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11-25-2015

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### Recommended Citation

Juma, Florence (2015) "Public Theology in the face of pain and suffering: A proletarian perspective," *Consensus*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 2 , Article 6. Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol36/iss2/6>

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## Public Theology in the face of pain and suffering: A proletarian perspective

Florence Juma\*

### Introduction

A basic understanding of theology is the quest for knowledge of the Divine—the study of God.<sup>1</sup> But why, one may ask, undertake such an endeavour, and to what end? My simple response would be, to know God is to enhance and enrich my life and service. To know God is to understand His creation – humanity and, the created context. I practice theology to learn more about God and His creation. In the process, that knowledge serves to improve my professional practice as a spiritual care provider in a public health institution. Thus, originates the burden of this task – the implication of doing theology in a public domain. My hope is to reflect on the implications of my professional practice as a spiritual care provider engaging in theological discourse in a public health institution. I'll attempt a discussion of the implications of public theology in a specific context – public health institution, employing a specific approach. By its nature, public theology may serve as a medium through which all the other branches of theology interact with the other disciplines and seek to promote the idea of individuals living out their spiritual values and beliefs for the good of the general public.<sup>2</sup> This can be applied in any field including, educational, social, health, political, and/or religious institutions, whether public or private. Public theology may vary depending on the context and practitioners at any given time and place, but have similar goals. Before getting to how I practice theology publicly, I'll first discuss my understanding of the term public theology.

### Public Theology

My engagement in theological discourse publicly precedes my attempts to understand the phrase, public theology. The goal of my theological training was to be equipped for service in the world, not in the church. In the process, communities of faith were formed. Whereas the goal was service, the object of my theology has always been my love for God. That love drives my desire to know God, knowing him points me back to his creation. Mulhall describes this concept using the terminology “divine author and his creations.”<sup>3</sup> Erickson's definition of theology<sup>4</sup> – the study or science of God – also implies this idea of what may be termed a down to earth theology in touch with contemporary life. Erickson expands on his definition stating that theology is:

That discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrine of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom and related to issues of life.<sup>5</sup>

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Erickson's definition underscore the argument that the two pursuits of knowing and serving God do not happen in isolation, they happen within a community. It is a relational pursuit. As Moltmann also observes "knowledge and community are mutually related,"<sup>6</sup> while Ramsay refers to "the significance of the community in care giving". As a community, we engage in theology to inform our service to another for the sake of God.<sup>7</sup> Thus for me, theology has never been a private endeavor, it has always been as public as my profession – the helping relationship.

A helping relationship modelled after the divine-human relationship. It is a self-emptying relationship that sets stage for theological dialogue to form communities. On the subject of God's love as a basis for thriving human relationships, Sremac posits that "theologically, this means that all human beings are called to participate and respond to God's creative and redemptive project of love...love is the most intimate way to encounter the Sacred and experience spiritual transformation."<sup>8</sup> Therapeutic encounters that are driven by divine love and concern for others may foster environments that encourage others to engage in theological discourse as lives intersect both personally and professionally in the public sphere. This involves ongoing dialogue to uncover parallel narratives as starting points in public theology. In my situation, engaging in public theology is not just a requirement of my position; it aligns with my identity and calling in life. My quest in theology serves me well in my efforts at understanding and enhancing humanity—creation. It just happens to be in the public sphere. In an ideal situation, knowing God would draw us to knowing others which leads to forming sacred relationships of trust be it within faith communities or elsewhere.

Thiemann captures a similar understanding when he states that: "public theology is faith seeking to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives."<sup>9</sup> Ramsay's definition however, indicates that public theology has evolved from practical theology. In her definition, Ramsay argues that the "redefinition of pastoral theology as public theology also means new delineation of pastoral care's central functions."<sup>10</sup>

This may be understood to mean that one branch of theology was rebranded as public theology. In my understanding, it is more that practical theology finds expression, not replacement in public theology. The discourse on public theology, like pastoral theology, tends to be contextual.<sup>11</sup> It arises out of and is influenced by contemporary religious, socioeconomic, cultural and/or political factors. Much as the pluralistic nature of our contemporary world presents a portrait for the pursuit of a global unity that seeks to rally around specific unifying causes like, politics, environment, education, healthcare and economics there is no denying that the global context is formed by local communities with unique histories that interact with these global issues on different levels. In the process, these localized histories translate into unique narratives that unite the local communities and influence their interaction in the global context in specific ways. This would mean that public theology may look different depending on both the local and global context of the given narratives. Lartey used the term "internationalization" in his discussion of the three major processes that characterized the development of pastoral care and counseling globally.<sup>12</sup> Byron Williams also presents an argument for public theology in USA, stating that

Public theology is concerned with how the Christian faith addresses matters in society at large. It is concerned with the “public relevance” of Christian beliefs and doctrines. Theology is a perennial contextual enterprise.<sup>13</sup>

Williams proceeds to pose the question asking: “How is God interfacing with the human condition of the moment?” in response to his question, Williams argues that a “theology unable to meet this challenge may be useless in the pursuit of affecting human transformation.”<sup>14</sup> His argument may be considered rather harsh by some. However, Williams writes to address the church’s response to human pain and suffering of a different kind – poverty. His discussions are taken from specific issues within the United States context. In some circumstances however, issues that influence theology in the West have proven to have ripple effects globally. Williams conclude that his paper is but a starting point of a discussion that allows “room for others who may not embrace the theology that spawned the document at the micro level but support the macro objectives.”<sup>15</sup>

My attempt at defining public theology is augmented by the works consulted above and informed by my specific context, which is spiritual care in a health care setting. A definition of public theology in my context then, is engaging with others of diverse faith traditions and religious groups in spiritual discourse so as to make sense of our common situations and identify divine interventions. Our common situation is the place of pain and suffering, marked by diverse health challenges that tend to plague humanity equally despite their religious affiliation or the lack thereof. At the basic level, human beings are needy beings whose longings are met by the divine being.

I’m approaching this paper from a specific perspective. A perspective formed and influenced by a specific Christian faith tradition. My early theological understanding was formed within the Pentecostal faith tradition in the African context. I am a relatively recent immigrant, living and serving in Canada both within the congregation and in the wider community. Whereas my spiritual formation is grounded in African expression of faith and worship, my graduate and post-graduate education occurred within an ecumenical context, and to some extent, with a North American flavour. My professional journey spans three countries, Kenya, South Africa and Canada. Currently, I’m a spiritual care professional in a public health institution and an associate professional faculty of spiritual care and psychotherapy in a public Seminary. The above framework informs my theological understanding and practice. The following section is a description of my understanding of public theology as it relates to my professional context.

## **Public Theology in the Professional Context**

The admonition in the Christian Scriptures to: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself” (Lk 10:27 NIV) is the basis of my life and work, both in personal and professional. The significance of this Scripture is the impetus for my involvement in the helping profession. I value and uphold all relationships from God’s perspective. One may rightly ask: what exactly is that perspective? What is God’s perspective and how does one know when one is perceiving life from that perspective? The

simple response is *theology* – faith seeking understanding.<sup>16</sup> I go through life never settling for the state of unknowing, always seeking to understand more clearly.

The premise that human beings are creations of God is the framework of my theological quest. My Christian faith is grounded in the teaching, among others, that humans are created in the image of God. My quest in knowing God leads to and is tied in the desire to love and serve Him. Loving others as oneself is a mandate that ties in well with my professional duty. In my work, I am honoured with the sacred duty of upholding human dignity at a most vulnerable state. Loving and caring for others is an extension of loving and serving God. Serving others involves journeying with them in our mutual quest for knowing God – doing theology with them in the public arena. As I encounter others in the health care setting, be they fellow care givers or care seekers, we engage in public theology through narrative.

Our individual theologies intersect through narratives; consequently, those narratives leave prints on our lives both on a personal and professional level. The care receiver's and my fellow care giver's personal lives dissects my professional life. I work in a public health institution as a spiritual care specialist. My work involves, and to some degree, requires engaging in theological discourse with others. In spiritual care-giving, I seek to create a safe environment that encourage others to explore and express their spirituality and understanding of religion, share their experiences, and explore other options – engage in theological discourse. Care receiver's lives and stories tend to take peculiar turns during adverse health situations. Their spiritual needs don't necessarily wither when physical needs come to the fore. If anything, many people tend to have deep spiritual and theological reflections when faced with challenging physical quandary. As a spiritual care-giver, I meet with care receivers at some of their most vulnerable times. In those somber moments, and with their invitation, I attempt to create supportive environments for spiritual discourse. The endeavour is to initiate dialogues that invite others to engage in what may be considered sacred and spiritual in an attempt of making sense of adverse situations.

Spiritual health and wellness does not necessarily depend on physical health and wellness, however, the two may impact each other. Spiritual care is an attempt to address the impact that the illness could be having on an individual's spiritual wellbeing, or the influence of their spirituality on their health. Whatever the faith tradition, religious affiliation or belief practices of a client/patient, spiritual care-giving serve to provide or enhance an environment conducive to relevant and effective spiritual discourse. Ramsay expounds on this same thought when she notes that “a great deal has happened in healthcare to propel pastoral care and counselling into public theology.<sup>17</sup> My profession benefits from the research output of many models of spiritual care and counselling that have improved the field.

In my context therefore, public theology means engaging outward—in my profession and in the public realm – that which I believe in and practice inward (privately). It is interpreting and living my theological beliefs and values in the public realm. Theology isn't just an academic exercise—knowing for the sake of knowing. The hope is that it is a transformative experience, the knowledge that can potentially influence my life and practice for the better. This cannot happen in a vacuum, postmodern approach to life and practice promotes an environment where all voices can be heard. My theological and professional training has equipped me for service in this very context. It forms the bedrock

of my practice, and informs what I do and shapes how I do it. From this perspective, public theology can be a personal faith experience lived out in the public domain for the good of all. The pursuit of knowing God (theology) moves the seeker to a better understanding of humans—as creations of God. This stance is expected to further foster experiential learning. The theology that under-girds my spiritual care practice is based on the understanding which esteems humans as created in the image of God. I proceed under the assumption that the same humans have the potential to be, or are currently in an active relationship with their God. From the Christian faith tradition, grace is the component that makes this relationship possible. The plausibility of this theory rests on the complex nature of human beings – a disposition of spirit, soul/mind and body. As spiritual beings, or creatures of their God, humans are capable of knowing and having a relationship with God/the Sacred either within their particular religious tradition or even outside of such a tradition.<sup>18</sup> Frankl also explains that “[Human] beings are unique. Each person is at the focus of an absolutely unique confluence of physical and spiritual currents which define the individual as completely and absolutely distinct from all other human beings.”<sup>19</sup> Personality traits are deemed to reside in the soul, however, the spirit is what enables humanity to perceive spiritual reality and respond to spiritual stimuli. In his summary on the doctrine of humanity, Erickson states that:

The universality of the human means that there is a dignity to being human...We should not be disdainful of any human being. They are all something beautiful even though they are distortions of what God originally intended humankind to be. The potential to likeness to the creator is there...The universality of the image also means that all persons have points of sensitivity to spiritual things.<sup>20</sup>

To successfully proceed with this discussion, it will be prudent to explain my understanding of the two terms, religion and spirituality. These two terms have sometimes been used interchangeably, though they represent two different constructs. There are differences and similarities that make them both distinct and identical, as defined by various authors.<sup>21</sup> Hill and Pargament break it down to belief systems for religion and feelings of closeness for spirituality.<sup>22</sup> McBrien on the other hand, gave an earlier definition that captured the interrelationship between spirituality and religion in when he writes that religion is:

...the whole complexus of attitudes, convictions, emotions, gestures, rituals, symbols, beliefs, and institutions by which persons come to terms with, and express, their personal and/or communal relationship with the ultimate reality (God and everything that pertains to God).<sup>23</sup>

McBrien’s definition of religion seems to effectively include spiritual components making it is in line with my premise of the possibility of a relationship between human beings and the Divine Being. His definition seems to address both the abstract aspect and the concrete. The complexity of humans allow for a relationship or communion with the Creator. Others note that “many people experience their spirituality in the context of religion, but not all do.”<sup>24</sup> Finally, Stempsey presents an argument for religion when he presents “empirical data from both the United States and Europe show[ing] that despite

increasing secularization in the most developed parts of the world, religion is still important to most people.”<sup>25</sup> All these different definitions help give a broad understanding of the terms. Spirituality, for me, is the essential aspect of humanity that connects us to God and gives life to our beings, and religion is the relevant edifice that holds and seeks to nourish individual or corporate spirituality.

## Theological narratives in the public realm

A client once referred to me as “spiritual lady.” I supposed that to be her understanding of my role within the health care setting – spiritual care provider. Understanding the nature and role of spiritual care in a public domain seems to be an elusive and sometimes abstruse task for most health care professionals. This situation can be equally complex, if not puzzling for care receivers. Most people make connections with notable religious figures and/or symbols in their context to understand what spiritual care professionals do in what may be considered a public domain. Narratives have proven to be an alternative approach in understanding and explaining the role of engaging in theology with others in public. It’s a viable option for the goal of creating space for people to share their stories as equal partners.<sup>26</sup> Narrative approach provides a gentler, more person oriented and facilitative angle to describing individual spirituality and engaging in public theology. It can propel the efforts of practitioners towards the goal of engaging the wider, spiritually diverse community in doing public theology. In her book *“Uncovering spiritual narratives,”* Coyle elaborates on this approach from a pastoral care perspective noting that this “broad narrative methodology focuses on how the telling of a life story and application of that story can aid in faith development and understandings of Christian beliefs.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, this approach is not only limited to a pastoral care or Christian context. It may also be applied by a Christian practitioner in a public religiously diverse context. Outlining the benefit of narrative approach in pastoral care, Coyle further points out that:

Pastoral care speaks through different words, dialects, and languages. It listens in various life transitions, difference places, and unique ministries of care. Yet it shares the common shape of story. Story has many different plots. The meaning that is conveyed through acts of pastoral care has the power to deepen. Discovering a story that is part of one’s fabric of spiritual narratives can deepen faith more than pastoral care that does not explore such stories. We now turn our attention to the task of uncovering those spiritual narratives.<sup>28</sup>

Doak on the other hand, highlights the potential setback in such an endeavour when she describes a political context.<sup>29</sup> She states that “the first problem, that of defining and defending a public role for theological discourse in a religiously pluralistic society, is quite complicated and increasingly contentious.”<sup>30</sup> The political scene, as portrayed by Doak, seems to be faced with challenges when it comes to accommodating divergent religious or theological discourse within its ranks. Understandably, politics by its very nature tends to assume a cynical if not combative stance to everything ideological. As such, it is most likely to expect that religious beliefs and/or theological discourse would suffer casualties with any approach and not just the narrative approach. Much as Doak’s caution is understood from the specific perspective that she is addressing, my experience in the healthcare

context has proven an openness to theological discourse, in part because, spirituality and religion comes as long standing equal partners in search for effective therapeutic interventions for care-seekers. It is worth noting that Doak expressed hope, however, when she applauded narrative as an effective approach in addressing issues raised because, as she contends “narrative is the form in which historical identity and direction are imagined, and because narratives compromise a whole out of particular events and characters without denying their individuality.”<sup>31</sup>

Narrative is not without its limitations, and much as it may not exclusively present a lasting solution to the challenge of pluralism in any given context, its potential in enhancing the understanding of each other’s stories seems to have potential. One of the realities of the theory of paradigm shifts is that in Christianity, paradigm shifts are not total replacements of the old beliefs, values or approaches but, may be described as a new or enhanced understanding of the teachings or practices from their previous understanding.<sup>32</sup> In the same vein, narrative may not necessary be applicable or effective in all contexts at all times. However, when engaging the public community in theological discourse in specific contexts, like the health care environment, it has proven to be effective. The health care context has demonstrated a need for incorporating spiritual and theological discourse as part of a holistic approach to healing. I espouse narrative as an approach that, combined with other relevant approaches, may serve as a platform that has potential to create room for sharing of multiple stories to map similarities and differences for enhanced understanding. Concerning the possibility that narratives may lead to better understanding and clarification of diverging points, Mulhall states:

The Christian narrative option thus leads naturally to a fundamentally dialogic understanding of character and so of personal identity, insofar as one central mode in which one closes oneself off to contingency and alteration is by closing oneself off from others. To enter into conversation is to enter into openness not simply because it acknowledges others as part of a world that exists and is at work outside our control, but more specifically insofar as it opens us to the possibility of being surprised by something another may say—whether about us or about whatever it is that concerns us in our conversation. Even if what surprises us is something we take to be a misunderstanding of what we said and did, we can either reject it at such and return to our starting points or take responsibility for the misrecognition and explore the options for expressing ourselves that we did not take, and thus the unnoticed element in ourselves that we have ignored—areas of ourselves that have been hidden or alien or simply not worked through. And what applies to us applies to the other: acknowledging that I misspeak myself prompts me to allow time for the probing of another’s misspeaking, as opposed that the words I am confronted with represent utterly self-sufficient and internally coherent closure.<sup>33</sup>

Moltmann, on the other hand, has an interesting interaction with R. D. Kaplan about knowing of the other. He addresses himself to the apparent challenge that many encounter in a diverse context. How do you live with the contention of conflicting beliefs when one is expected to enter into sacred conversations with others of different faith? Moltmann contends:



If our organs of perception encounter something like, something familiar, or something that already corresponds to ourselves, we feel endorsed, and that is pleasing to our senses. If our organs of perception encounter something different, strange or new, then the initial effect is pain. We feel the resistance of the alien. We feel the contradiction of the other. We sense the claim of the new. The pain shows us that we must open ourselves, in order to take in the other, the alien and the new.<sup>34</sup>

In theological narratives, there is potential for discomfort when the encounter is between two unlikely individuals. This is what Moltmann describes as the other. He observes that it is in knowing the other, that a community is created. My support of employing the narrative approach to allow for an environment conducive to spiritual care in a pluralistic context is made with recognition that there can be a tension when it comes to the one end of Absolute truth of the Gospel and the other end of having meaningful theological discourse in a pluralistic context. How can I be both authentic to my Christian convictions and advocate for a space that help others with differing, even conflicting convictions to engage in a theological discourse? Can there be room for “both” and “and” or is there room only for “one” or the “other”? In my professional context, I encourage the possibility of co-existence without compromising the authenticity of my beliefs. In his piece on “*Considering Absolute Truth*”, an Editorial in the “*Journal of Research on Christian Education*”, Furst summarizes his stance on the subject stating: “I am still an absolutist. Yet I am also willing to acknowledge that I have much more to learn about absolute truth before I know all that God would have me know.”<sup>35</sup> Unlike Moltmann’s proposal of changing oneself in order to be like and understand the other, my position would be that we do not need to change and be like the other to understand the other.<sup>36</sup> We seek to accept the difference and co-exist with it. Difference may be experienced even within one religious group with different faith traditions. There are differences in doctrine and interpretations even within the Christian faith. My acceptance of the other and attempts to create room for dialogue with the other, does not take away or minimize my stance and faith practice. If anything, it serves to solidify my position by the knowledge gained from understanding the other better.

In the previous section, I discussed some of the widespread definitions and understandings of the terms spirituality and religion. The terms can and have sometimes been used interchangeably because of their interconnecting nature. The abstract nature of spirituality makes it challenging to define even when one has a reasonable grasp of the concept. However, when engaging in theology in the public realm, some faith specific terminology and concepts can be misconstrued. Such concepts may mean one thing in their primary context but understood otherwise in a different context. A narrative approach as opposed to a philosophical discourse may prove more effective in describing and/or understanding these terms in the public realm. In some situations, there could be potential conflicting conceptions of the meaning of spirituality or religion in various religious groups. As Lester also notes: “[f]uture stories, as well as past and present stories, are essential in defining a person and in making that person’s being-in-the-world intelligible.”<sup>37</sup> In a similar note, Sremac purports that “without memory, we would be lost and our experience would have no coherence at all. It has been argued that narrative identity has roots in past stories that need to be recollected, reconfigured, and incorporated into a coherent self-narrative.”<sup>38</sup>

Employing a narrative language seems to allow simplicity in theological dialogue, through reflection on experiences rather than on abstract constructs.<sup>39</sup> This may help clarify the difference between the institutional aspect—religion and the individual experiential component—spirituality. Theological narrative can also be an intentional act of engaging in a process of knowing God or talking about the Sacred with others. Meylahn explains Muller’s approach in post foundational practical theology stating that the focus is: “describing and interpreting theory laden practices through interdisciplinary conversations.”<sup>40</sup> Ward and Campbell analyze a study of public worship events among youth to better understand “how ordinary theology is structured around clusters of metaphors or narratives.”<sup>41</sup> Their study revealed a potential benefit to practical theology brought about by the study of narrative and flow of worship which they say, may “help reveal new aspects of construction and flow of ordinary theology for evangelical and charismatic groups.”<sup>42</sup>

Therapeutic story telling is a distinct intervention prevalent in pre-modern approaches to healing within many African contexts where I attained most of my spiritual formation and theological training as described above. In that context, the sacred intertwined with the secular in all aspects of life, but more importantly for therapeutic purposes. That particular grounding and my denominational affiliation, does account, to a large extent, for my degree of comfort in engaging in public theology. Addressing pastoral theologians, Coyle describes this stance as a “minister’s personal and spiritual presence is the first stance of being a storyteller of hope.”<sup>43</sup> Townsend also describes a similar approach in his discussion on “transformational conversations” when referring to Jesus’ ministry with small or large groups.<sup>44</sup> It’s an approach that blends well with my spiritual formation and faith. The formation and journey is a blend of the African expression of faith and worship that blossomed in the Charismatic movement. This grounding and formation is also a major contributor to my current narrative approach as a vehicle in public theology. Whereas I do not consider myself an intellectual, I however, do engage in theology for personal development and professional competence.

The narrative approach to public theology tends to stand out in my profession where sharing the experiences that bring meaning to life and define our understanding of spirituality is a viable therapeutic intervention. It enables for the assessment of spiritual care by listening to and analyzing those stories to find common threads and points of entrance. Coyle applauds her work as landmark in North America when she writes that “I believe this book uses the collective narrative approach for the first time in North American pastoral care and ministry.”<sup>45</sup> Coyle posit that “this methodology honors, in many ways, the increasing bent of pastoral theology to practice a public theology that opens itself to multiple disciplines beyond the behavioural sciences.”<sup>46</sup> Narratives illustrate the ways that people embody values and beliefs in daily practices. In exploring these narratives,” Doehring claims, “caregivers can listen for underlying emotions that might point to a constellation of values, beliefs, and practices that make emotional/spiritual care.”<sup>47</sup> In most cases people will identify themselves as having a personal faith, spirituality or even, some personal convictions about the sacred; and many more may identify a connection to particular religious tradition. Encouraging a supportive environment for narratives may enable people to reflect on these convictions and beliefs to access the resources that these practices offer in time of need. Whereas, the pastoral theologian provides supportive care and counseling from specific faith tradition – the faith tradition of both the care provider

and care receiver, the public theologian provides spiritually integrated care and psychotherapy informed by a broader theological knowledge base beyond his or her specific faith tradition and also including behavioural sciences. Coyle makes a key observation stating that “the way in which the story teller encounters God’s voice is critically important to how the spiritual narrative is experienced, told, and retold.”<sup>48</sup>

What may be considered a positive grounding in faith is likely to give the practitioner a base from which to operate. A broader and deeper base is likely to provide a more solid and versatile resource. Doing theology in the public domain may also enable the practitioner an opportunity to clarify his or her faith and convictions in a pluralistic context. Living out one’s theological convictions and beliefs, and providing care that is supported by the same theology and convictions can be both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is in seeking to maintain a helpful balance between one’s personal convictions and those encountered in therapeutic relationships. And, the opportunity for continuing reflection on the very theology that one holds dear. In turn, such reflections may lead to clarity and objective analysis that creates room for a deepening of the same faith. Given that what I do stems from who I am, my identity is clarified and finely defined in the process of my work. Listening to and sharing in stories of others about their God and spiritual experiences may help expand our horizon in public theology.

Stackhouse argues that public theology has the task of engaging in public dialogue on ethical issues. He states:

The Judeo-Christian tradition offers two deeply rooted Biblical themes that undergird the “principled pluralism” that presses society toward the kind of democracy that is the necessary supplement to the idea of the image of God, on which human rights rest, and to the idea of vocation, on which professional integrity reels. These are the recognition of sin and the possibility of covenant.<sup>49</sup>

Spiritual narratives, as previously defined, are those stories in one’s life that give spiritual meaning through either an explicit belief system or an implicit spirituality that gives rise to spiritual beliefs and enhance meaning to life. They touch the vulnerable spirit of a care-receiver. This public theology and the narrative approach that gives it the momentum in the public domain also stems from the Revelation.

## **Revelation as a basis for public theology**

From the standpoint that theology is the study of God and based on the understanding that we only know that which is revealed, my spiritual care in the public realm is driven to engage in narratives as informed by the Revelation. Revelation is understood to be the act of God, entering the human sphere to reveal himself and commune with His creation.<sup>50</sup> In a previous study on the history of the Assemblies of God Church in Kenya, Juma asserts that “God is above history, but also present in history taking the initiative to reveal Himself to [hu] mankind.”<sup>51</sup> Revelation also, presumes communication with another or others – thus a community. Moltmann posits that knowledge enhances community. The process of knowing God, whom he refers to as the Other and knowing others whom we do not know well, helps build community. He elaborates that “in order to know one another we have to come closer to one another make contact with one another

and form relationships”<sup>52</sup> with each other. Knowing more about God and His creation serves to solidify relationships both with Him and those we serve. But our knowledge can be limited. How we know and what we know is limited by our humanness. Fowler explains that the “human act of knowing, even though it is a knowing of what is revealed with divine authority, is a creaturely act that carries with it a creaturely authority, never a divine authority. In response to God's Revelation,” states Fowler, “man formulates doctrines, values, and/or statements of faith.”<sup>53</sup> Our understanding and interpretation of Revelation does sometimes reflect contextual factors.

The Sacred Texts include the human response to the Revelation. Concerning the phenomenon of Christianity and the theory of paradigm shifts, Juma maintains that “biblical principles [do not necessarily] change, however, their application may reflect contextual differences” at any given point in history. In her analyses, Juma elaborates that the Revelation contained in the Christian Scriptures took place in a period of time and focused on different aspects, which together make a complete whole. She makes this argument to demonstrate that the main subject of God's Revelation has always been reconciling humanity to Himself, however, the means and lessons learned each time can be contextual.<sup>54</sup> Furst's assertion that: “the revelation of God to His created beings has taken place over time and we still have much to learn by keeping our hearts open to the influence of His Spirit.”<sup>55</sup> also echoes this thought. In his classic works on the theories of paradigm shifts, Kung also observe that:

Christian theology . . . is not only connected to the present and the future. It is also not only, oriented to tradition. . . . it is in a quite specific sense oriented to its origins: The original event in the history of Israel and of Jesus Christ, and hence the primal testimony, the old and New Testament documents, remains for it not just the historical beginning of Christian faith, but at the same time its continual reflexive point.<sup>56</sup>

The human ability to know may be limited when it comes to understanding Revelation. In interpreting the Sacred Texts, it is possible for different faith traditions, or theologians from different eras to emphasize specific aspects based on situational contexts but this does not mean that the message of the Revelation can or has changed; it is the “knowing” aspect of it. It helps explain the aspect of human limitations in understanding the Revelation.

This Revelation was not only given over a period of time, but also in narrative form. Concerning this delivery Fowler makes a contention that is worth noting, writing that Scripture is “the Word of God where, in and through human words, God reveals himself as the Creator/Redeemer, calling us to covenant partnership with himself.”<sup>57</sup> Having encountered God through His narratives with humanity, I seek to help others encounter to better know and understand God. We engage in theological narratives that enhance our knowing and inform the therapeutic relationships. Thiemann observe that the “Modern theologians have relied heavily upon images of light and vision in order to express God's illuminating self-disclosure in revelation.”<sup>58</sup> As much as these images have served the theological community well, it may be interesting to see how bringing in the imagery of narrative may broaden the understanding of Revelation.

## Conclusion

Theology as the study of God may transpire in what may be described as a sacred or secular space; at a private or public sphere, or, in a personal or professional context. The one thing that seems consistent is that theology happens for the purpose of solidifying relationships with God and humanity and for the improvement of human race. Public theology may take different forms for different people, based on their specific contexts. In my context as a spiritual care provider in a public health institution, it involves bringing to the public sphere what I believe and practice in private. This is consistent with who I am as a woman of faith, a believer in God the creator and in Christ my saviour; it is a fulfillment of my desire to know, love and serve God and His creation with all that I am and have. It just means that my private context is expanded to include and create an environment where others can join in and share their sacred stories. The Word of God unfolds as a narrative, revealed within relationships and includes human response to that Revelation. Having been socially grounded in a context that was partly formed and informed by oral tradition and spiritually rooted in a tradition that thrives in theological narratives, I engage in public theology with the ease, mostly due to these two realities. In the process of sharing our stories, we may identify aspects of the stories that intersect. I listen to those spiritual and/or theological stories of others to make meaning of our shared experiences and shed some light to our mutual situations.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J Erickson, *Christian theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983); Emmanuel Y. Lartey, "Globalization, Internationalization, and Indigenization of Pastoral Care and Counseling," in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy J Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004); Hans W Frei, *Theology and Narrative Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Meylahn, Johann-Albrecht, "Postfoundational Practical Theology as Public Christology," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no. 2 (2014): 1–11.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Mulhall, "Theology and Narrative: The Self, the Novel, the Bible," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69, no. 1 (2011): 37, doi:10.1007/s1153-010-9234-9.

<sup>4</sup> Erickson, *Christian theology*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Srdjan Sremac, "Faith, Hope and Love: A Narrative Theological Analysis of Recovering Drug Addicts' Conversion Testimonies," *Practical Theology* 7, no. 1 (2014): 34–49; Lartey, "Globalization, Internationalization, and Indigenization of Pastoral Care and Counseling."

<sup>8</sup> Sremac, "Faith, Hope and Love: A Narrative Theological Analysis of Recovering Drug Addicts' Conversion Testimonies," 43.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Dafydd Jones, "Ronald Thiemann's Theologia Crucis and the Task of Public Theology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 30, no. 1 (2014): 19–32.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy J Ramsay, ed., *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 62. Ramsay discusses the functions of pastoral care as listed by various authors to include: healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling as key, but includes the newer list from the last decade as including resisting, empowering and liberating.

- <sup>11</sup> Lartey, "Globalization, Internationalization, and Indigenization of Pastoral Care and Counseling."
- <sup>12</sup> Ramsay, *Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 88.
- <sup>13</sup> Byron Williams, "Prophetic Public Theology," *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 2 (2014): 159, doi:10.1177/0034637314525008.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.
- <sup>16</sup> Meylahn, Johann-Albrecht, "Postfoundational Practical Theology as Public Christology."
- <sup>17</sup> Ramsay, *Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 58. Ramsay gives the example of a span of ten years that saw pastoral care and counseling rise to a place of prominence in the US health policy and activities. She notes that the appreciation of pastoral counseling and AAPC by the wider public due to its recognition of diversity and its efforts to inform rather than convert the public to any particular Christian position.
- <sup>18</sup> Meylahn, Johann-Albrecht, "Postfoundational Practical Theology as Public Christology," 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Melvin Kimble, *Viktor Frankl's Contribution to Spirituality and Aging* (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2000), 10.
- <sup>20</sup> Erickson, *Christian theology*, 535.
- <sup>21</sup> Everett L. Worthington et al., "Religion and Spirituality," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 67, no. 2 (2011): 204–14, doi:10.1002/jclp.20760; Kenneth I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007); Peter C. Hill and Kenneth I. Pargament, "Advances in the Conceptualization and Measurement of Religion and Spirituality: Implications for Physical and Mental Health Research," *American Psychologist* 58, no. 1 May-June (2003): 64–74, doi:10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.64; Harold G Koenig, Michael E McCullough, and David B Larson, *Handbook of Religion and Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Meylahn, Johann-Albrecht, "Postfoundational Practical Theology as Public Christology."
- <sup>22</sup> Hill and Pargament, "Advances in the Conceptualization and Measurement of Religion and Spirituality."
- <sup>23</sup> Meylahn, Johann-Albrecht, "Postfoundational Practical Theology as Public Christology," 11.
- <sup>24</sup> Worthington et al., "Religion and Spirituality."
- <sup>25</sup> William E. Stempsey, "The Role of Religion in the Debate about Physician-Assisted Dying," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 13, no. 4 (July 21, 2010): 383, doi:10.1007/s11019-010-9267-y.
- <sup>26</sup> Suzanne M Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives: Using Story in Pastoral Care and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); Meylahn, Johann-Albrecht, "Postfoundational Practical Theology as Public Christology."
- <sup>27</sup> Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives*, 3.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 34.
- <sup>29</sup> Mary Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10579059>.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>32</sup> 1. Florence Akumu Juma and J M Vorster, "Küng's Theory of Paradigms in Church History: An Evaluation," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 24, no. 2 (1998): 116–30. Juma argues based on Kung's discussion of essence and centre of Christianity when she posits that, unlike other religions, Christianity is unique and an attempt to "re-narrativize" its story that embodies both this essence and centre may require much more than what the theory of paradigm shifts can offer.
- <sup>33</sup> Mulhall, "Theology and Narrative," 37.
- <sup>34</sup> Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 144.
- <sup>35</sup> Lyndon G. Furst, "Considering Absolute Truth," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 13, no. 1 (2004): 3, doi:10.1080/10656210409484956.
- <sup>36</sup> Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 145.
- <sup>37</sup> Andrew D Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 18.
- <sup>38</sup> Sremac, "Faith, Hope and Love: A Narrative Theological Analysis of Recovering Drug Addicts' Conversion Testimonies," 39.
- <sup>39</sup> Pete Ward and Heidi Campbell, "Ordinary Theology as Narratives: An Empirical Study of Young People's Charismatic Worship in Scotland," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 15, no. 2 (2011): 226–42, doi:10.1515/IJPT.2011.035.
- <sup>40</sup> Meylahn, Johann-Albrecht, "Postfoundational Practical Theology as Public Christology," 2.

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- <sup>41</sup> Ward and Campbell, "Ordinary Theology as Narratives," 241.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 242.
- <sup>43</sup> Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives*, 36.
- <sup>44</sup> Loren L. Townsend, *Introduction to Pastoral Counseling* (Abingdon Press, 2009), 4.
- <sup>45</sup> Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives*, 1.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>47</sup> Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 5.
- <sup>48</sup> Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives*, 34.
- <sup>49</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, "Public Theology and Democracy's Future," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (2009): 53–54, doi:10.1080/15570274.2009.9523393.
- <sup>50</sup> Stuart Fowler, *A Christian Voice among Students and Scholars* (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1991).
- <sup>51</sup> Juma, "The growth of the Assemblies of God Church in Kenya, 1969-1999," 41.
- <sup>52</sup> Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 135.
- <sup>53</sup> Fowler, *A Christian Voice among Students and Scholars*, 30.
- <sup>54</sup> Juma, "The growth of the Assemblies of God Church in Kenya, 1969-1999," 42.
- <sup>55</sup> Furst, "Considering Absolute Truth," 2.
- <sup>56</sup> Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 156.
- <sup>57</sup> Fowler, *A Christian Voice among Students and Scholars*, 30.
- <sup>58</sup> Ronald F Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 49.