

# Public Theology and the Public Sphere

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## **Abstract**

This article presents Abraham Kuyper’s principles of sphere sovereignty, structural pluralism, and confessional pluralism as effective means for resisting the pressure to compromise—always a danger for public theology. Public theology, as distinct from political theology, concerns civil society. In this sense, Kuyper’s structural pluralism is an important element for the connection between public theology, civil society, and the public sphere. Kuyper’s political thought is therefore viewed from the perspective of public theology.

## **Keywords**

*Public sphere, public theology, Abraham Kuyper, sphere sovereignty, civil society, structural pluralism, confessional pluralism*

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**P**ublic theology presupposes that the public sphere exists. Without the public sphere, public theology cannot exist. Therefore, in this article, I want to show the strong connection between the public sphere and public theology.<sup>1</sup> There are several aims of this article.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is taken from Chapter 2 of my dissertation with certain adjustments; see Antonius Steven Un, “Chapter 2: Public Theology and the Public Sphere,” in “Theology of the Public Sphere: An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas from the Perspective of the Theology of Abraham Kuyper with Implications for Public Theology and the Indonesian Context” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2020), 8–23.

First, I want to show the necessity of the public sphere for public theology. The public sphere becomes the place for public theology to operate and to find public issues that shape its themes and approaches.

Second, as the problem of the translation of theological categories often haunts public theology, in this article I propose the vital importance of Abraham Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty in general and his principle of confessional pluralism in particular.<sup>2</sup>

Third, in addition to the problem of translation, another problem often makes public theology seem to contradict itself, namely, the pressure and temptation to compromise its particular messages. In this regard, I suggest that Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty is necessary for public theology.<sup>3</sup> While his principle of confessional pluralism strengthens public theology to overcome the pressure and temptation to compromise, his principle of structural pluralism is needed for an understanding of the role of civil society.

Fourth, I aim to show that public theology is differentiated from political theology in that the second is engaged mainly with the state and the first with civil society.

I will indicate the importance of Kuyper's sphere sovereignty principle mostly by using analyses by scholars of public theology as sources. To explain the connection of public theology and the public sphere, I will make a comparative analysis between public theology and certain notions very close to it, namely, public religion, civil religion, and political theology. Before analyzing more deeply the connection between public theology and the public sphere, I will elaborate a brief definition of public theology.

## **I. A Brief Definition of Public Theology**

The term *public theology* was first coined by Martin Marty in his decisive article "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience."<sup>4</sup> However, Marty does not give an explicit definition of public theology;

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<sup>2</sup> On Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty, see Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 461–90. See also Abraham Kuyper, "Calvinism and Politics," in *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 78–109.

<sup>3</sup> Though I want to show the importance of Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty to encourage the role of public theology in the public sphere, I do not intend to elaborate on it in detail as I have dealt with that elsewhere. See Antonius Steven Un, "Sphere Sovereignty according to Kuyper," *Unio Cum Christo* 6.2 (October 2020): 97–114.

<sup>4</sup> Martin E. Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," *Journal of Religion* 54.4 (1974): 332–59.

later scholars would define it. Here, I am surveying the definitions of public theology from six scholars. Ronald Thiemann defines public theology as “faith seeking to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural context in which the Christian community lives.”<sup>5</sup> According to Robert Benne, public theology is “the engagement of a living religious tradition with its public environment—the economic, political, and cultural spheres of our common life.”<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Kim gives another definition of public theology as “Christians engaging in dialogue with those outside church circles on various issues of common interest.”<sup>7</sup>

While those scholars seem to give a more general definition of public theology, other scholars are going to have a more comprehensive and more detailed definition. In Duncan Forrester’s view, public theology is

rather a theology, talk about God, which claims to point to publicly accessible truth, to contribute to public discussion by witnessing to a truth which is relevant to what is going on in the world and to the pressing issues facing people and societies today.<sup>8</sup>

Harold Breitenberg defines public theology as

theologically informed descriptive and normative public discourse about public issues, institutions, and interactions, addressed to the church or other religious body as well as the larger public or publics, and argued in ways that can be evaluated and judged by publicly available warrants and criteria.<sup>9</sup>

For Max Stackhouse, the term “public theology” is used

to stress the point that theology, while related to intensely personal commitments and to a particular community of worship, is, as it most profound level, neither merely private nor a matter of distinctive communal identity. Rather, it is an argument regarding the way things are and ought to be, one decisive for public discourse and necessary to the guidance of individual souls, societies, and, indeed, the community of nations.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM, 2011), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 127.

<sup>9</sup> E. Harold Breitenberg Jr., “What Is Public Theology?,” in *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, ed. Deirdre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, “Public Theology and Ethical Judgment,” in *Shaping Public Theology:*

From these six definitions, I will draw several commonalities that are essential to public theology. I will use the definitions and the commonalities for further explanations.

First, public theology is rooted in a set of particular convictions. This point is indicated by some of the terms used by those scholars such as “faith seeking to understand,” “a living religious tradition,” “Christians,” “a theology, talk about God,” and “theology ... related to intensely personal commitments and to a particular community of worship.”

Second, public theology is differentiated from other branches of theology in that whereas theology focuses on the audiences inside the private or particular communities, public theology intends to speak to those outside particular religious communities. This essential point is exhibited through the several audiences mentioned, such as “the broader social and cultural context,” “public environment—the economic, political, and cultural spheres of our common life,” and “the larger public or publics.”

Third, public theology focuses on responding to or engaging with public issues. This crucial element appears through the themes that public theology emphasizes, such as “various issues of common interest,” “the pressing issues facing people and societies today,” and “public issues, institutions, and interactions.”

Fourth, public theology prioritizes a public engagement between theologians and people in the public sphere. This kind of public engagement presupposes a communication that can be understood by those outside the circle of particular religious communities. Several public theology scholars mentioned above emphasize this point by using the terms “faith seeking to understand the relation,” “the engagement,” “public discussion,” and “public discourse.” Public theology is expected to provide arguments that can be understood and examined by “publicly available warrants and criteria.” This can be called “publicly accessible truth.” Thus, the public sphere is necessary since it becomes the locus for such a kind of “publicly accessible truth.”

## **II. *The Necessity of the Public Sphere***

Public theology, however it is defined, presupposes the public sphere. We could even call the public sphere a constitutive element of public theology. At least, we can view the importance of the public sphere for public theology from two points. First, the public sphere is a space where public theology

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*Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, ed. Scott R. Paeth, E. Harold Breitenberg Jr., and Hak Joon Lee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 116.

can operate. Second, the public sphere generates issues that public theology engages. I will now explore these points.

The public sphere is a space where public theology operates. Public theology is differentiated from other branches of theology in that it intends to publish in the public sphere. This does not mean that all theology brought into the public sphere is essentially public theology; it does mean that all public theology is intended for use in the public sphere, either its contents or its approaches. Katie Day is right when concluding, “Theology becomes public theology as it becomes a relevant participant in the public sphere.”<sup>11</sup>

The public sphere is not only a space for public theology to operate; it is also necessary in that it provides public issues that public theology would engage. Jürgen Moltmann claims, “Its subject alone necessarily makes Christian theology a *theologia publica*, public theology. It gets involved in the public affairs of society.”<sup>12</sup> The content of the public affairs of society is the public sphere. Thus, getting involved means entering and engaging in public affairs in the public sphere. This understanding does not mean that public theology must deny its particular theological heritage. Indeed, public theology has two aspects, namely, one transcendent and the other immanent. In one sense, public theology brings prophetic voices into the public sphere; these prophetic transcendent voices speak out in the depths of a darkened society. In another sense, public theology is a priestly response to weeping from below, a lament of people in excruciating circumstances. I call the former the transcendent aspect of public theology and the latter its immanent aspect. The transcendent aspect of public theology is its distinctive and prophetic voice that derives from its particular tradition. The immanent aspect of public theology is its ability to take issues from the public sphere and understand the approaches shaped by the public. We might conclude that the public sphere is vital for public theology in that it is a space where its transcendent aspect is shared.

The immanence of public theology in society involves the conveyance of issues from society to it. Public theology needs empathy so that it can listen and pay attention to society, and understand its pressing issues. At the proper time, public theology takes part in this struggle. Public theology comes as a partner in cordial communication to share its distinctive contributions. The supply of issues from society to public theology in the public

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<sup>11</sup> Katie Day, “Social Cohesion and the Common Good: Drawing on Social Science in Understanding the Middle East,” in *A Companion to Public Theology*, ed. Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 215.

<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 1.

sphere does not necessarily crown society as the agenda setter. Forrester calls on public theology to decide from among the many issues “which seem most pressing at a particular time.”<sup>13</sup> Apart from a more “natural” criterion, he puts forward two more “supernatural” criteria. Public theology should view *sub specie aeternitatis* (what is universally and eternally true) and “discern the signs of the times.” By these criteria, the transcendent aspect of public theology plays a pivotal role. Thiemann highlights the immanent aspect by applying Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” method to public theology. A public theologian is called to “offer a careful and detailed” theological conviction that intersects with the issues and practices of contemporary public audiences.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the public sphere is necessary for public theology in that it becomes the place for sharing the transcendent aspect of public theology and to shape its immanent aspect through the public issues received from the public sphere. When public theology accommodates its immanent aspect, it is tempted to compromise its transcendent aspect when it is translated.

### III. *The Problem of Translation*

The above definitions of public theology indicate the intention to translate the language of theology to make it accessible to the public. This concern is made explicit by a finding that “most thinkers believed religious convictions should be translated into a more properly ‘public’ vernacular before they enter the public sphere.”<sup>15</sup> The intention to translate theological language into language accessible to the public is based on the fact that public theologians are speaking beyond the walls of church and seminary. Thus, in engaging public issues, public theology must be done in a manner that is “genuinely public.”<sup>16</sup> This means that public theology should be “adopting forms of reasoning that [are] compelling, at least potentially, to those who [stand] beyond the borders of the religious community ... if theology [is] to reach a broader audience, it [is] necessary to move past the technical jargon that rendered it all but incomprehensible to those outside one professional guild.” The first step toward this translation is that public theology should

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<sup>13</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, “The Scope of Public Theology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17.2 (2004): 6.

<sup>14</sup> Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 21–22.

<sup>15</sup> Charles T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Linell E. Cady, “Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 8 (2014): 295.

learn “the language of the secular world in such a way that Christian discourse relates to it.”<sup>17</sup> In short, a “good public theological praxis requires the development of a language that is accessible to people outside the Christian tradition.”<sup>18</sup>

The intention to translate the particular language and reason of public theology entails many problems. First, the translation process of public theology into publicly accessible secular language contradicts the very nature of public theology, which opposes the liberal thesis of the privatization of religion. Mary Doak even equates public theology scholars who require such translation with the “liberal rationalists, who oppose the inclusion of specifically religious beliefs in public policy debates on the grounds that religious beliefs lack the basis in shared rationality necessary for civil debate.”<sup>19</sup> Marty speaks of public theology as part of public religion “to identify the imbrications of religion,” which is an ideological rejection of the commitment to the privatization of religion.<sup>20</sup> Public theology in particular, and public religion in general, can be identified as the “deprivatization of religion.” José Casanova in his important work on public religion defines the deprivatization of religion in two ways: the rejection of the privatization of religion and its inclusion in the public sphere. Casanova first means “the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them.”<sup>21</sup> He then completes his definition of the deprivatization of religion as “the process whereby religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, discursive legitimation, and redrawing of boundaries.”<sup>22</sup> Public theology as part of the deprivatization of religion should reject the pressure to translate its own language and reason. When public theology submits and translates its language and reason, it has accepted being relegated to a sequestered place assigned by liberal rationalists.

Second, the intention to translate public theology into publicly accessible secular language might possibly cause the loss of certain distinctive contents

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<sup>17</sup> John W. de Gruchy, “Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007): 27.

<sup>18</sup> De Gruchy, “Public Theology as Christian Witness,” 39.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Cady, “Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn,” 293–94.

<sup>21</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–66.

of public theology.<sup>23</sup> For example, it is commonly known that the target language in the translation process does not necessarily have the various distinctive idioms of the source language. Further, certain distinctive doctrines or perspectives of a religion cannot be easily translated into secular language. The possibility of loss in the translation process occurs not only in perspective but also in the purity of the Christian faith.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the integrity of public theology is put at risk since the prophetic voices of public theology are compromised to serve the public agenda. Moreover, it is not uncommon that the purity of public theology is exchanged for facilities from the political elites so that political agendas can be served. Public theologians who are eager to serve political agendas in their private interests are indeed “doing more salesmanship than theology.”<sup>25</sup>

Instead of translating, public theology should dare to raise its head and speak its own language and reason in the public sphere. Stackhouse is convinced that theology is in itself public for two reasons.<sup>26</sup> First, Christian belief is not “esoteric, privileged, irrational, or inaccessible”; rather, it is both “comprehensible and indispensable for all, something that we can reasonably discuss with Hindus and Buddhists, Jews and Muslims, humanists and Marxists.” Second, Christian theology might possibly give “guidance to the structures and policies of public life. It is ethical in nature.” The rejection of translation is not only based on the public nature of Christian theology but also on “the fact that theology is not ‘neutral.’” Rather than disqualifying theology “from participation in public discussion ... because of its distinctive perspective, theological findings can make an effective contribution to public issues.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, “Christian truth claims should rather be described within their own frame of reference if one is to serve their persuasive power and if they are to have any value outside the community of faith.”<sup>28</sup>

As mentioned above, the intention to translate the religious language and reason of public theology first comes from the pressure of the privatization-of-religion thesis, which endorses a kind of public sphere that is committed to neutrality. The empowerment of public theology to enter the public sphere with its own unique and distinctive language and reason could come

<sup>23</sup> See Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Cady, “Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn,” 296.

<sup>25</sup> Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> As quoted by Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Ernst Conradie (1993), as quoted by Ignatius Swart and Stephan de Beer, “Doing Urban Public Theology in South Africa: Introducing a New Agenda” *HTS Theological Studies* 70.3 (2014): 9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2811>.

from Kuyper's principle of confessional pluralism. As I have argued before, Kuyper believes that all human beings are "by nature incurably religious."<sup>29</sup> This belief encourages religion in general and public theology in particular to become truly and consistently religious in both private and public life. Not only that, faith or religion becomes the basis for "every act of thought" and all "human intercourse," thus making religion constitutive and essential for human life.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, it is impossible for a religious citizen to speak without his or her religious language and reason in the public sphere. As we will see, not only does the principle of confessional pluralism strengthen public theology to speak with its particular language and reason, it will also empower public theology to overcome the pressure and temptation to compromise.

#### ***IV. The Pressure and Temptation to Compromise***

For several reasons, public theology as defined above in engagement with various publics runs the risk of compromising its prophetic voice. First, pressure from governmental and market power occur because the public theology that comes out of the church or seminary sometimes critically addresses the social injustice of the state and the market through the prophetic voices in the public sphere. After Hitler came to power, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was forced out of radio broadcasting for criticizing Hitler on the radio.

Second, in the opposite direction, governmental and market power may instead provide tempting offers to soften the voice of public theology in the public sphere. Political elites can give public offices to religious leaders or theologians, especially if they come from the religion of the majority. The political power can also provide funding for facilities and permits for the construction of houses of worship. The market gives money and other luxurious facilities to theologians so that they no longer speak out in the public sphere.

Third, the compromise of public theology can also occur due to public pressure within the public sphere. For example, it is not easy for public theology in Macao or Las Vegas to criticize gambling and its related crimes because most of the population get their income from gambling and its derivative businesses.

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<sup>29</sup> Un, "Sphere Sovereignty according to Kuyper," 105.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 106.

Compromise will end up adjusting public theology to the publics' contents, approaches, and agendas. In some sense, adjustment can only be made in the immanent aspect of public theology, namely, the issues and the approaches. No adjustment can be made to the transcendent aspect of public theology, namely, its prophetic voice. The adjustment of its prophetic voice contains many risks.

First, it will destroy the nature of public theology. Public theology presupposes the distinctive and constructive voices brought from the Christian community into the public sphere. By nature, public theology is a ministry to bring sound biblical doctrines to bless the common people in the public sphere. Adjusting theological voices decreases its distinctiveness.

Second, the adjustment of the transcendent aspect of public theology destroys the nature of pluralism. Pluralism presupposes diversity instead of uniformity of voices in the public sphere. Public theology's compromise contributes to making society uniform instead of plural.

Third, the twist of the core values of public theology destroys communal creativity and cultural heritage. It impoverishes society.

To these notes, we can add the warning of public theology scholars. Kim says,

for the authentic and sustainable engagement of the Church in the public sphere, the Church needs to guard against the temptation to take pragmatic approaches and to measure the result of ministries in numbers or external appearances, and to develop a public theology suited to the issues and relevant to the context.<sup>31</sup>

While Kim reminds us of the temptation, Thiemann reminds us of the pressure:

Public theology is a genuine risk-taking venture. By opening the Christian tradition to conversation with those in the public sphere, public theology opens Christian belief and practice to the critique that inevitably emerges from those conversation partners.<sup>32</sup>

Following David Tracy, Thiemann's model for the relationship between public theology and the publics is "mutual criticism." This does not mean that public theology will easily adjust its theological core to the publics. Thiemann reminds us that "such radical reshaping of the tradition should take place only after prolonged and rigorous inquiry, but openness to that

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<sup>31</sup> Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 23.

possibility is an essential element of a faith that honestly seeks critical understanding.”

It is important for public theology to maintain its authentic identity and prophetic voice due to the differentiation between public theology and civil religion, as Marty originally intended when the American sociologist Robert Bellah popularized the notion of civil religion.<sup>33</sup> Civil religion is here understood as a “public religious dimension” that is “expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals.” Based on the analysis of the American context, Bellah perceives that there are “certain common elements of religious orientation” that are shared by the great majority of the citizens. He mentions several examples: the citation of the divine names and attributes in United States presidential inaugurations and in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Civil religion also has some articles of belief such as the sovereignty of God, though those articles are not collected in a formal creed. Although civil religion absorbs many beliefs and values from the majority religion of a country, it is not necessarily identified with that religion. Civil religion is not a kind of a sectarian denominational group inside the religion of the majority and is not intended to substitute for it. In the American context, for example, the civil religion is not Christianity since neither the founding fathers nor the presidents ever mentioned Jesus Christ’s name in their official addresses or documents. The purposes of civil religion are to provide the right feeling for political responsibility to the state and loyal sociability to the nation and to provide symbols as the expression of “the primal freedom of the ‘people’” and the cultivation of a ‘general will.’”<sup>34</sup>

In articulating public theology, Marty criticized civil religion. I explain those criticisms by referring to scholars who have built on Marty’s article. The Durkheimian roots of civil religion, which “[envision] a homogenous religion uniting a nation,” according to Cady, “failed to do justice to ... pluralism” and are “too easily appropriated for the sacralization of the state and society, rather than for its critique and transformation.”<sup>35</sup> Pluralism presupposes theological convictions and religious traditions that must be differentiated from the solitary model of civil religion. Uniformity, as assumed by civil religion, demolishes religions’ unique identities as well as the wealth of their rituals, ceremonies, heritages, traditions, and confessions.

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<sup>33</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *The Robert Bellah Reader*, ed. Robert N. Bellah and Steven M. Tipton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 225–45.

<sup>34</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political Theology, and Public Theology: What’s the Difference?,” in *Shaping Public Theology*, ed. Paeth, Breitenberg, and Lee, 191.

<sup>35</sup> Cady, “Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn,” 294.

The sacralization of the state and society could lead to the rise of totalitarian or despotic regimes and endanger democracy. Religious legitimation used by the state may exacerbate its crime against humanity. Even a mere political and legal legitimation of the state has very powerful authority that can be misused if left unchecked. This brings to mind Lord Acton's famous sentence, "Power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely." The calling of public theology is not to "celebrate the social system and its culture" as whatever they are, but rather, to change them.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to these criticisms, in my opinion, civil religion's use of religious values to sacralize the state at the same time desacralizes religions. Religious values are separated from the main focus of religions, which is spiritual-supernatural-transcendental activities. Religious values come under the agenda of political-natural-earthly activities. Not only that, civil religion also separates religions from their inherent identities. Religious values are borrowed while religions' identities are killed off. Moreover, civil religion in some sense can be categorized as a softer secularization because religion is not involved institutionally in the public sphere. The classic example of this is the politicization of Christianity by the Roman Empire. German public theologian Wolfgang Huber writes,

In the term of dialectics, this Christianization of the Roman Empire effected simultaneously the secularization of Christianity and the definitive emancipation of Christianity from its Jewish roots. The radical nature of the Christian mission was thereby weakened.<sup>37</sup>

When Christianity was adopted as the Roman Empire's state religion, it at once became secular. Christianity, directly or indirectly, was adjusted to come in line with the political agenda and interest of the Roman Empire. In this context, Christianity as a whole religion, when taken by the Roman Empire, was weakened. Moreover, if the universal values of Christianity were taken to form a civil religion, it would be even more weakened.

To differentiate itself from civil religion with its many problems, public theology should maintain its authentic identity and prophetic voice without compromising with the publics, either political power, economic force, or social pressure. Public theology needs a theoretical framework that might empower its authentic presence in the public sphere, which at the same time might relocate the state and the market in their own spheres to stop

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<sup>36</sup> Stackhouse, "Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology," 195.

<sup>37</sup> Wolfgang Huber, "Human Rights and Biblical Legal Thought," in *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Religious Perspective*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Johan D. van der Vyver (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1996), 49.

them from becoming predators and invading other spheres. Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty is vital to filling this need. Public theology as it comes out of churches and seminaries is a part of civil society.<sup>38</sup> Thus, public theology needs a theoretical framework that endorses the structural pluralism of society, in which civil society is empowered according to the nature and purpose of each institution. Moreover, public theology as part of a confessional group needs a theoretical framework that endorses confessional pluralism in a society in which each religious group is empowered to have various public manifestations. Here, Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty, with the principles of structural pluralism and confessional pluralism, could be utilized to empower public theology in particular and civil society in general.

### **V. Public Theology and Civil Society**

Public theology is not intended for a specific and narrow audience. The aforementioned definitions of public theology indicate that the audience of public theology is related to "the broader social and cultural context,"<sup>39</sup> which consists at least of "the economic, political, and cultural spheres of our common life."<sup>40</sup> The term "public" in public theology thus must be expanded beyond politics or the state to include "exploring normative questions about societal life," recognizing "the significant role that 'mediating structures' can play."<sup>41</sup> This is precisely the difference between public theology and political theology. Public theology believes that

the public is prior to the republic, that the fabric of civil society, of which religious faith and organization is inevitably the core, is more determinative of and normatively more important for politics than politics for society and religion.<sup>42</sup>

Political theology as indicated in this differentiation believes the opposite. Political theology, according to Stackhouse, is rooted in Aristotle's philosophy, which saw "the political order as the comprehending and ordering institution of all of society."<sup>43</sup> In brief, the new wave of post-Auschwitz political

<sup>38</sup> Rudolf von Sinner, "Public Theology as a Theology of Citizenship," in *A Companion to Public Theology*, ed. Kim and Day, 245.

<sup>39</sup> Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Richard J. Mouw, "Calvin's Legacy for Public Theology," *Political Theology* 10.3 (2009): 433.

<sup>42</sup> Stackhouse, "Civil Religion, Political Theology, and Public Theology," 197.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

theology advanced in Europe mainly through Vatican II and the World Council of Churches.<sup>44</sup> The prominent thinkers of this new wave are the Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz and the Protestant theologian Moltmann. According to Stackhouse, the heirs of this new wave remained committed to “a rather centralized state, a state not focused on colonial expansion or military conquest or nationalist solidarity, but on an integrated and politically managed economic policy.”<sup>45</sup>

A similar differentiation between public theology and political theology is drawn by Breitenberg. While political theology should “confine its interests and focus primarily or exclusively to politics and political institutions, the rights of individuals within specific nations, or the relationship between Christians and the political realm,” public theology “especially in its constructive, descriptive, and normative forms, is concerned with a variety of other publics, including economic, artistic, environmental, academic, medical, and technological publics.”<sup>46</sup> It is obvious that the publics of public theology do not consist only of the state. We could recall Tracy’s classic classification of three publics, namely, the church, the academy, and society.<sup>47</sup> Stackhouse expands on and criticizes Tracy’s three forms of public. For Stackhouse, the Western classification of publics—“the authentic religious public” (that seeks holiness), “the political public” (that seeks justice), “the academic public” (that seeks truth), and “the economic public” (that seeks creativity) is “still much too narrow and shallow.”<sup>48</sup> Considering the criticisms coming from various sources, there must be a “redefinition of a broader public” in which “the great philosophies and world religions, which have demonstrated that they can shape great and complex civilizations over centuries must have a place.”<sup>49</sup> The development of public theology that follows this redefinition should “include a much-enlarged conversation.” Despite this criticism, Stackhouse is imagining a crowded public from which can emerge the conversational partners for public theology.

This differentiation does not imply necessarily that public theology is “antipolitical.” The building of the political, educational, judicial, medical, and other institutions is necessary.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, what public theology is

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Breitenberg, “What Is Public Theology?,” 15.

<sup>47</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Stackhouse, “Public Theology and Ethical Judgment,” 117, 118, 131.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 131–32.

<sup>50</sup> Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political Theology, and Public Theology,” 197.

to do, according to Stackhouse, is “to guide choices about the just and unjust use of coercive force” and to direct the political power “to be [the] limited servant of the other institutions of society, not their master.” This means that while political theology “inclines to have a political view of society,” public theology “tends to adopt a social theory of politics.”<sup>51</sup> Public theology can at the same time be equated with and differentiated from socialism. It can be equated to socialism in terms of its view of “the fabric of society as decisive for every area of the common life.” Yet Stackhouse differentiates public theology from socialism for two reasons. First, public theology does not accept “the polarization of the classes as the fundamental characteristic of society—either in theory or in fact.” Second, it also does not expect “the state to control economic life by centralized planning and capitalization.”<sup>52</sup>

In view of these arguments, a key question appears. Does Christian public theology, especially for Protestants, have a theoretical framework that can organize a complex society in which civil society is strengthened? Stackhouse names Johannes Althusius’s “consociation of consociations,” which is “a federation of covenanted communities,” and Kuyper’s “basic theory of the relative sovereignty of the spheres of life.”<sup>53</sup> The principle of sphere sovereignty as articulated by Kuyper, earlier posited by Althusius, and later developed by Herman Dooyeweerd, emphasizes that

the sovereignty of independent spheres such as the family, schools, and workplaces are expressions of the sovereign will of God. Each sphere has a relative autonomy and specific character that needs to be respected. Government has a role in ordering and protecting the general good, but it does not have the authority to interfere with or determine the character or *telos* of each sphere. In turn, the state is bounded by the sovereignty of other spheres.<sup>54</sup>

Public theology needs and is also empowered by the principle of sphere sovereignty, especially as articulated by Kuyper, if it is to strengthen civil society. Thus, participants in the public sphere coming from several social spheres could contribute according to their own *telos*. Not only that, and more importantly, the principle of sphere sovereignty also provides a framework for strengthening the public sphere—a framework most needed by public theology. The principle of sphere sovereignty empowers the public

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 199–200.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>54</sup> Luke Bretherton, “State Democracy and Continuity Organizing,” in *A Companion to Public Theology*, ed. Kim and Day, 103–4.

sphere not only by strengthening civil society by guiding its participants but ontologically empowering it by interpreting it as a sovereign sphere in which megastructures such as the state and the market must not intervene.

## Conclusion

I have established the necessity of the public sphere for public theology. Starting with its definition, I have presented the public sphere as the place for public theology to operate and to get public issues that will shape its themes and approaches. For public theology, the public sphere in one sense is essential but, in another sense, brings several problems. The intention of public theology to translate its particular languages—or the outside force to translate—might cause several problems. For instance, it will affirm the liberal thesis that religion is exclusively a private matter. This kind of thesis contradicts the nature of religion in general and public theology in particular. It also contradicts contemporary sociological facts. One of the contemporary sociological facts is marked by “the rediscovery of the sacred *in* the immanent, the spiritual *within* the secular.”<sup>55</sup> In Kim and Day’s expression, “Religion has re-emerged in the public square in higher relief and in new forms.”<sup>56</sup> Describing this turn, Cady states,

In the academy religion was largely ignored: that is not our world. In recent decades the public face of religion has exploded, nationally and internationally. It is not just that there is a greater recognition of religion’s public role, though that is certainly part of it; we have also witnessed a notable resurgence of religion in public life, a resurgence that has caught most scholars and analysts by surprise.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, Kuyper’s principle of confessional pluralism is needed to encourage public theology to speak with its unique voice in the public sphere.

Kuyper’s principle of confessional pluralism is also necessary for public theology to overcome the pressure and temptation to compromise its transcendent voices. This kind of pressure or temptation will cause public theology to become similar to civil religion. This conception has many problems and has been criticized by many scholars as destroying the nature of pluralism, avoiding the distinctive contributions of public theology, and sacralizing the state and society. Public theology would thus lose its prophetic role in society.

<sup>55</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 2.

<sup>56</sup> Kim and Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology*, 18.

<sup>57</sup> Cady, “Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn,” 297.

The last but not least of Kuyper's principles, structural pluralism, is vital for viewing, understanding, and encouraging the role of civil society in the public sphere. In relation to public theology, civil society is essential and even constitutive. By this notion, public theology is differentiated from political theology. While the latter is mainly focused on the state, the former is focused on civil society.