

Seeking Welfare, Securing Witness: Toward a Theology of Engagement with and in the Public Sphere

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The Character of the Contemporary Public Sphere

The Public Sphere is out in the public! Across the spectrum of free and inclusive debate right through to civil war, we are currently witnessing it all unfold before our very eyes. The violent uprising in the middle-east, ironically called the Arab Spring, and the non-violent uprising led by Anna Hazare in India are just two examples of nations and peoples are talking about and active in the public sphere. While they may be doing so for entirely different reasons and their contexts vastly dissimilar from each other, for all of them the public is the sphere where their support/protest is being voiced. These developments are doubly public in the sense that they are, not parochial and localised, but aided by the media, both national and international. Such a flurry of activity may prompt one to see it really as a crowded public sphere. And as we all know if it is crowded it is bound to be noisy. Amidst this cacophony of opinions on the place and role of the public sphere, and even opposition to many of the powers that harbour and execute dictatorial designs on that public sphere, it seems difficult to even hear ones voice. Indeed what we have seems to be a *crowded and clamorous public sphere*.

Within our country, of course, we also have been and are witnesses to the painful throes of a scam ridden government both at the centre and in many states. The 2G, the CWC, Coal Mining and the Bellary Mines issues are only some of the numerous scams that have been unearthed and are being probed by investigating agencies. Even the high and mighty, indeed office holding politicians are being taken down from their pedestals for their criminal culpability. Lalu Prasad Yadav is languishing in prison for his role in the Fodder scam. If such is the case, what we inhabit therefore seems to be a corrupt public sphere. As each one involved either seems to be hitting out at others in an effort to bring them down and/or stay afloat, keen observers and even bystanders are heard providing their diagnosis of the current state of affairs and offering their prognosis for the future. In the midst of the crowds and the noise one realises that we inhabit a *corrupt and complex public sphere*.

It is at such a critical juncture in this crowded, clamorous, corrupt and complex public sphere that we have come to deliberate on the role of Christians. It seems to me that we could not have chosen a better time. The title of my paper seems self explanatory. My subtitle suggests that this paper will attend to two issues, alluded to by the word 'with' and 'in'. First is a *theology for public life*, which is what I believe this conference is focused on – how may Christians engage with public issues as members of civil society. I wholeheartedly agree that this focus is legitimate and has its place. Yet, it seems to me that a certain danger attaches itself to such an approach and hence I am not convinced that this approach -the Christian vision for society is one of virtuous individuals pursuing noble goals through their private lives which may happen to touch upon sections of the public- is the only way that we may conceive of the Christian vocation. If that smacks of being a caricature, then even if one allows that some of us are sympathetic to a form of public witness the notion of Christianity, for the most part, still remains the aggregate of individuals living righteous lives in their own spheres of influence, with all other things being equal and untouched. Such a quietist

approach has been in vogue within our circles for too long such that it has almost become our default position.

In contrast I tend to believe in the imperative of the *public role of Christianity*. Christianity is much more than individuals living righteous lives, though that is certainly involved. More profoundly Christianity is a corporate witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and an exercise of engaging with the principalities and powers of this world (Ephesians 6:12) even as we pronounce and practice that Lordship of Christ over them (Colossians 2:15) and indeed ourselves. That is to say, Christianity does not only deal with public issues, it is or ought to be consciously and intentionally a public issue. I will come back to this later, but for now I just wanted to flag that up. Therefore in addition to focusing on a theology for public life I would also like to work through, however briefly that may be, the need for rationale of and character of the public nature of the Christian life, that is a *public theology*.¹ For attending to the former I believe cannot be done without recourse to the latter. However, in a short paper such as this I clearly cannot offer an exhaustive analysis. I do trust that what I have to say though will not sacrifice a measure of depth for breadth.

Public Sphere

The contemporary technical understanding of ‘public sphere’ has been largely influenced by the German social and political philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who produced a thoroughgoing study of its nature and historic development.² Habermas saw the public sphere as that space situated between private individuals/households on the one hand and the state on the other. This space was not simply the coming together of many private entities to create a public one that was effectively not any different. On the contrary the character of the public sphere was qualitatively different. The essential factor was that it was a space for critical discussion and debate on matters of public interest which then formed public opinion. Habermas states:

By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.' They then behave either like business or professional people transacting private affairs, or like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion-that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions-about matters of general interest.³

Without going into the details of the history of the idea as Habermas recounts it, which is essentially a Greek and European narrative that does not necessarily portray reality as we know it here in India, though one may arguably make a case for an Indian genealogy for such

¹ Felix Wilfred has recently made an interesting distinction between the two. See his *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010) pg. xvii ff

² *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962 & 1989). He revisited the discussion of the public sphere and democracy in *Between Fact and Norms: Contributions to Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998)

³ Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox & Frank Lennox, ‘The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)’ *New German Critique*, No. 3. Autumn, 1974, pp. 49-55. pg. 49.

a notion,⁴ the idea that the public are the protagonists and their general wellbeing its concern is a serviceable concept for our present discussion. The public sphere, we may say, offers society a valuable mechanism to supplement the formal practice of democracy, being the exercise of the voting privileges of citizens, with an informal practice, where citizens are able to dialogue with each other and in constructing and voicing public opinion keep their rulers in check. Though connected to the state the public sphere is not part of the state and its apparatus. It is non-state platform where rational public debate leads to the creation of public reason/opinion which then can be put at the service of public good. Here the focus is not on status of the individual but the credibility of his/her rational argument. The participant in the public sphere is not present by virtue of her rank but by virtue of her reasoned contribution to the discussion. Hence the public sphere is a discursive platform for equal citizens. Yet for all that it was made out to be, one will need to recognise that rather than providing access to all it was only a homogenous group that were able to participate in such a public sphere, by virtue of their economic power and status. No wonder then it was called the *bourgeois public sphere*⁵ that in general denied the working class and other subaltern groups a role in it.⁶ Indeed Habermas himself confessed that, “class interests were the basis of public opinion.”⁷ He narrates how over time this degenerated into a sphere of competing interests, and reason itself was manipulated for sectional ambitions and overtaken by consumerism.

It is at this point that civil society comes into its own. While the notion of civil society is closely aligned to the notion of public sphere care is to be taken not to collapse them into one. Groups, which are outside state apparatus, that seek to speak for and on behalf of issues of public concern and facilitate the voicing of grievances of marginalised people are civil society organisations. The platform on which they carry out their advocacy is the public sphere. A tool with which such advocacy is aired is the media in its various forms. Through their advocacy civil society organizations exert an influence in the public sphere and thus both help to create and shape public opinion on issues of public interest, or that which ought to be public interest but for various reasons is not. Civil society is able to articulate a voice because there is a healthy public sphere, a platform or a network for communication, which in turn is facilitated by the media, though for the media its remit is larger.⁸ For the greater public good the value of the public sphere, civil society organisations and media are paramount, though one must admit they also require superintendence. Indeed for a healthy democracy to flourish a nation requires not just state institutions, the legislature, judiciary and executive, but also a healthy and vibrant set of democratic institutions, associations and mechanisms, besides of course an active economy. Only thus can participatory democracy be secured for the good of all.⁹

⁴ See the wide ranging discussion in Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld, eds., *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005)

⁵ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* pg. 27.

⁶ Nancy Fraser is one who has commented on the exclusionary tendencies of the bourgeois public sphere. See her ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990), pgs. 56-80.

⁷ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* pg. 87.

⁸ Respected historian K.N. Pannikar says: “Among the institutions that contribute to the make-up of a public sphere in society, the media perhaps perform the most critical function. In the transactions in the public sphere, the media are not a neutral participant or an impassioned chronicler. Instead they are either a legitimiser of the *status quo* or an innovator of the existing social equilibrium.” See his ‘Media and the Public Sphere’ in *The Hindu*, January 12th, 2004.

⁹ See the wide ranging discussion in Rajesh Tandon and Ranjita Mohanty eds., *Does Civil Society Matter?: Governance in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003)

Which Public? Whose Programme?

It does not require much imagination to recognise that this is an ideal. Reality can and often is a far cry from such an ideal. While on the one hand if we say that our public square is crowded, clamorous, corrupt and complex, it suggests that we have progressed in our sixty four years of nationhood. Over the years we have increasingly secured for ourselves, at least to a certain extent, participatory democracy. But on the other hand we will also recognise that there is a long way to go in order to ensure that the public sphere is truly representative of the public of the nation. For example, even in such a popular movement such as I-AM-ANNA phenomena some sections of the public were crying foul, both because of its allegedly high caste support base and its middle class orientation. So it seems to me that a fundamental question to ask about engagement with and in the public sphere is: Which Public? Whose Programme?

In our context where historical complexity, cultural diversity and religious plurality are some of the hallmarks of society conceiving of the public sphere is not a simple and straightforward exercise. Problematising the notion will therefore be a necessary and helpful step. In the first place we will need to recognise that various conceptions of the public sphere have existed over periods of history. What were conceptions of the public sphere in ancient India? What changes did the Mughal rule introduce? How did the arrival of the British alter the public sphere? What influence did the freedom struggle, with its active engagement of leaders and the masses, have on conceptions and engagement with the public sphere? What strands of that complex legacy do we possess currently? How has globalisation influenced the reality? Surely one cannot answer all those questions here, but suffice to say the public sphere is a complex notion and myriad are the forces that have shaped it. For example, in Farhat Hasan's insightful exploration of the public sphere in Moghul India, he finds that commoners and the intelligentsia regularly participated in discussion and debate. We know of the Emperor Akbar who frequently invited learned people to dialogue in his court. This practice was then carried out in the mosques and marketplaces. The 'Argumentative Tradition' as Amartya Sen calls it finds in this period as much energy as any other.¹⁰ Yet as Hasan astutely notes, for commoners participation in the public sphere was "an ideological struggle." While the subalterns devised ways and means by which they could engage with and influence the public sphere the elites clearly had a greater visibility and of course the presence of women was limited.¹¹ During the next major episode of history we learn, from Sandria Freitag for example, how the public sphere was subjected to a communalisation.¹² Not that this tendency was absent until then but it took on a greater political colouring during this period. The British government decided as far as possible not directly engage with the private sphere (though the codifying of the Hindu and Muslim personal laws was really about the private sphere), but rather focus on the public sphere, whose concerns were voiced by representatives of the various religious communities. These representatives, who were of course chosen from the elites of each community, were given the responsibility to ensure their people's interests within the affairs of the nation. This oftentimes caused an inward looking preoccupation to overtake their better judgment. Stressing such division of society further, along communal lines, were the choices these groups made regarding the manner of their popular protest.

¹⁰ *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005)

¹¹ Farhat Hassan, 'Forms of Civility and Publicness in Pre-British India,' in Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld, eds., *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship*, pgs.84-106.

¹² Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*, (New Delhi:OUP,1990)

These expressions of public opinion, that were voiced in what Freitag calls ‘public arenas’ rather than the public sphere, began employing religious idioms. The Cow Protection Movement of the late 19th and early 20th century is one case in point.¹³ The development of some religious revivalist movements and their espousal of the nationalist cause further strengthened the ties between nation and a particular community. Hence besides secular nationalism communalism also became a vehicle for expression of anti-imperialist protest, and beyond that even for the articulation of their idea of what India ought to mean.¹⁴ Not surprisingly therefore the public sphere in contemporary India is indelibly shaped by and contends with these and other formidable forces that emanate from the private sphere as much as it does from imported spheres, not to mention that which is produced by the admixture of the two.

If the public sphere is a site of and for the voicing of complementary but also contradictory visions and ambitions, it does not necessarily mean that it is an egalitarian and benign space hospitable to all and sundry. Clearly some individuals/groups have a greater influence than others, and that could be because of any number of reasons including caste prejudice, economic power or sheer brute force that silences alternative voices. One can cite cases where one or all three of these have shaped the debate in the public sphere in the recent past. Hence even if we allow for the fact that there are numerous voices and that in itself is a sign of the health of the public sphere, it does not follow that audibility assures a hearing, let alone influence. Complicating the case is the role of contemporary media, and its own explicit shaping of the public sphere and its implicit complicity with those very forces that it ought to analyse and lay bear. Although it is meant to be a non-partisan in reality the media often is far from that. For example, the philosophy of the ‘sound bite’ that drives contemporary media and in turn shapes public opinion has a power with few rivals. Simultaneously the media often controlled even owned by large corporations with their all-consuming quest for Television Rating Points (TRP) which signifies the importance of the bottom line undoubtedly shapes the reporting and analysis of news. If the current fixation with celebrity and consumerist cultures is a symptom of such a malaise we have enough and more reason to be concerned.¹⁵ The public sphere is clearly a complex space that theoretically is meant to be neutral and benign so all may participate but in practice it is often subverted by the power play between groups. So private interests are played out and fought over in the public sphere. Indeed as Habermas has opined, the current public sphere is in many ways a manufactured one and public opinion is thus shaped by such media manufacturing.¹⁶

A further qualification that needs to be mentioned here is the multiplicity of spheres in which the public engage in discussion. The large nation that we are with its various publics clearly cannot rely on a single public sphere so to speak. By virtue of its geographical, linguistic, educational, economic, ethnic and religious diversity discussions occur at various levels and in all manner of ways, using numerous methods, some of which even includes internet technology. To be true to ground reality therefore it would be wise to recognise this multiplicity of ‘spaces’ for discussion and creation of public opinion. There is another side to the point to the multiplicity of spheres, which relates to the conception of the individual in western and Indian thought. Clearly Habermas’ idea of the participant in the public sphere

¹³ Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community* pg 219 ff.

¹⁴ Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community* pg 196.

¹⁵ See for e.g. the discussion in Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2008) pg. 10ff.

¹⁶ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* pg. 247.

was shaped by the enlightenment idea of a individual rational thinking subject who was able to independently reflect on his/her own weigh the options before him and arrive at a logical position. While clearly the Indian subject was and is capable of such a process that is not always how participants in the public sphere operate. One has only to watch political debates on TV to discern that vacillating between positions and policies is the modus operandi of our political spokespersons. While reason may play a part in their articulation in the public sphere, ideology seems to direct the plot, which is in turn based on myriad forces, including caste, culture, business and religion.

This brief glimpse into the complexity and multiplicity of the public sphere warns us against viewing it innocently or approaching it naively. It urges us to recognise the weight of the question: Which public? Whose programme? In the light of that I would like to submit that perhaps it may not be best to talk of *a public sphere*, for there really are *many publics* and *many spheres*. Depending on whom one talks to and depending on when that conversation takes place, conceptions of the public sphere will probably change with each conversation. Now it could deal with religion, now with economics, and perhaps at another occasion with the population and the natural forces. As with so many other things in India there are only a few ideas that perhaps remain static and changeless over time. The public sphere is not one of them. It truly is a dynamic entity, constantly changing and introducing change both with positive and negative connotations. Some of the publics and some of the spheres overlap now and then while some others remain separate. Hence awareness of such heterogeneity and therefore precision about what we are referring to will be necessary when addressing the issue of the public sphere.

Another innocent or naive approach to the public sphere would perhaps assume that there is such a thing as an independent public sphere out there, and we can as Christians choose to enter it and influence it if we so desire. Not that it necessarily does so, but the way the theme of this consultation is expressed could generate some such ideas in people's minds. Lest some of us harbour such an idea I must stress that this mode of thinking is as false a rendition of reality as it is inappropriate theologically. The fact of the matter is that we are the public in this public sphere. Perhaps as we pursue our quietist lives we may not see ourselves as that public, but the fact of the matter is that it is we who constitute the public. Now the question of what sort of public we are is another matter, though a relevant one and will need to be answered, but that we are the ones, along with other citizens, who make up the public, is to be underlined. So whether we like it or not we are already implicated in the public by virtue of populating it and by, whether explicitly or implicitly, possessing and projecting a stance, whether quietist or constructivist, toward it and its concerns. By extension of that line of thought Christianity is already one of the forces that possesses a stake in the public sphere. Through the various ways in which it was introduced and the numerous agents who propagated it over the centuries, Christianity is one of the forces that have shaped the nation. So the public sphere is not a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which we can now begin writing. It already has been shaped by various forces including Christianity. By the same token, for good or otherwise, Christianity has also been shaped by the debate and resolutions of the public sphere. One cannot deny that we are what we are partly because of the historical and societal forces that shape us. If we combine and then extrapolate these two aspects one may affirm that in our context a distinctive feature is that *religion is in the public sphere* and *the public sphere is religious*. In so doing we are affirming that we begin our discussion not innocently, not without a history, not without prejudice and/or bias, but yet honestly and prudently. We recognise that Christians and Christianity has a stake in the public sphere. We

are not faced with a choice whether to engage with it or not, the question really is: how are we to engage with and in it?¹⁷

Theology for Public Life

Having attempted a deck clearing exercise with regard to the conceptions of the public sphere the task ahead of us is to clarify a theology for public life and then discuss the shape of a public theology in the sections that follow. Before I do that however it would be helpful to note that such a notion, a theology for public life and a public theology is premised on the understanding that our Christian identity at its heart is one that does not rapture us from the world but indeed it is one that drives us into the world.¹⁸ Theology can thus be seen as a doxological, reflective and missional exercise which worships and loves God who loves the world, seeks to know him and articulate that wisdom in the world, and serves him by seeking to share that life of God with the world. So in both instances theology possesses a mission to serve both the follower of Christ as she lives and serves in the world as much as it seeks to serve the larger world through the corporate Christian community, in responsible living in that world. Theology in these instances, and indeed in any other instance, cannot be seen as an intramural exercise, one that is preoccupied with 'internal' matters'. On the contrary it is shaped by the word of God as it hears the word of God; it lives the word of God as it is nourished by the word of God; it shares the world of God as it is sustained by the world of God. Doxology and mission therefore find in theology, among others things and however that is conceived, a valuable bridge, connecting the inner ritual with the outer rite. Clearly who does theology and how it is done are worthy questions, but in the interest of time and space they are not necessarily answered here. What is attempted is to provide a sketch of these two dimensions of theology.

A theology for public life is seen, at least in this current exercise, as one that fits Christians to pursue careers and indeed life in society and to do so with a clear recognition that such a pursuit can and indeed ought to bring glory to God. The way Christians live and work in the world is the subject matter of such a theology for public life. Among the many metaphors available, the salt and light one, found in Matthew 5: 13-16, is a good basis to conceive of the role Christians can play in wider society. The idea has had many commentators both from the pulpit and from the pen of the scholar, so it does not require much comment from me here. I would like to emphasise here though that the metaphor suggests that the goal of the Christian life is in its intermingling, in its engagement with the world, so as to produce transformation. The character of salt and light can be fully understood and comprehended only so far as it can and does 'infiltrate' the messy conditions that the world provides. The other two options, one to stay in the saltshaker and the other in which the salt has lost its saltiness, are really not genuine options for in that situation salt is fit for nothing. The other interesting observation that one can make here is the fact that in the case of salt once it has infiltrated the food it is no longer identifiable as it was before it was put into the food. The food however is altogether different as a result of having salt in it; it has been considerably enhanced. While the salt is indistinguishable from the food, it is nevertheless clearly evident in it, there is no hiding that salt has done its work. The taste of the food proves it beyond doubt. According to Matthew 5

¹⁷ Having said that though, I believe that the theological rationale for engagement with and in the public sphere is equally if not more important, which I will attend to later. The chronological precedence of this point in the paper does not necessarily imply conceptual priority.

¹⁸ See my paper presented in SAC 2010 'Being Indian, Becoming Christian: Toward a Theological Vision for Identity Formation'.

such is the calling of Christians in the world; they are invited to intermingle with and transform the world, they are called to be salt and light in the world.

Although the salt and light metaphor comes later in the Bible the example of people like Daniel in the Old Testament is worth pondering here as an example of transformation of the world. Note that rather than mourning the fact that he has been taken into exile, Daniel jumps straight into his life as a civil servant. His calling is clear; he is to serve Yahweh even though he is not in Israel, even though he is in Babylon. He knew that his God was not bound by geography but rather that Yahweh was the God of history. He had allowed this exile, which on the face of it was a defeat of Israel's God Yahweh, only to prove that he was indeed God of the nations. It was in such a paradoxical situation that Daniel finds himself. Yet his life and work was premised on the assumption that Yahweh was sovereign and he would work his purposes out, even if it meant using the Babylonians for that task. This recognition fitted him with a trust and submission to God's overall purpose, even though that looked like it was going all pear shaped. A belief in and action based on the sovereignty of God therefore seems like a foundational principle for public life. Perhaps Daniel would have known Psalm 103:19: "The Lord has established his throne in the heaven's and his kingdom rules over all." He was certainly aware that while one's immediate superior maybe a gentile and one works for a pagan king nevertheless over and above such earthly powers and authority stands Yahweh, God almighty. Even though it is this pagan boss who calls the shots and a heathen system that writes the rules and sets the agenda, Daniel is able to see beyond that and recognise God's overall authority and purpose. Yahweh is the ultimate authority and ruler over all. While appearances may point in the other direction, belief and affirmation of that fact through his actions was appropriate, indeed necessary.

Together with such a belief we see that for Daniel courage was also a key factor. Courage enabled him to 'be' and 'act' according to his inner convictions rather than external compulsions. Daniel was courageous to follow his own way of life, which included among other things a certain diet and a certain prayer life. Such courage also enabled him to speak wisdom into the political situation of his day. All this suggests that as Daniel lived by the belief in the sovereignty of Yahweh that gave him in turn the courage to march to a different drum beat. While he may have towed the line in terms of executing the job that was given to him, but his feet marched to another drum beat. Courage is an essential part of public life for it will determine the approach that one adopts in the pursuit of such a public life. It will determine whether salt stays in the saltshaker or is willing to intermingle with the food and render it edible. It will determine whether light is set under a bushel or it is willing to be put on a hill to lighten up the world around. In this all too brief introduction to a theology for public life we are able to recognise that public life cannot be thought of in quietist fashion. As was suggested it necessarily involves a theological vision which is necessarily public in its vision.

Public Theology

This is where one needs a public theology, in part as a framework for the pursuit of a public life, but perhaps more profoundly as a necessary concomitant to the very nature of our faith. At the basis of our Christian faith is the affirmation that Jesus is Lord. To be sure, this is not a statement uttered by Christians inside a church building as a confirmation of private belief with little reference to and implication for the world outside. On the contrary, when a Christian declares that Jesus is Lord, she is actually making a public and a political statement that announces the sovereignty of God as seen in Creation, as seen in and through Jesus in

the redemption and will be conclusively seen in the eschaton when Jesus comes a second time. 'Jesus is Lord' is therefore in essence a *public* theology in three words. It affirms that over every other claimant to power, over every other authority, over every ruler, stands Jesus as Lord. Christianity is therefore a corporate witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and represents an exercise of engaging with the principalities and powers of this world (Ephesians 6:12) even as we pronounce and practice that Lordship of Christ over them (Colossians 2:15) and indeed ourselves. Put differently, Christianity does not only deal with public issues, it is necessarily and consciously a public issue, a public faith. Lesslie Newbigin articulates this idea eloquently.

The community that confesses that Jesus is Lord has been from the beginning a movement launched into the public life of mankind...It was from the beginning a movement claiming the allegiance of all people, and it used for itself with almost total consistency the name 'ecclesia theou' the assembly called by God and therefore requiring attendance of all. The church could have escaped persecution by the Roman Empire if it had been content to be treated as a 'cultus privatus' – one of the many forms of personal religion. But it was not. Its affirmation that 'Jesus is Lord' implied a public universal claim that was bound eventually to clash with the 'cultus publicus' of the empire. The confession 'Jesus is Lord' implies a commitment to make good that commitment in relation to the whole life of the world – its philosophy, its culture and its politics no less than the personal lives of its people. The Christian mission is thus to act out in the whole of life in the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all.¹⁹

As briefly expressed earlier the need for such a focus on the public nature of our theology and faith is made evident in my observation that many Christians are often content to approach life in a quietist fashion, which believes that the Christian vision for life in society is one of virtuous individuals pursuing noble goals through their private lives which may happen to touch upon sections of the public. Among others, a certain danger of being shaped by individualism and privatism attaches itself to such an approach and hence I am not convinced that this can exhaust the Christian role in the public. Rather if the simplest form of theology that the church has articulated, as we have observed, is a public theology, then there seems to be little room for a quietist and privatistic approach to faith.

If Christianity is a public faith, how then are we going to articulate that in the world? How are we going to make public what is in essence public? While it is true simply however repeating that Jesus is Lord will not suffice. We need a greater depth of understanding of the role of governments, civil society and indeed the public sphere. In Romans 13:1 we read: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." All through its pages the scriptures emphasise that God is sovereign over all powers and authorities. As creator and sustainer, as redeemer and judge he rules over everything. He ordains powers and authorities of the world to execute his rule and as such they work for him. They are his instruments to ensure the flourishing of human and created order. As we know from experience however governments do not always fulfil that role, yet that truth remains.

¹⁹ *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) pgs. 16-17.

Such a theological truth yields an important imperative. When we work for the strengthening of legitimate governmental, public and social institutions we are in effect working for a just, equitable and peaceful society. This in turn is God's plan for his creation, though marred by sin. As we engage actively with nation and society we are affirming and pointing to God's sovereignty over all; we are serving his purpose for the created order.

Second, as we find expressed in Genesis 12: 2-3, God's overall intention is to bless the nations. Abram was chosen for that particular purpose; that was the purpose in calling and constituting Israel as a people and a nation (Is. 42:6, 49:6); as children of Abraham in faith the church has been called and constituted (Gal 3:7-9) for that purpose. Indian Christians are called to be a blessing to the nation.

One way of doing that is to work actively for the strengthening of democratic and civil institutions including the public sphere. The extent to which we actively work for the nation's peace and prosperity we are in fact blessing it in God's name. In one sense therefore the temperature of our spirituality can be measured by the thermometer of our engagement in the public sphere.

Of the many that exist, two ways in which this engagement can be mounted can be mentioned. First, is to serve as a *conscience of the nation*. Calling the nation to God given ethical standards has been a task the Old Testament prophets performed. Jesus followed suit as he challenged the Jewish and the Roman establishment to return to their God given roles and responsibilities. In recent times we have had people like Anna Hazare taking on that to a certain extent. He was instrumental in stressing the need for ethics in public life. He played the role of a prophet that the church should have been doing. In his own indomitable manner he succeeded in highlighting, as the prophets of old did in their day, the need for justice and probity. Second, is to serve as a *catalyst for justice and peace*. Just as the Prophets and Jesus spoke and acted against evil and for justice, in personal relationships, religious systems and societal patterns we have a calling to bless and build our nation by pursuing, amongst ourselves and within society at large, justice and peace for all. We can fulfil this calling in humbly (for none of us are exempt from succumbing to its vices) acting and speaking against evil and actively promoting a wholesome society. Christians should represent a critical voice against evil and a constructive force for the nation's welfare.

Such a pursuit requires not only theologians. It requires all followers of Christ to serve as the conscience of the nation and as catalysts for peace and justice. In and through their own unique ways and employing their diverse capabilities, whatever they may be, Christians can and must play their role in the public sphere creating a wholesome vision for and facilitating the nation make its way towards that vision. Now clearly this is easier said than done. While it is all very well to promote Christian involvement in civic, public and political life, as it is often done with little appreciation for the immensely difficult job it is, it is only a few who can provide a method and model of such participation. For some of them the pressures and pain that attends such an engagement seems to dwarf the good one obtains, yet serving the nation whether through informal civic engagement or a career in politics is a noble calling and vocation. Besides encouraging such an engagement therefore we need to also establish mechanisms to facilitate and resource that. A constructive Indian Christian theology and philosophy of politics, public life and societal engagement will need to be produced. Non-partisan platforms to equip and practically support such activists and thinkers need to be erected. Experienced hands will need to guide younger leaders. Prayer and church backing will be indispensable. Particularly at this precarious moment we currently are at this is a

worthwhile pursuit. Indeed it may even be an urgent priority for Christians and the Church in India.

In the words of the late MM Thomas, a one-time governor of Nagaland, we surely need a 'spirituality of combat' to fight internal and external forces that are tearing the notion of the public sphere and ideas of the nation apart. For currently the very idea of India seems to be up for grabs. On the one hand Hindu nationalists argue that to be Indian is to be necessarily Hindu, leaving other communities wondering about their place in the nation. On the other hand the issue of corruption, for e.g., is destabilizing the very character of democratic governance and public welfare. The soul of India, as in the former, just as the body of India, as in the latter, is under attack. This is to say nothing of external threats, both of the violent terrorist and of the ruthless and self-serving capitalist. Indeed it seems that notions of who we are and how we live are currently being redefined.

Conclusion

At the crucial juncture we live in currently the public life of Christians and the public nature of theology and our faith are important notions that require sustained attention and action. For far too long we have had an ambiguous attitude toward the 'public'. We have been reluctant to engage with the public sphere for perhaps our theology has focused primarily on an individualistic conception of faith. Our theology has neither been sufficiently deep or robust in providing us the rationale for such thinking and actions. If some of us did get involved in public issues it may have been to save our skin. Unfortunately in some quarters we are politically active for 'selfish' reasons, primarily to safeguard the Christian community's existence. Surely this is an important task, but by no means the only task. If at the root of our life and presence in the nation lies an acknowledgement that God is sovereign and all rulers and wholesome systems and structures fulfil his design; if we equally affirm that we are called to be a blessing to the nations; if we equally affirm that at its root our faith is a public one that calls into question the powers that be; a naturally occurring publically active lifestyle will be ours. It will not symbolize a leisure activity of those who are so inclined. Rather the public theology, which was discussed above ever so briefly, could nurture Christians who will represent a conscience of the nation and a catalyst for justice and peace. As we do that we will seek the welfare of the nation and in so doing secure witness for that Jesus who is Lord indeed.