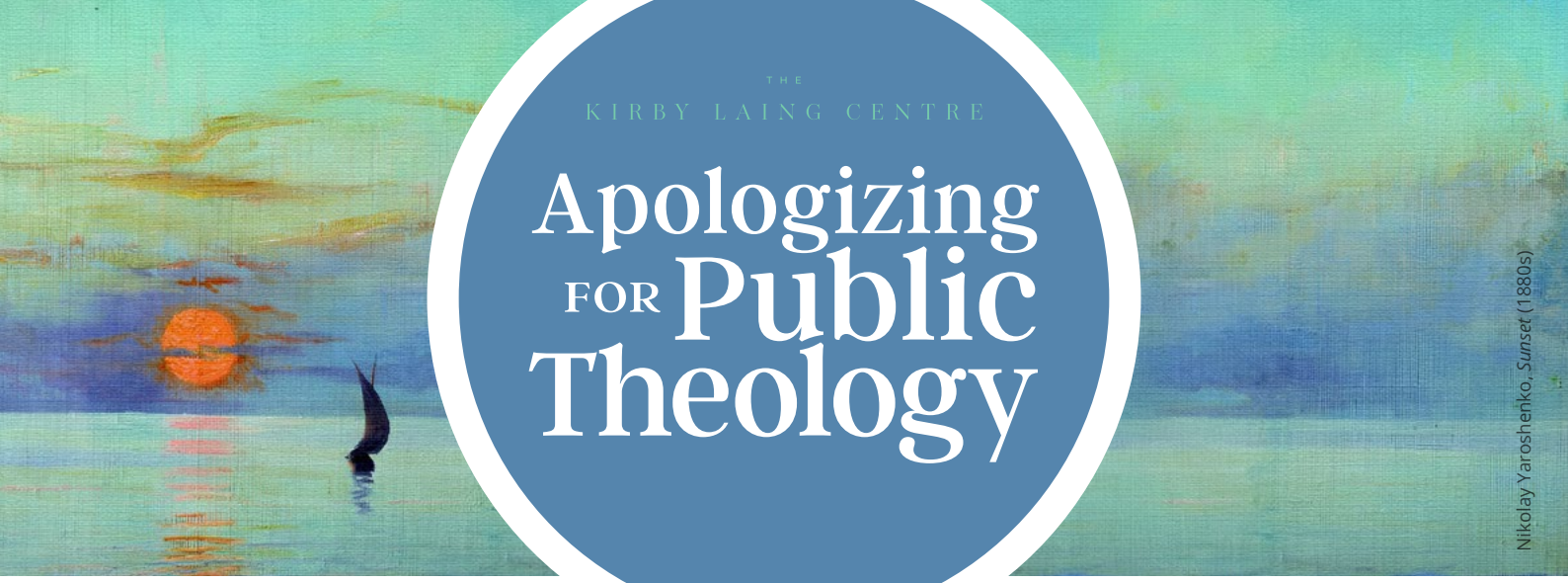

Nikolay Yaroshenko, *Sunset* (1880s)

PART 1 · CHAPTER 3

What is the "Public" in Public Theology?

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Public theology is concerned with theoretical reflection on how to relate the gospel to all areas of life, including the realms of politics, economics, scholarship, education, the judiciary, technology, art and more. In effect, public theology takes seriously the famous statement of Abraham Kuyper that "There is not a square inch [thumb's breadth] of the entire domain of human life of which Christ the Sovereign does not say 'Mine!'"[1] Or C. S. Lewis's similar comment that no neutral ground is to be found in the universe. God claims every inch and every second and these are counterclaimed by Satan.[2] If Christ is the Creator of and Lord over every human culture, then every aspect of human life is his by right. His followers may not withdraw into the private realm but must press his rightful claims into the public world of culture. The complexity of bringing the gospel to bear on the many areas of cultural and social life demands rigorous and interdisciplinary reflection that connects Scripture to the public world of culture. This is the task of public theology.

The question is, why employ the term "*public* theology" to denote this? Kuyper borrowed the term "worldview" from continental philosophy to articulate a set of beliefs that underlie all thought and action, including the public square. It was missionally strategic, addressing the day's urgent missional need to protect the gospel's comprehensive scope. Today, it seems the word "public" to describe Christian theological reflection on cultural issues may play a similar role.

All missionaries know that language is deeply shaped by a culture's religious vision. To communicate the Christian faith, one must employ terms laden with religious meaning. Key terms function like suitcases, containing a cohesive set of foundational beliefs formed by a long cultural story. This is how the New Testament writers communicated the gospel.[3] John, for example, seizes the term *logos* and challenges the whole idolatrous worldview carried by that word (John 1:1–14).

Yet to utilize such key words carries both great danger and significant opportunity. The danger is that you may accommodate your reflection to the idolatry that shapes the terminology. This certainly happened with some early church fathers, for example, who employed *logos*

1 Abraham Kuyper, *Souvereinteit in Eigen Kring* (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1880), 32. This famous statement by Kuyper has been paraphrased in many ways. His comment in Dutch reads: "Geen duimbreed is er op heel 't erf van ons menschelijk leven, waarvan de Christus, die àller Souverein is, niet roept: 'Mijn!'."

2 C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 33.

3 Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, ILL: IVP Academic, 2005).

Tarsila do Amaral, *Workers*

in their theology.[4] The significant opportunity is that it has the power to challenge deep assumptions that have remained below the surface level of consciousness. It can invite others to unpack their suitcases to see what is hidden in them. Taking words that carry a culture's worldview and filling them with new meaning challenges the tacit worldview and invites the curious to ponder why.

The primary reason the word "public" may be missionally appropriate today is that there lies a dichotomy at the very religious heart of Western culture that has excluded the gospel from the public realm, relegating it to the private sphere and individual salvation. The assumption that there is a public and private realm and that the gospel belongs to the latter is pervasively assumed. The language of "public," when applied to theology, is an arresting designation that seems initially to express an oxymoron. To say public theology is to do today what the Hungarian scientist Michael Polanyi did in 1958 when he challenged the presumed objectivity of science with the language of "personal knowledge."[5] Both "public theology" and "personal knowledge" bring together spheres held apart by the religious assumptions of the culture. Breaking the hermetic seal between the two spheres challenges the fundamental dualistic assumption of our culture.

While present in Greek culture, the public-private dichotomy has become firmly entrenched in Western culture with the religious and cultural conversion that took place during the Enlightenment. Before this period, the Bible and the Christian faith carried some authority within the public square as it addressed government, business, courts and other public institutions. However, with the conversion of Western culture to the scientific humanist religious vision, the ultimate authority of methodological reason began its reign in the public square. All truth claims admitted to public discourse must be adjudicated by the neutral judge of scientific rationality.

At least two series of events in European history led to this state of affairs. The first was the rise of modern science in the 16th and 17th centuries, which began to unify divergent views of the natural world. As the church, first among Protestants and then by the more powerful Roman Catholic church, challenged the new science, the

4 Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *Christian Philosophy: A Systematic and Narrative Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 65.

5 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

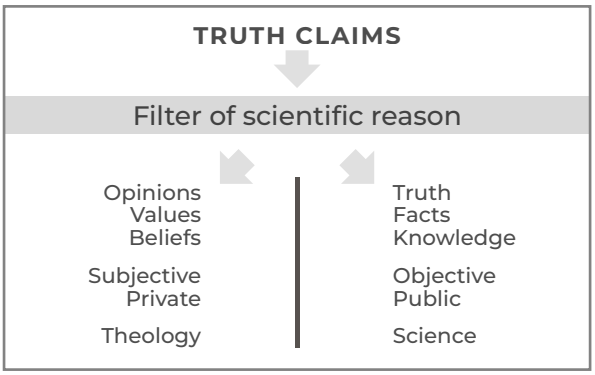
Edvard Munch, *Workers Returning Home* (1920)

Bible increasingly lost credibility among the educated classes of Europe.

The second was the religious wars of the same period between the various confessional factions of the Christian faith. As Europe was soaked with the blood of Christians killing one another over their differing beliefs, many were sickened by the violent spectacle and turned away from the gospel as a message that could provide a unifying centre for public life. As the scientific community was being united by methodological reason, the hope was held that perhaps it could fulfil the same role in the public life of European society. Moreover, one way to avert religious warfare was to relegate the Christian faith to the private square where it could not incite violent claims on public life.

The convergence of these two trends led to growing certainty in the public authority of scientific reason and the loss of confidence in the public authority of biblical faith. The public Christian faith of Christendom gave way to the private Christian faith of the Enlightenment. Scientific rationality no longer remained within the boundary of empirical analysis but was now tasked to create a new world. Out of this soil grew the public-private dichotomy. And the language of public carries the deep religious meaning of this dualism.

Perhaps this dichotomy can be diagrammed as follows. All truth claims about the world must be filtered by scientific reason. Those claims that can "pass through" this filter are considered to be objectively true for all people and, therefore, facts that can play a role in shaping public life (right column in diagram below). Such facts are accorded the high epistemological status of knowledge. All the natural and social sciences find their place here. However, all truth claims that cannot be so justified are considered to be subjective opinions that a person might personally value (left column in diagram below). Such opinions cannot be admitted to public discourse but are rightly confined to the private realm. This is simply what we believe, not what we know. Theology is located here.



Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*

This dichotomy is rooted in the idolatry of scientism. In this religious vision, the gospel and the Bible, and all theological reflection on it, are, from the outset, banished from public discourse. They may play no role in forming a just and peaceful society. I may believe what I want about God and the man Jesus, about the world as created by God and human rebellion as the problem, about the nature of human life and culture, about the order of creation and meaning of salvation, and all else the Bible reveals. But these beliefs are to remain firmly locked within my own private life and have no legitimate place in medicine, labour negotiations, public policy or the public school curriculum.

The language of "public" challenges this dichotomy and the religious vision of scientific humanism that upholds it. It says that God is the creator of all things, that he gave the creation mandate and governs the course of cultural development in history, that conforming our cultural and societal development to the wisdom of his created order brings blessing, and that sin is at root idolatry that creates unjust systems which shape all of public life, and that the good news is about God's restoration of the whole of human life, including the public square, from human idolatry. If true, all of this, and much more, has important implications for public life. If the gospel is true, our mission must be to proclaim and embody the public claims of Jesus even amidst a hostile world with contrary assumptions. Public theology can be a significant ally in equipping and enabling the church to fulfil its task.

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