rob Shields, commenting on Benjamin’s treatment of the *flâneur* as ‘a detective of street life’ (Shields, 1994: 61), describes the practice of scanning ‘the urban environment and passers-by for information on the true nature of the world’, with the arcades providing

a vantage point for both the *flâneur* and for Benjamin to engage in a depth hermeneutics of the street and, through its metropolitan centrality, to Europe and its colonies. (Shields, 1994: 73)

An important feature of Benjamin’s treatment of the *flâneurs* is their fate in trying to swim against the currents of modernity. One such counter-cultural protest is the

practice of taking a turtle or tortoise for a walk, thereby challenging the (even then) accelerating speed of the modern world (Tester, 1994: 15). There is far more than mere eccentricity in this gesture when interpreted against the background of Benjamin's understanding of the *flâneur* in a Paris shaped by modernity: it is an implicit protest against one of the effects of rationalisation, specifically its effect on time, although the mystery of life is driven out of both time and space by this process:

Benjamin's argument is that the rationality of capitalism and, especially, commodification and the circulation of commodities, itself defined the meaning of existence in the city so that there remained no spaces of the mystery for the *flâneur* to observe. (Tester, 1994: 13)

This priest of the genius loci, we might say, has lost her altar. Such images may appeal to some chaplains as models of counter-cultural chaplaincy contesting the capitalist captivity of their institutional context. To others they may seem dangerously nostalgic against a background of increasing professionalisation. However, it is not so much the early historical example of *flânerie* that inspires the model being explored here, but the later development of the idea in critical theory and cultural studies. Susan Buck-Morss has observed that subsequent forms of the *flâneur* continue to express characteristics of the original manifestation making 'the "truth" of the *flâneur*, more visible in his afterlife than in his flourishing' (Buck-Morss, 1986: 105).

This development begins with Benjamin himself, Frisby seeing in the Arcades project the fullest expression of Benjamin as *flâneur*. He speaks of the 'fundamental ambiguity of the figure of the *flâneur*, sometimes verging on that of the mere stroller, at other times elevated to that of the detective, to the decipherer of urban and visual texts, indeed to the figure of Benjamin himself' (Frisby, 2001: 28). Frisby describes *flânerie* as an activity that includes observation and listening, the reading of metropolitan life and of texts, and the production of texts (Frisby, 2001: 28); the *flâneur*, as Beatrice Hanssen expresses it concisely, is a 'peripatetic critic' (Hanssen, 2006: 2).

From those early beginnings in Paris, then, the *flâneur* travels far and wide, not only geographically but culturally, being found in the pages of literature as well as in sociology, geography, philosophy and art. Tester concludes the introduction to his edited collection of essays on the *flâneur* by stressing the value of *flânerie* for 'reflection upon the worlds we inhabit', concluding that the '*flâneur* and *flânerie* become different and intriguing keys to understanding the social and cultural milieux' (Tester, 1994: 18). Tester and those he discusses relate this task of reflection and understanding to disciplines such as social theory, cultural history and cultural sociology. But what of public theology? This will become clear we explore the parallels between *flânerie* and chaplaincy.

***Flânerie* and chaplaincy**

There are aspects of the foregoing description of the *flâneur* that do not easily correlate to the experience and self-understanding of most chaplains. Even if the slowness of the *flâneur* might be embraced as a counter-cultural challenge to the speed of capitalism, images of the *flâneur* as lazybones will be rejected; and the idea of *flâneur*

as spectator, however much interpreted as participant-observer, will find it hard to shake off accusations of detachment.

There is much, however, that is resonant and this will be uncovered by exploring the model of chaplain as *flâneur* in three dimensions. The first concerns the experience or fate of chaplains, how they are treated and perceived, and what happens to them in their institutional context. The second relates to the physical practice of engaging that space through walking slowly, observing and reading. The third dimension arises from the other two and is the interpretive practice of seeking meaning and insight in the fragments that have been gathered from walking and reading. In the final section of the article these dimensions are used to paint a picture of the chaplain as public theologian and of a 'chaplaincy project' that is to public theology what Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is to critical and cultural theory.

The fate of chaplains

It is the ambivalent, ambiguous, complex and evolving nature of the figure of the *flâneur* that opens up such a wide range of interpretive possibilities, making this a valuable device for thinking about the ambiguous, complex and evolving figure of the chaplain. Observing what happens to chaplaincy in the changing conditions of modernity and post-modernity, secularity and post-secularity, can provide valuable insights into the place of religion in contemporary society. It may be precisely when chaplaincy is under threat that much of importance for public theology can be learned. In his discussion of the decision by Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust to cut chaplaincy services almost to the point of non-existence, Christopher Swift observes how in the ensuing media coverage 'the polarity of a debate between bishops and secularists inevitably made it an argument about the place of religion in modern society' (Swift, 2014: 87). Chaplains may not be considered idlers like the *flâneurs* of the Paris arcades, but just as their fate revealed something about the development of that city, so the vulnerability of chaplaincy in times of financial stringency is indicative of the ease with which their usefulness and productivity can be questioned, which in turn sheds light on perceptions of the social significance of religion as well as on the values operative in public life. The media discussion that followed the Worcester announcement revealed the complex place of faith in contemporary public life, with perceptions ranging from a stark polarity between religiosity and secularity to a more nuanced relationship between religion, spirituality and pastoral care. There is much in such episodes for public theologians to ponder and learn from: public theology needs chaplaincy and cannot afford to ignore its insights, much as Benjamin learned about modernity from reflecting on the fate of the *flâneur*.

Physical practice

The chaplain as *flâneur*, however, is much more than simply a barometer; there is a double-layered strategic practice here too, at the heart of which is the literal strolling of the institution. My own chaplaincy practice included time spent deliberately walking the campus with a threefold intention: to be seen around, increasing pastoral availability and awareness of chaplaincy; to meet people, establishing

connections and building networks; and to ‘read’ the institution in support of more effective ministry (central areas plastered with posters and frequented by student society stalls were important). This, then, was walking rather than loitering with intent and this dimension of the chaplain as *flâneur* has resonated well with chaplains I have explored the model with, a practice of walking slowly in their institutions capturing something important about a distinctive way of being in and engaging the context. *Flânerie* captures well this purposeful walking that is active rather than passive. In line with dominant models of chaplaincy this strolling may have primarily pastoral intent, although missiological purpose (variously understood) may also be in view. Chaplains may act counter-culturally by resisting acculturation into the frenetic busyness of many institutions. Again, this may relate to more traditional chaplaincy models and the practice of the *flâneur* walking with turtles may be a striking image to reflect this aspect of their work.

It is, however, the ‘botanising on the asphalt’ aspect of *flânerie* that I want to emphasise. This comes to the fore when we recognise the shift in understanding of the *flâneur* as merely strolling to doing something more purposeful, in the manner of a detective: a ‘notion of the more directed observer and investigator of the signifiers of the city’ in which *flânerie* is seen ‘as a positive activity of individuals not totally submerged in the crowd’ (Frisby, 2001: 35). The social oddness of the original *flâneurs* thus becomes a positive value that can redeem the sometimes uncomfortable experience of chaplains not quite fitting into their context. The distance suggested in this experience can be embraced as a critical distance that is valuable for the related practices of walking and reading. Moody conveys something of this, relating it both to pastoral practice and broader contextual engagement, when he describes the chaplain as ‘participant observer ... able to observe situations as they occur’ (Moody, 1999: 16) noting the accompanying requirement of ‘a particular kind of spirituality to be able to loiter on the edge of other people’s lives, to be fully engaged and yet watchful at the same time’ (Moody, 1999: 18). The fuller sense of the ‘reading’ entailed by *flânerie* is seen when this physical practice is overlaid with the related interpretive practice.

Interpretive practice

Our understanding of these practices is enhanced by considering the work of Michel de Certeau. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) de Certeau offers an evocative meditation on the view of Manhattan from the World Trade Centre (written long before the destruction of the twin towers in 2001). He describes how the ‘wave of verticals ... the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production’ (de Certeau, 1984: 91). The textuality of the city is seen in a particular way from this position, the planned city viewed as a totality, and the ‘reading’ of this ‘text’ from the perspective of such height has the effect of fixing it:

The 1370 foot high tower that serves as a prow for Manhattan continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilises its opaque mobility in a transparent text. (de Certeau, 1984: 92)

A dominant text and a dominant reading of the text are generated by the vantage point. But this view reveals only one dimension of the textuality of the city and in the process obscures others, and it is to the hidden texts of the city that de Certeau turns his gaze. He is concerned with the everyday lives of those who are dominated, and with the tactics they use when faced with the strategies of the powerful, tactics that are textual in nature:

As unrecognised producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices ... unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space. (de Certeau, 1984: viii)

This understanding of texts produced from practices of everyday life in the city, resonating with Henri Lefebvre's conception of the 'social text' (Lefebvre, 1961, in Elden *et al.*, 2003: 88), points to the human texts that the chaplain reads in dialogue with the dominant texts of the institution. The 'ordinary practitioners of the city' live below the sight-lines of the panoptic vision and their 'bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it' (de Certeau, 1984: 93). This text, or multiplicity of texts, is different from the text of a city read from above, but insinuates itself into the dominant text: '[a] migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city' (de Certeau, 1984: 93). Chaplains can read their institutions as texts as the *flâneur* reads the city as text, interpreting the signifiers that they encounter all around them.

Benjamin studied Paris and modernity through the arcades which represented a microcosm of the city; social theory studies modernity and post-modernity through the contemporary city. Likewise chaplains study the contemporary world from the perspective of faith by reading the institutions in which they work. Reading the campus, prison or hospital, chaplains as public theologians bring these texts into dialogue with those of the faith tradition.

Whilst this may seem quite far removed from more traditional understandings of chaplaincy as primarily pastoral, the task of 'reading' is in fact an important practice that links the two approaches. In pastoral mode the chaplain is involved in reading the patient, the prisoner, the student, interpreting the various human texts that they encounter in their strolling; the social text is as much their concern as institutional texts. But if the model of chaplain as *flâneur* finds confirmation through its resonance with more traditional models, it can equally receive support from more contemporary understandings that are rooted in the inter-disciplinarity of practical theology. In its later developments the *flâneur* comes to represent disciplines of anthropology, sociology and related forms of social research. An understanding of chaplain as researcher is rooted in the day-to-day practice of walking and reading the institution. We are a long way here from 'loitering with intent', whilst preserving some of the insights of that model. Strategic walking, with the eyes, ears and analytical mind of a researcher generates opportunities for pastoral, sacramental and missionary encounters as well as insights for public theology. In the final section I explicate the relationship between the practices described here and the discipline of public theology.

Chaplaincy, *flânerie* and public theology

What, then, is public theology? As Dirkie Smit has observed

the notion of public is used in so many meanings and discourses that it defies any unequivocal and technical definition. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the expression ‘public theology’ can be used in many different ways and discourses as well. (Smit, 2007: 443)

Some of these discourses are deemed ‘public’ because of their subject matter. William Storrar, for example, defines public theology as ‘a collaborative exercise in theological reflection on public issues which is prompted by disruptive social experiences that call for our thoughtful and faithful response’ (2007: 6). For others, it is the intended audience that defines a theological discourse as ‘public’, as exemplified in Elaine Graham’s approach in which the ancient tradition of apologetics is reclaimed from a positivist captivity to modernist conceptions of evangelism (2013: xxv) as a way of articulating a theological voice in a post-secular public sphere (2013: 211–213).

My understanding of public theology includes both these elements and can be stated simply: it is theology concerned with questions that have broad contemporary resonance beyond the narrowly ecclesial or confessional, and envisages an audience beyond the church. By virtue of the contexts in which they work, chaplains are well placed to put matters of public importance on the theological agenda. Their ‘botanising on the asphalt’ produces valuable specimens for their own and the wider public theological enterprise. They are alert to the disruptive social experiences of which Storrar speaks (2007); their theological lives are lived in manifestly public contexts necessitating the apologetic task which Graham sees as key to post-secular public theology (2013); they develop ‘lived public theologies’ pertinent to their particular contexts (Todd *et al.*, 2014: 35); and they do this whilst negotiating the shifting relationship between religion and public life. It has been noted that

Muslim chaplains have arguably become a rather distinctive and privileged group of faith actors in public life. Many of them ... have acquired a confident grasp of the language, the concepts and the knowledge to be able to talk confidently about religious and moral issues in the public domain. (Gilliat-Ray *et al.*, 2013: 184)

They have resembled *flâneurs* in terms of their particular fate in the contemporary post-secular context, what has happened to them being indicative of shifting understandings of religion. But, as the quotation above suggests, they have also resembled *flâneurs* in the ways in which they have read and interpreted that context, taking on a role akin to public theology.

So the chaplain as *flâneur* has a distinctive contribution to make to public theology based on an immersive and close reading of key public (con)texts, a gathering of scattered specimens and fragments, and the production of critical theological insight. Chaplains are not alone in this work of patient theological attention to contemporary life. Academic public and practical theologians, particularly those whose work includes ethnography, often draw their theological insights out of a thorough engagement with particular situations. But the distinctiveness of a chaplain’s

immersion in context is threefold: first, their religious identity is publicly visible, even if only by their designation as chaplain; second, and related to visibility, their experience of context is bound up with religious identity in a way that is less likely to be the case with academic researchers; and, third, their immersion is usually sustained over a longer period of time. These features of the chaplain as *flâneur* generate unique readings of the textuality of public life that in turn have much to contribute to the work of public theology. An exemplary format for realising this contribution is the process of collective theological reflection by those involved in public institutions as parish clergy, chaplains and lay people, written up in *Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing* as an ‘encounter between pastoral practice and public theology’ (Cameron *et al.*, 2012: xiv *et passim*).

The contribution made by chaplains to such conversations is important for the theological community in church and academy; but to be worthy of the name this articulation of public theology also benefits the contexts of chaplaincy offering, in Stan Brown’s phrase, ‘wisdom in this place’ (2010). An example of this is found in Helen Orchard’s *Spirituality in Health Care Contexts* (2001), where chaplains feature prominently in an inter-faith and inter-disciplinary conversation that aims to inform wider debates and institutional practices. Christopher Swift’s description of chaplains as speaking differently about the hospital context is based on distinctive practices of seeing, hearing and acting that closely resemble the model of the *flâneur* (Orchard, 2001: 96–106). And Stephen Pattison’s concerns about ‘dumbing down’ the rich and complex tradition of Christian spirituality in favour of ‘a sanitised, homogenised, generalised spiritual concern’ (Orchard, 2001: 34) are the fruit of practical theological reflection on emerging lived theologies of spirituality in health care. This is just one example of the potential for public theology in action and the outworking of this understanding of chaplain as public theologian is of a ‘chaplaincy project’ that is to public theology what Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* is to critical theory.

Conclusion

In this article I have played heuristically with the model of chaplain as *flâneur* in the belief that doing so provides fresh insight into the nature and practice of chaplaincy. The use of this model, intended to complement rather than replace other models, achieves at least three things. Firstly, it allows the fate and contextual experience of chaplains to be thematised as itself a source for public theology: as the fate of the *flâneur* was a source of insight into modernity for Benjamin, so the experience of chaplains sheds light on the place of religion in contemporary post-secular society. Secondly, it evokes and expresses a persistent and deeply rooted perception of the work of chaplains: as the *flâneur* would walk the arcades slowly (sometimes with turtles), observing and collecting (botanising on the asphalt), so the chaplain walks the literal or metaphorical corridors of their context, watching, reading and interpreting — counter-cultural ‘priests of the genius loci’. Thirdly, it offers a way of conceiving the relationship between chaplaincy and public theology: as the *flâneur* became a model for Benjamin’s own critical (and sometimes theological)

work of interpreting modernity, as in the *Arcades Project*, so the relationship between chaplaincy and public theology can be understood as the sharing of partially interpreted fragments within the overlapping communities of Church, institution and wider socio-political context. Thus the work of chaplains as *flâneurs* and the burgeoning field of chaplaincy studies are envisioned as central to the work of public theology.

Note

- 1 As here, the figure of the *flâneur* in history, sociology and critical theory tends to be male; *flânerie* is clearly gendered. The features of the *flâneur* I am applying to chaplains are not, in my judgement, tied to the distinctively male character; hence I have avoided gendered language where possible in the hope that the practice of *flânerie* in relation to chaplaincy can transcend this particularity. Further research into the distinctive features of the *flâneuse*, however, would be valuable for investigating the gendered nature of chaplaincy practice in relation to this model and public theology. For discussions of gender in relation to *flânerie*, see Wolff (1994: 124–126).

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