

Public Theology — A Purely Western Issue?

Public Theology in the Praxis of the Church in Asia¹

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Introduction

This article looks at Public Theology. Public Theology has come to the forefront in the theological consciousness of churches and Christians in recent years. We now have a Global Network in Public Theology (GNPT), involving over twenty theological institutions in all continents around the world, including those in Hong Kong SAR, China, India and Indonesia. This network was provisionally set up at a conference held in Edinburgh in 2005, and formally constituted at a second conference held at Princeton in the United States in 2007.

So, what is Public Theology? Why, indeed, has there been this interest in Public Theology? To the first question, “What is Public Theology?”, there have been a variety of answers. The most prominent has been that of David Tracy, of Chicago. His answer has been that Public Theology is a theology which engages three audiences: the academy, the church, and society.

However, why the interest in Public Theology? Clearly the church in Western societies has faced the marginalisation and privatisation of faith and theology. Has that brought the reaction of promoting the public presence of theology? There is, of course, no logical reason why Christianity should not play into the public domain, any more than, for example, the trade unions, employer groups, doctors, legal practitioners, the teaching profession, miners, or any other group of citizens.

This article looks at Public Christian Theology in the Asian context. Many scholars in Asia, both of Christian faith and of other religions, would argue that in this context **all theology is public**. So the paper looks at a number of questions.

The **first** issue that this article considers is the question as to what extent the assumptions of public Christian theology actually are the assumptions of post-Enlightenment Western Christian theology alone. This is a pressing issue for the methodologies in public theology of Asian Christian theologians. Does the agenda of much public Christian theology, for

¹ An earlier version of this article was delivered as the 2007 Ferguson Lecture in Auckland, New Zealand, in August 2007. This article has been peer reviewed and is deemed to meet the criteria for original research as set out by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.

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example, actually address the situation of Christianity in the Asian region, or does it in fact only seek to address the internal Angst of Western Christianity? Is public theology thus an expression of a Western need, or even a “Latin Captivity”, in the Church, or not?

The **second** issue that this article considers is the intercultural nature of Christian theology, and its implications for public theology. Where Christianity is a minority (albeit, large minority) faith, what is the contribution of a public Christian theology to the debates of civil society? Is the word “debate” the correct word? This is especially pressing where the cultural aspects of a world religion other than Christianity (e.g., Islam in Indonesia, Buddhism in Thailand, and Hinduism in India) heavily influence the discourses of civil society.

The **third** issue that this article considers is a concrete reality of Asian society, that is violence, and how Christian public theology is developed in that context. In this third section, I look at theological methodologies, and then go on to reflect on the dynamics of a New Testament theology frequently used in Asia in relation to violence. In doing so, I seek to find a method for engaging theologically with the fact of violence.

Fourth, and **finally**, this article seeks to answer the question as to what we can learn from the interaction of Christianity and cultures, particularly in the Asian region, to help us in the engagement of a public theology in general.

First: Public Theology—A Western need of the Church?

I need to begin by looking at the question of Public Theology as a need of Western Christianity. One might even go on to see it as a “Latin Captivity” of the church. This term, the “Latin Captivity” of the church, is parallel to Martin Luther’s famous phrase, the “Babylonish Captivity” of the church (in its sixteenth century English translation). Luther, of course, was referring to the captivity of the church within its late medieval structure and form within Western Christianity. So I take this concept of Luther’s, and apply it, in general, to Western Christianity. I am not thinking here of Western Christianity as opposed to the Eastern Orthodox churches. Rather, I am thinking of Western Christianity as it has developed from the eleventh century in its variety of forms, including Catholic, Anglican and Protestant. These are the churches which factually have had the greatest impact on the growth of Christianity in Africa, the Americas and Asia, particularly from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century. Thus the question arises as to the extent to which the primary international agenda in theology has been, and continues to be, set by Western Christianity. This, then, leads to the question as to the extent to which Christianity in Asia is dominated by this “Latin Captivity”. I use the word “Latin” not simply in the sense of language, although this may be involved too. Nor do I use it as applying only to the Roman Catholic Church, although that church is involved too. I use it in relation to the whole agenda of Western Christianity, so heavily influenced as it is by Latin thought-

³ See, especially, BOYD, R. H. S. *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church: The Cultural Context of the Gospel* (Monograph Supplement to the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, No. 3). London: Cambridge University Press, 1974; KITAGAWA, J. M. *The Christian Tradition beyond the European Captivity*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992. See, too, HAIRE, J. *The Character and Theological Struggle of the Church in Halmahera, Indonesia, 1941 - 1979* (*Studien zur interkulturellen Geschichte des Christentums*, Band 26). Frankfurt am Main und Bern: Lang, 1981.

forms, philosophies and agendas. The literature on this in relation to Asia is significant.³

In addition, there is the issue of Erastianism (in the senses of both the political and the intellectual ascendancy of the state over the church in theological and ecclesiastical matters) and anti-Erastianism. In Western Christianity there have been both very strong Erastian and very strong anti-Erastian tendencies. These play heavily into the debates of public Christian theology.

Within the traditions of Western Christianity of course comes the European Enlightenment. Here we see radical changes, but they develop within Western Christianity. Human beings, on the one hand, become more important than God. On the other hand, however, they become not fundamentally different from animals and plants. Both capitalism and Marxism derive from this Enlightenment vision of human beings as autonomous individuals without any reference to the Divine. It is a radical anthropocentrism. What distinguishes the effects of the Enlightenment is that it is, in its public face or public philosophy, atheist. The Christian faith is questioned, repudiated, or studiously ignored. Revelation, especially communal revelation, now has to prove its claim. However, the European Enlightenment did not deny the Christian faith, or indeed any religion, its place. That place is fundamentally in the private sphere. The Enlightenment relativised the Christian faith's exclusive claims, and thus placed it firmly in the area of the individual's personal rights. It taught that every individual was free to pursue his or her own happiness, irrespective of what others thought or said. This has continued in Western cultures to our times. It means that in Western Christianity individual faith and ethics, and the communal faith and ethics of like-minded individuals, can be nurtured and developed. Individual discipleship and small communal or monastic groups can flourish. However, the public face of Christianity is denied or ignored.

Here is the *Angst* of contemporary Western Christianity, in its inheritance of the Latin Western tradition. It faces a world where it sees the effects of the Enlightenment in the public place. What this tends to produce, in its eyes, is that people cannot take others seriously, and indeed do not need others. The *Angst*, then, of Western Christianity is that it follows from this that individuals can no longer take themselves seriously, and that, despite the fact that they now have liberty to believe as they wish, they can easily, following Nietzsche, live their lives in frenzied work and frenzied play, so as not to face the fact, that is, not to look into the abyss. In reaction to this confronting situation for Western Christianity, it thus might seem that public theology is purely Western Christianity's way of addressing this *Angst*.

Second: Intercultural nature of theology, including public theology

A vast literature has been produced on the issue of intercultural theology since the first discussions of the so-called *theologiae in loco* took place in the late 1950s, now fifty years ago. I wish specifically to look at how the insights of the past half-century of theological debate in this area can inform the development of public theology. However, before that can be done, it is necessary to draw out some of the insights of intercultural theology and see how they can be related to the development of public theologies, especially in societies

as in Asia, where emerging indigenous theologies are conscious of their Latin captivity.

The authentic gospel or Christ-Event-for-us⁴ is not pre-packaged by cultural particularity but is living. The church remains in a constant struggle between the acceptance of the Christ Event within its particular culture in each place, and yet in the wrestling with that which stands against its own particular acceptance in each place. In this sense the church is always both indigenous and *reformata sed semper reformanda*. In recent times the ἡ ἀκοή” (*hē akoē – the hearing*) is respect. It is perhaps because the Christ Event can never be exclusively identified with one culture or one type of culture that Paul employs the ambiguous term,

to describe the action by which the Christ Event enters a person’s or a community’s life, that is, the crucial steps of grace and faith.⁵ Since Kasemann’s pioneering work, this, of course, has been seen in the varied theologies in the New Testament.⁶

If the Christ-Event-for-us in each place lives in widely diverse cultures, then for the whole people of God there can only be a true fullness of that event or gospel if there is true inter-confessional, inter-traditional, international, interracial and inter-cultural fellowship. For the church of Jesus Christ is a fellowship which transcends space and time. The gospel, especially today, can only be lived in its fullness through sustained and widespread inter-cultural theological reflection and action. For the Christ Event, to which these factors point, as in Gr?newald’s painting⁷ constantly before Karl Barth, is only truly the same if differently expressed in different cultures.

This now needs to be applied to public theology. It is not enough that indigenous theological reflection, oral and written and otherwise expressed, and related action, should take place in Asia, Africa, the Carribean, the Americas and the Pacific. That this should happen is important, but it does not go far enough. Public theology should not be seen as the appendix to theology, or even more the appendix to dogmatics, church history or practical theology. Rather it should be at the heart of theological and dogmatic reflection, as its concerns were in the multi-cultural context of the beginnings of Christianity.

Third: Public Theology in the Praxis of the Church in Asia

Asian Christian theologies, in the main, make little or no distinction between the public and the private. Thus, they are in a situation entirely different, on the whole, from that of post-European Enlightenment Western Christianity. For this article, the main difference is in the conception of the public sphere within which these Asian theologies are articulated.

⁴ I use the term “gospel” here in a sense not simply dependent on the Bultmannian use of the term.

⁵ See, for example, Romans 10: 16 - 17; Galatians 3: 2.

⁶ See KASEMANN, E. “Begrundet det neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?”, in *Evangelische Theologie*, Munchen, Vol. XI, 1951/52, 13 - 21 (subsequently published in KASEMANN, E. *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, Erster Band, 2nd Edition. Gottingen: Vandenhoech und Ruprecht, 1960); K?SEMANN, E. “Zum Thema der Nichtobjektivierbarkeit”, in *Evangelische Theologie*, Munchen, Vol. XII, 1952/53, 455 - 366. (subsequently published in KASEMANN, E., 1960).

In much of Asia public discussion of religion forms the normal pattern of life, quite unlike the marginalised and privatised place of religion in the post-European Enlightenment Western world. Equally, being a Christian, whether a church leader or church member, frequently necessarily involves the person in communal, public and sometimes political⁸ activity. This involvement has to do with Christian presence, self-propagation and survival in a multi-religious context.

Indigenous Asian Christian theology has, of course, a very long history, as outlined so clearly by Samuel Moffett⁹, and also by Gillman and Klimkeit.¹⁰ However, if we look specifically at the development of self-conscious *theologiae in loco* or contextual theologies in Asia in recent times, that is, since the late 1960s, a number of significant factors occur.

First, there is the communal nature of these theologies. These theologies are not conceived for private purposes, but have the whole community as their audience.¹¹ This is seen in a number of significant indigenous Asian theologies. Let us look, for example, at the Korean concept of *han* as used in *Minjung* theology¹², at the writings of Kosuke Koyama¹³ and at the work of Choan-Seng (C S) Song.¹⁴ This communality relates both to the Christian community and to the interaction between the Christian, minority community and the wider community in each Asian society.

For *Minjung* theologians this relationship is with the wider Buddhist and Shamanist communities of Korea. The Korean concept of *Minjung* is τὸ ὄχλος people who have been put aside and robbed of their subjectivity in history, either by outsiders or by internal oppressors. The word is created from two Chinese characters, “*min*” and “*jung*”, which can together be translated as “the mass of the people”.¹⁵ Its emphasis is on the people’s loss of subjectivity. It thus has some similarity to the New Testament concept of “

⁸ Such poli MOON, C. H. “*Minjung Theology*”, in *Ching Feng* 26 (1983), 48.
Mark 15: 34 (NRSV).

tical activity may be formal or informal, local or wider.

⁹ MOFFETT, S. H. *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. 1. San Francisco: Harper, 1992.

¹⁰ GILLMAN, I. and KLIMKEIT, H. J. *Christians in Asia before 1500*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002.

¹¹ See WICKERI, P. L., ed. *The People of God Among All God’s Peoples: Frontiers in Christian Mission*. Hong Kong/London, Christian Conference of Asia and the Council for World Mission, 2000; WIDYATMADJA, J. P. *Kebangsaan dan Globalisasi dalam Diplomasi*. Yogyakarta (Indonesia): Yayasan Bimbingan Kesejahteraan Sosial/Kanisius, 2005. See, too, A. A. YEWANGOE, *Theologia Crucis in Asia: Asian Christian Views on Suffering in the Face of Overwhelming Poverty and Multifaceted Religiosity in Asia*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987, *passim*, especially 289 - 323.

¹² See BEVANS, S.B. *Models of Contextual Theology (Faith and Cultures Series)* (revised and expanded edition). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004, 77 - 78.

¹³ BEVANS, 95 - 99.

¹⁴ See, for example, SONG, CHOAN-SENG (C S), *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*. Madras: CLS, 1975; SONG, C S. *Third Eye Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979. See, too, KOSHY, N. *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, Vol. 1. Hong Kong: World Student Christian Federation Asia-Pacific Region, Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs, and Christian Conference of Asia, 2004, 219.

¹⁵ MOON, C. H. “*Minjung Theology*”, in *Ching Feng* 26 (1983), 48.

¹⁶ Mark 15: 34 (NRSV).

(*ochlos*). The Korean concept of *han*, so close to the heart of *Minjung* theology, refers to the sense of unresolved resentment against injustice and suffering, a sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming odds, especially overwhelming violence, and a feeling of being totally abandoned. Again, we think of our Lord's cry, "Why have you forsaken me?"¹⁶ *Han* also points to a feeling of acute bodily pain, a feeling of helpless suffering, and an urge to right a wrong.¹⁷ An example is the account of Miss Kim Kyong-sook, an executive committee member of a Korean trade union. On 11 August 1979 she was shot dead during a demonstration organised by two hundred women workers demanding that the Government party (the New Democratic Party) work out a fair solution to their labour dispute. According to the letter which she left for her mother and younger brother (in case she should die during this labour dispute), she recounted that sometimes she was not paid for her work in the factory over the previous eight-year period. She had no opportunity to attend church because of her work on Sunday. Her testament was for a deepening of personal and community piety (church attendance and Bible study) and stronger support for the trade union movement. For *Minjung* theologian David Kwang-sun Suh¹⁹ this concern is always with the wider Shamanist, Buddhist, Confucian and Neo-Religionist communities of Korea, who respectively represent approximately 25%, 15%, 13% and 14% of the South Korean population, with Christians representing over 30%.

Equally for Koyama it relates to the wider Japanese community, and to the wider Buddhist community of Thailand²⁰, and for Choan-Seng Song it relates to the wider Daoist and Confucian society of both Taiwan and China.²¹ Song uses the concept of the Mask Dance as a means of expressing communal theology in the public space. The dance helps the community, including both Christian and non-Christian, overcome the toil of the day, including the effects of structural violence. However, for Song, its importance is much greater. Song sees the dance in its social, political and theological contexts.²² Through the dance, the plight of the poor and the achieving of justice without violence are portrayed. It inspires human resourcefulness in a merciless society. It exhibits the nearness of God to humanity, in God's favour as well as God's disfavour. So the communal mask dance, in the public space, is a political manifesto as well as a prayer for a community in trouble. According to Song, the dance comes from what is called the "experience of critical

¹⁷ SUH, David Kwang-sun. "Minjung and Theology in Korea", in Kim Yong Bok, ed., *Minjung Theology: People as Subjects of History*. Singapore, Christian Conference of Asia, 1981, 27; MOL, D. "Minjung Theologie, Zuid Koreaanse Bevrijdingstheologie in een geïndustrialiseerde Samenleving", in Wending (1985), 20 - 21.

¹⁸ SUH, Nam Dong. "Towards a Theology of Han", in Kim Youn Bok, ed., *Minjung Theology*, 54.

¹⁹ See KOSHY, 306.

²⁰ See BEVANS, 96 - 99, 169 - 170.

²¹ See, especially, SONG, C S. *Third Eye Theology*. See too PO Ho Huang, *From Galilee to Tainan: Towards a Theology of Chhut-thau-thi'* (ATESEA Occasional Paper No 15). Manila: Association for Theological Education in South East Asia, 2005.

²² SONG, Choan Seng. *Theology from the Womb of Asia*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986, 218 - 219.

²³ SONG, Choan Seng. *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 219.

²⁴ LEIMENA, J. "De Ontmoeting der Rassen in de Kerk", in *De Opwekker*, 1941, 626 - 642; LEIMENA, J., "The Task of Restoring Fellowship Within the Church and the Indonesian Nation", *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 9: 3 (1968), 57 - 64. See too VAN KLINKEN, G. *Minorities, Modernity and the Emerging Nation: Christians in Indonesia, a biographical approach* (*Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Volume 199*). Leiden: KITLV Press, 2003, 122, 137, 189 - 190,

transcendence".²³

Second, there is the close inter-relationship of the personal, the political and the public. This is seen clearly, for example, in the work of Johannes Leimena²⁴ and of T. B. Simatupang²⁵ in Indonesia, particularly in relation to the debates of the late 1940s as to whether or not Indonesia should become an Islamic State. Leimena, a Presbyterian from the Moluccas, served as Prime Minister of Indonesia in the 1950s. In the period after the so-called attempted Communist Coup in 1965, Leimena was questioned by officials of the *New Order* (*Orde Baru*) Government of President Suharto concerning the activities of former President Soekarno. He refused to implicate Soekarno as a Communist, insisting that Soekarno had primarily been a nationalist. What is more significant for this paper is that Leimena insisted that his co-operation with all the independence revolutionaries of whatever background, as a Protestant Christian, had been part of his Christian calling. For Leimena, Soekarno, a nationalist of joint Muslim and Hindu background, had been one of his colleagues, and he refused to join in activity to betray or discredit him. Again, Simatupang, a Lutheran from North Sumatra, served as a General and Chief of Staff in the Indonesian Army during that decade too. In his writings he insists on the living relationship between the faith of Christians, on the one hand, and their thinking and activities in relation to the ongoing revolution in a nation like Indonesia in its striving to bring about a more just society without violence, on the other.²⁶ Again, this close inter-relationship of the personal, the political and the public is seen in the work of Mamen Madathilparampil Thomas, or M M Thomas, in India²⁷, against the background of debates on the state as secular or as influenced by Hinduism. Thomas, a member of the Mar Syrian Church of Malabar, spent much of his career involved in the issues of Christianity and society, both in India and through the World Council of Churches²⁸, and completed his career as Governor of the Indian State of Mizoram. Unlike the early indigenous Indian theologian Vengal Chakkarai, who was interested in the *bakti-marga*, "the way of devotion", Thomas was interested in the *karma-marga*, "the way of action". One of his aims was to contribute to a humanized world community, along with other religious traditions. Especially in his work, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, Thomas demonstrates how Christianity has constantly had responsibility for introducing new elements into Indian society, particularly in facing the three challenging issues of Indian society, that is, of group over individual, of certain individuals over others, and of male over female. The introducing of these new elements have brought about many changes to the core of Indian society, both politically

218 - 220.

²⁵ See VAN KLINKEN, 97, 123, 147, 169 - 170.

²⁶ SIMATUPANG, T. B. *Tugas Kristen dalam Revolusi* ("The Christian Task in the Revolution"). Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1967; SIMATUPANG, T. B. *Keselamatan Masa Kini* (Salvation Today). Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1973.

²⁷ THOMAS, M. M. *The Christian Response in the Asian Revolution*. London: SCM, 1966. THOMAS, M. M. *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*. London: SCM, 1969. See, too, KOSHY, 32 - 33, 111 - 112, 179 - 180.

²⁸ See, for example, THOMAS, M. M. and ABRECHT, P., eds., *World Conference on Church and Society: Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of our Time*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967, *passim*.

²⁹ BOYD, R. H. S. *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. Madras: CLS, 1975, 312.

and otherwise, and also to Hinduism itself.²⁹

So, in looking at the issue of public theology on this occasion, this article takes one of the major realities of the Asian context, that is, the reality of **violence**. It thus seeks to do public theology in the praxis of the church in Asia, against a specific, and at times overwhelming, background. This is because the issue of the prevalence of violence in Asia is dominant, and because there is a relationship between violence and theological debate.

The contemporary reality of Asia³⁰ is one of deep violence. The irony of the ending of the Cold War is that it has coincided with the unleashing of uncontrollable violence, especially in Asia. The combination of high technology and seemingly medieval tribal conflict has become the pattern of our times, and this, at times stimulated from the West, "legitimizes a culture of violence by invoking God arbitrarily to suit a particular agenda for aggression. As a result, insecurity, fear and anxiety characterize the lives of many people"³¹ throughout Asia.

This culture of violence manifests itself in many different ways. There is the negative impact of economic globalisation, which continues to widen the gap between the haves and the have nots. There is also the structural violence of domineering or negligent governments in relation to their populations. Corruption and the abuse of power often manifest themselves in violence. In addition in the Asian region, there are often structural forms of traditional violence, mainly based in patriarchal societies. These result in gender discrimination, forced labour migration, discrimination against young people and those with disabilities, and discrimination based on race, caste, and class. Surrounding human life itself is the violence against the environment.

Against this rather gloomy picture of the Asian region, positive signs must also be noted. There is a yearning among young people for true manifestations of peace and of peaceful communities. In the aftermath of the Tsunami there were remarkable efforts to create communities of peace in various places. Again, the speed of reconciliation after ethnic and communal violence often has been very rapid. Despite violence, there is evidence of a vast amount of resilience among populations who have been deeply wounded.

Between 2001 and 2005 I took part in the reconciliation process for the Molucca Islands. In 2001 and 2002, I visited Halmahera in the North Moluccas, where I had served for thirteen years in the 1970s and 1980s, and saw the results of the Christian - Muslim violence, which had been stimulated by the political situation in Indonesia at that time, and aggravated at times by elements within the Indonesian military. Events too terrible for words had occurred. Both Muslims and Christians were involved in violence. Let me just give one example. Six of my former students in the Molucca Islands, all ordained ministers, were killed. One of them was the Rev Albert Lahi. He was in the vestry of his parish church

³⁰ The author has lectured in Asia now for over thirty-five years, including thirteen years when he was resident in Indonesia.

³¹ KOBIA, S, quoted in World Council of Churches News Release entitled "Restating the Ecumenical Vision demands Conversion, says Kobia", Geneva, 15/02/2005. Cf. BURTON, J. Conflict: Resolution and Provention. London: Macmillan Press, 1990, 1 - 2; 13 - 24.

when elements of the *Jihad*, aided and abetted by elements of the military, arrived. He knew that his case was hopeless. He asked to be allowed to pray. His wish was granted. He put on his preaching gown and knelt by the communion table. He prayed for his church, for his nation, for his congregation and for those about to kill him. The Sunday school children who observed the whole incident told me what happened. Then he stretched his head forward and was beheaded. His head was carried on a pole around the village. His body was dragged by the feet for all to see. Yet in this same village, and in this whole area, reconciliation has come about. Christians too, were heavily engaged in violence. However, since 2002 both the Muslim and the Christian populations have been slowly but surely working their futures out together, in a quite remarkable display of overcoming violence and creating communities of peace. At the end of the peace process in the Moluccas a remarkable communal act of reconciliation occurred. A rebuilt central mosque and a rebuilt Christian church were both dedicated. Both had been destroyed in the violence. At the beginning of the dedication of the mosque, Christians brought the *tifa* (the equipment used to call Muslims to worship), which they had had made at their own expense, to the Muslim community, as their gift for the new mosque. At the beginning of the dedication of the church, Muslims brought a large bell, which they had had made at their own expense in the Netherlands, as their gift for the new church. Both promised never to engage in violence again with their neighbours.

Against the situation in which we find ourselves, in which we find incredible violence in our communities, but also the resilience of the human spirit, we need to seek a public theology. That we should do so is important, for two reasons. First, as Christianity represents just over one third of the global population, it shares in a responsibility for the existence of violence in our contemporary world. Second, despite its strong peace traditions, Christianity has been involved in violence in much of its history. Within this, we need to hear the voice of God, because that is central to our identity as Christians.

How do we listen to the voice of God? It is not our task primarily to invoke God for our particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to sit and listen as that divine voice comes to us.

Therefore, in looking at how we move towards a public theology, let us, in this article, take up this task theologically, as we must as Christians. Let us first go to the very heart of our existence as Christians, and as the church. The inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to be understood in terms of the structures and events of the world. Equally, God's inexplicable will to be God with, and for, humanity implies that we should always understand our life as Christians theologically. These simple, yet profound, facts derive from the mystery of the triune God not to be God apart from, or separate from, humanity, but rather to make God's very life intersect with the unity of the Son of God with us. Our theological basis as Christians and as the church is in the wonder of God's condescension, in the intentionality of God's solidarity with sinners, that is, with those who find their self-identity solely within themselves, and find their self-justification and sole solace in themselves alone, without any reference to God. The church is called to exist solely through the solidarity of Jesus Christ with those who are alienated from God, by Christ going to the extremes of alienation for humanity, so that humanity might through him come close to God. At the heart of our faith is expressed

the fact that God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder God's inexpressible love for humanity. God in Christ calls into existence an earthly body of his Son, who is its heavenly head, in order that humanity may responsively rejoice with God in the harmony and peace which God has established for creation.

If the being of the church and its life is predicated upon the grace of Jesus Christ, as itself defining God's action in the world for the reconciliation of creation, including humanity, then its life of peace, in opposition to violence, is that which it receives from him, who is its life. The church's very existence will be shaped by *the manner* in which it confesses this truth to be its very life.

On the basis of our theological identity in Christ, we take the New Testament writings, on Christian peace and community especially, most seriously. We struggle to be faithful disciples of Christ today in a world of violence. For in that struggle we find strength in the experience of early Christianity. Christianity was born in a milieu of political and social violence. The evidence which we have both from the New Testament and from non-Christian sources of the First Century CE point to the constant struggle of Christianity to survive in such a climate. Clearly that climate of violence also influenced the language and concept-construction of many parts of the New Testament. Nevertheless, it is also very striking how early Christianity sought to transcend this violent world.

A microcosm of the New Testament understanding of overcoming violence and building peace for all can be seen in the ethical sections of Paul's writings, especially in those ethical sections in his *Letter to the Romans*, frequently used in Asian contexts. In order to understand this ideal of overcoming violence and building peaceful communities, that is, living out its theology in public, we need to understand that early Christianity reacted against, and transformed, Greco-Roman cultures of the first century CE.

First, in the world of Early Christianity, social groupings were based on kinship, ethnic issues, power, and politics. Individual consciousness was subordinate to social consciousness.³² **Second**, religion, like other social factors, was enmeshed in kinship and politics. In the first century CE, Christianity, which was a religion of voluntary members, resulted in a newly-created kinship group. Although it appeared to be similar to, or to look like, any other kinship group,³³ it was in fact a created or fictive kinship grouping. In early Christianity, language of the natural kinship group, for example "household (of faith)", was used for a created kinship group. It was a created, or fictive, kinship group, but it

³² MALINA, B J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981, 55-66, 60-64; MEEKS, W A. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 90-91. Cf. THEISSEN, G. *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics and the World of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1992, 272 - 278.

³³ THEISSEN, G. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (edited and translated by John H Schutz). Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982, 27-40. Cf. ESLER, P. F. *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific approaches to New Testament interpretation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 6 - 12.

³⁴ PEARSON, L. *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*. Stanford: University Press, 1973, 193; WEDDERBURN, A J M. *The Reason for Romans (Studies of the New Testament and its World)*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 81-83. Cf. LOADER, W. R. G. *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the*

struggled to have the closeness of a natural kinship group. For God had created the church. **Third**, there is considerable evidence in the First Century CE within Greco-Roman culture of intense expressions of emotion, through outbursts of anger, aggression, pugnacity, and indeed violence. Moreover, these appear to have been socially acceptable.³⁴ **Fourth**, in such an atmosphere, concern for honour and shame was significant. A person's sense of self-worth was established by public reputation related to that person's associations rather than by a judgment of conscience.³⁵

Over against these four factors, Paul summons Christians to new social roles. They are based on mercy, peaceable conduct and reconciliation in a culture where expressions of violence seem to have been normative. The call for transformation now means new expressions of group identity. No longer based on kinship or ethnicity, group identity nevertheless seeks to retain the intense cohesion of former groups. Paul's community members bind themselves together as one body in Christ. This metaphor is poignantly suitable in a society where self-awareness arises from group association rather than from individual worth. The ideals of honourable and shameless conduct are altered in that they are now for Christians not any more primarily derived from society outside. Rather, enhanced honour for the community derives from its incorporation into its risen Lord. Patterns of social co-operation are modified as a result. A new communal identity as one body in Christ is thus reinforced.

The social groupings see their identity as coming from beyond themselves. Their self-understanding and their life together are defined by the kindness or mercy of God and by the truthful harmony (or peace) which God gives. The other factors in the transformation include cohesiveness within the group, based on an understanding of God's action from outside. For that reason, attitudes of overcoming violence and of peaceful harmony are central to the Christian community's identity. Moreover, no other identity marker (ethnicity, gender, class, or status) may be accepted as absolute. Honour derives from the faith-life of the community, originating from God. The original groupings are transformed by the new ideal of a central awareness of their relationship with God.

In addition, throughout the ethical sections of *Romans* attitudes to those *outside* the newly created Christian social groupings are to be the same as to those *within* them. There is to be no distinction. All are to be treated in the same way. This perception is totally new in much of Greco-Roman society.

We thus see the radical way in which Paul took hold of Greco-Roman categories of group identity, and then applied to them new metaphors, including that of the body of Christ, so as to create in them a totally new identity.

In Western society individualism and the privatisation of faith at times make it difficult for us to see the significance of the dynamism of Paul's transformation of a received aggressive culture. Moreover, throughout world history Christianity in its Western form has had both success and failure in being able to present and live out this newly transformed identity in

Gospels. Grand Rapids (Michigan) and Cambridge (UK): Eerdmans, 2002, 177.

³⁵ MALINA, op.cit., 27-48.

Christ. This stands in stark contrast to the teachings of the New Testament, epitomised in Paul as we have seen, where Paul's ethics for **internal** Christian life are exactly the same as his ethics for those **outside**. You treat the outsider in exactly the same way as you treat your Christian sister or brother. There are poignant examples of this, across religious divides, including the attacks by elements within Christianity against Judaism in Nazi Germany, and the antagonism between specific traditions of Islam and certain traditions of Christianity in the United States.

In Cyril Foster Lecture in the University of Oxford, Jack Straw argued that the Cold War had eroded traditional political identities, and that its end had encouraged people to retreat back to identities defined in terms of cultural, ethnic, national, gender or religious affiliations. So, he argued, the challenge is to recapture civic political culture by finding ways of allowing space for these affiliations within a broader framework of shared values.³⁶ The Pauline ideal, of an equal ethical outlook for those **inside** a community as those **outside** it, epitomises a Christian viewpoint on this. In Paul's way, Christians seek to overcome violence and create communities of peace by showing the same attitudes to all, whether in the community or outside it. In Asia, unlike in much of Western society and Western history, Paul's intent is seen much more clearly appreciated and understood.

Fourth: Christianity, Culture and Doing Public Theology

Therefore, a number of things are incumbent upon us.

First, we need to be aware that overcoming violence and creating societies of peace means creating attitudes of peace and harmony towards those **outside** which are the same as to those who are **within** the faith-community.³⁷

Second, Asian theology, including Asian public theology, therefore, is not simply a matter of engaging in word and semantic exercises (in, for example, doctrine, ethics and polity). It is as much an expression of faith through liturgy, drama, dance, music, and communal living.

Third, the communal nature of expressing theology in Asia calls Asian Christians in particular to advance, at all opportunities, the eight goals of the Millennium Declaration (MDG) of the United Nations³⁸. These are indeed expressions of Asian *theologiae in loco*.

Fourth, this way of communal harmony is necessary in the ways in which the churches in the Asian region live their lives. Consensus decision-making, mutual celebration, and interest in others' rituals and festivities are important in the Asian way of being Christian.

³⁶ *Oxford Today* 19: 3 (2007), 4.

³⁷ See, for example from a Muslim perspective, H. TARMIDI TAHER. *Aspiring for the Middle Path: Religious Harmony in Indonesia*. Jakarta: Center for the Study of Islam and Society (CENSIS), 1997; MUHAMAD ALI. *Teologi Pluralis-Multikultural: Menghargai Kemajemukan Menjalani Kebersamaan*. Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2003; H. M. OASIM MATHAR, ED. *Sejarah, Teologi dan Etika Agama*. Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Interfidei/Dian, 2003.

³⁸ See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

This is lived, un-self-conscious, Asian public theology.

Fifth, truth can be communicated without aggression. Therefore, the ecumenical movement in Asia, in and of itself, as it brings the churches together, is central to the expression of an Asian public theology of peace for all.

We in our time live in a deeply ambivalent age, an age of high technology and of medieval conflict, and an age as strangely confident of the saving powers of the market-place as a previous age was strangely confident of the saving powers of collectivism. Yet both these ages have reflected inbuilt cultures of violence. In this age, Christians are called to follow Paul in speaking of, and living out, the wonder of God's mercy, peaceful harmony and reconciliation with humanity. Christians are thus called to a life of praise, which embraces all of our personal and social life, in all its practical, ethical, religious, political and intellectual aspects. That praise will be both culture-transforming and culture-renewing, over against the self-worship of individuals and nations in our time.

This vision of public theology in general, and of a public theology of peace, is eschatological in nature. It pictures the end of time as now already beginning to be operative. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, was greatly inspired by Gandhi. Both in their own religions were public theologians. One of Temple's lasting images was that of the Christian with bi-focal lenses. In his writing he says that we should look through the top part of our glasses to see the church as God intends it to be. With the bottom of our lenses we see the church as it actually is. Although we look at the church day by day with the bottom part of our spectacles, we should also always live as if the top part were already reality, as if the church was already living its ideal.

So it is with the public theology of peace. With the top part of our spectacles, as it were, we see a world community of peace and harmony. With the lower part of our spectacles, we observe the world as it is. Although we daily look at reality through the lower part, we must live as if the upper part is reality too. In the church, we have to model what fully harmonious and peaceful communities are. For that reason we need to use consensus models of discussion. We need in our churches to celebrate peace. For Christians, it is not just **what** we do, but **how** we do **what** we do that is important. Just for a moment think of the violence of language structures and procedures in the church. How can we speak of peace in the Asian region unless we model it? Perhaps the greatest enculturation or *theologia in loco* which we need in Asia is to express the style of our theological existence through Asian forms of peace. Our Western inheritances in Asia have not always helped us in this. Public theological language in Western Christianity has at times been violent. Is this violent language more acceptable where faith is a private matter, and therefore the form of the language of theology has less relevance to civil society? Does the tendency to marginalisation and שלום (*shālóm*) mean that the style of the language of public theology does not matter?

However, in cultures where violence is close to the surface, then the style of language and the methodologies of public theology are paramount. The ways in which we express public theology, the ways in which we preach, the ways in which we engage in the worship of God, the ways in which we engage in community services, the ways in which we live are

the ways we express this

The gospel is not pre-packaged by cultural particularity. Thus the styles of Christian public theology, both in word and praxis, not just in its agendas, must vary from culture to culture, if they are to reflect the same gospel. This has sometimes been referred to as each theological situation being *glocal*. In this the experience of the church in Asia is an important contribution. If public theology in each place lives in widely diverse cultures,