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The ordinary and the mystical? Exploring the intersections of Spirituality and Public Theology

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This article starts from the premise that the ordinary is the mystical. It does so by delving into the dynamic relationship between Spirituality and Public Theology against the backdrop of Christianity's societal roles. It explores how Christian theology extends beyond private faith to address broad societal issues. Through a critical examination of Public Theology's distinct contributions to contemporary discussions, the article emphasises the necessity of engaging Spirituality – with its focus on the divine-human relationship into this discourse.

Contribution: This synthesis aims to enrich our comprehension of Christianity's impact on public life, advocating for a faith that actively contributes to societal transformation across diverse contexts.

Keywords: Spirituality; Public Theology; mystical; ordinary spirituality; stranger; hospitality.

Introduction

The intersections of Spirituality and Public Theology represent fertile ground for exploring the multifaceted role of varying forms of the Christian faith in the public sphere. While it might seem obvious that these fields overlap (Public Theology and Spirituality), this article delves deeper into the unique contributions that each can make to the other. Public Theology, with its emphasis on engaging societal issues through a theological lens, and Spirituality, focused on the divine-human relationship, together provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of faith's role in public life. This synthesis is not merely theoretical; it offers practical frameworks for addressing contemporary societal challenges through a spiritually informed public engagement.

By critically examining how Spirituality can inform Public Theology, this paper highlights the transformative potential of integrating personal spiritual practices with public theological discourse. This is based on a conviction in much of spirituality research, that the ordinary is the mystical. We will return to this concept in the article. We argue that the integration of Spirituality and Public Theology not only enhances theological scholarship but also provides a robust foundation for lived faith. Through this dialogue, we can uncover new ways to approach issues of justice, peace and ecological care, demonstrating the profound public implications of spiritual practices in relation to matters of public concern.

The concept of Public Theology emerged as a critical framework for understanding this engagement, offering a nuanced approach to the theological underpinnings of Christian public action. Unlike a simplistic conflation of all theological endeavours with public implications, Public Theology is presented as a distinct paradigm that seeks to articulate and critically engage with the intersections of faith and public life. This distinction is vital, as it allows for a more meaningful exploration of how theology can inform and be informed by the complex realities of contemporary society. Moreover, the emergence of Public Theology as a field of study brings with it a rich tapestry of perspectives, challenging traditional methodologies and encouraging a dialogical approach to theological reflection and action.

At the heart of this discourse lies a deep foundation in Christian Spirituality. Rather than being an esoteric or personal pursuit, Spirituality is understood here as a relational process between humanity and the Divine that has significant public implications. This process is transformational, affecting not only individual self-understanding and ways of life but also societal interactions and engagements. The engagement between Spirituality and Public Theology opens new avenues for understanding the dynamic ways in which faith can influence and be shaped by spiritual living in public life. It invites the Christian community to reflect more deeply on the spiritual underpinnings of our public involvement and to consider how spiritual practices can inform and enrich our engagement with contemporary societal issues.

This article aims to navigate these complex terrains, offering insights into the essence of Public Theology and the critical role of Spirituality in shaping public discourse. It seeks to demonstrate the vital importance of keeping these two fields engaged with one another, not only for the enrichment of theological scholarship but also for the practical outworking of faith in the world. Through an exploration of the historical roots, conceptual frameworks and contemporary challenges of Public Theology and Spirituality, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of their convergence and the transformative potential it holds for Christian engagement in public life.

The emergence of Public Theology as contemporary paradigm in theological research

Kenneth Latourette in his work, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (1971), argues that the narrative development of the Christian faith (theology) is intricately linked to its dissemination across diverse cultures, geographies and contexts. Thus, understanding Christianity and its development requires a socio-historical analysis of Christian individuals and groups in various times and places. Furthermore, it includes the exploration of different faith expressions throughout history, which necessitates a philosophical and theological examination of how novel ideas spurred the formation of movements, communities and distinct expressions of varying forms of Christianity, as well as distinct beliefs and practices. Finally, it considers the reciprocal influence between Christianity (as a socio-cultural phenomenon) and humankind and their broader environment. This involves anthropological, sociological, political, economic and ecological investigation into how communities and their beliefs and practices interacted with and were influenced by cultures, materialities and geographies (Latourette 1971:417–418).

Public Theology, as a paradigm in contemporary academic theological research, is a relatively new field. The first contemporary usages of the concept of a Public Theology (that are akin to how it is understood and used in, for example, the *International Journal for Public Theology* and the *Global Network for Public Theology*) were in the early 1970s (Smit 2013:13–17). Later in this article, we will offer a more detailed explanation of the terms and concepts associated with contemporary Public Theologies.

What this article wishes to offer is reflection on the intersection of two approaches to theological thinking, one ancient (Spirituality) and one relatively new (Public Theology). Out of this reflection we hope to be able to show the importance of linking Spirituality to Public Theological reflection.

On the public intentions of the Christian faith

Rudolf von Sinner, the editor of the *International Journal of Public Theology*, argues that historically, in terms of both Christian identity and Christian mission, Christians are active in public life and deeply concerned about relating the meanings and contributions of Christianity to issues of public concern. Many individual Christians and Christian groupings are committed to what they understand to be the values of the Christian faith such as justice, peace and the flourishing of human and non-human creation. Thus, von Sinner says that Christianity:

> [I]s a public religion in the sense of conveying its message to the wider public, taking an interest in the well-being not only of its members, but also of those who are not part of a church or congregation. (Von Sinner 2014:41)[1]

Nico Koopman further claims that the 'church [and the Christian faith] exists in public, is a part of it and impacts upon it both knowingly and unknowingly' (Koopman 2011:94). To make this point, Koopman asks three questions about the 'public' nature and implications of Christian faith:

> What is the inherent public nature of God's love for the world? How can we understand and articulate the rationality of God's love for the world? What are the meaning and implications of God's love for every facet of life. (Koopman 2010:124)?

In this, we, like Jürgen Moltmann, Wolterstorff and Charry (1998), could conclude that:

> [F]rom the perspective of its origins and its goal, Christian theology is public theology, for it is the theology of the kingdom of God … As such it must engage with the political, cultural, educational, economic and ecological spheres of life, not just with the private and ecclesial spheres. (p. 24)

Public Theology thus seeks to reflect upon and understand the intersections of Christian faith (both beliefs and practices) in relation to public life and the impact of public life and public concerns upon the Christian faith.

What do we mean by the term 'Public Theology'?

Based on the argument in the previous section, one could be forgiven for assuming that the logical conclusion is thus that all theologies are public theology – that is not the case. Indeed, theology, in its varied forms (which include beliefs and practices) are public, but not all theologies are Public Theologies.

The relationship between theory and practice in Public Theology (which is not curtailed to a single discipline – as there are public theologians in Biblical Studies, Church History, Systematic Theology etc.) can, however, be understood through several models used in Practical Theology. These include the See-Judge-Act model, the pastoral circle and the praxis cycle. Public Theology, when linked to spirituality, does not merely theorise but actively engages with real-world issues, informing and being informed by practical actions. In our understanding,

Public Theology should operate within a praxis cycle that includes reflection, action and evaluation. This cycle ensures that theological insights are continuously applied, tested and refined in practical contexts.

Spirituality plays a crucial role in this praxis cycle. It enlightens believers and more formal public theologians to read the signs of the times, illuminates their interpretation of Scripture and tradition and mobilises, guides and sustains their actions. For instance, the contemplative practice of discernment can help theologians and believers understand contemporary social issues in the light of their faith, leading to more informed and impactful public engagements.

The careful reader would have noticed that we have been using upper-case letters when we speak about Public Theology and lower-case letters when speaking about the public nature of theology. The intention is to show that we should not collapse all of the public implications of theology into the emerging field, or 'paradigm', of Public Theology. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there are some critiques of certain 'successionist' approaches to Public Theology, that is, that Public Theology has 'replaced' other dominant and important theologies. The critique is that a successionist view seems to undermine the importance of contextual and unique theological contributions from, for example, feminist theologians, black theologians and African theologians, to name just a few (Forster 2022a:1–9; Maluleke 2021:297–315). Secondly, there is a rich and meaningful debate about the semantic meanings and implications of the term 'public' in the phrase Public Theology.[2] One of the founders of the Global Network for Public Theology, Dirk Smit, characterises the fluidity of the notion of public theology and its usage:

> Those who claim to pursue public theology have widely different views on what they are doing. Many who seemingly engage in doing public theology never use the term at all – and some deliberately choose not to. Those who critique the notion hardly share any consensus on what they are rejecting. Opinions differ. What should be included as public theology? What does not qualify as public theology? Who is actually doing public theology – where, and how? Confusion seems to abound. But does it matter? Does it matter that this growing field, already widespread and popular, has not (yet) developed a definite and normative methodology? (Smit 2017:67)

Given the richness and diversity of understandings of Public Theology in contemporary debates, we seek to differentiate between the 'public' dimensions of theology and Public Theology. Firstly, we point to the 'public' dimensions of all theology, where the word 'public' is an adjective that describes the qualitative contribution of various theologies to the public sphere or issues of public concern. This is a descriptive approach to the role of theology (and Spirituality) in relation to public life. Secondly, we identify 'Public Theology', written with upper-case letters, as it is a noun that names an emerging paradigm in contemporary theology. This is a more prescriptive approach that delimitates a field

of study in which theologians engage around some common interests and debates. Harold Breitenberg suggests that three forms of academic research fit into this categorisation of public theology. Firstly, there is research into the life, work and contributions of certain persons that aims to clarify what they understand public theology to be. Secondly, there are what could be considered methodological research projects that aim to comprehend what public theology is and how it is done. Thirdly, there is 'constructive public theology', which operates from a theologically informed base to engage events, policies, practices, values, beliefs and ideas from a wide range of contexts inside and outside of the Church (Breitenberg 2003:64). Sebastian Kim describes the three forms of research in public theology saying that the 'first two are more to do with developing public theology as a discourse, whereas the last category is to do with the practical application of theology in the public square' (Kim 2013:ix).

In this article, we are not going to engage expressly in the first kind of research (studying, for example, the public relevance of the beliefs and practices of persons such as Desmond Tutu or Dorothy Day). We also will not expressly engage in the third kind of research, 'constructive' Public Theology. To our mind, the ways in which Public Theology often collapses into moral philosophy or theological ethics is only one aspect of the importance and contribution that should come from Public Theological research.

Rather, what we hope to do is show why and how the intersection of research in Spirituality that intersects with research in Public Theology (and vice versa) is of importance for Christian beliefs and practices.

A next step in our argument is to offer some insight into what we mean when we speak of a 'prescribed' approach to Public Theology (in this second sense of the term).

So, while there is no distinct definition or normative approach or method that characterises the varied understandings of public theology in this prescriptive sense, it is precisely the diversity of approaches and understandings that are the most common characteristic of theological reflection and action in this form of 'public theology'. This is an important claim as it clearly limits any attempts at universalising public theology or presenting it as a totalising enterprise. This means that while it will take positions on issues, it is not static, it is not a discipline; it is rather deeply 'inter-contextual' and 'multilingual' in nature (Smit 2017:77–78; Forster 2020:20–21). Dirk Smit explains that Heinrich Bedford-Strohm integrates this in his various roles as academic theologian, bishop and public figure – functioning in the publics of the theological academy, the Christian church and as a public figure in society in general. He notes that Bedford-Strohm:

> [D]escribes this [*aspect of public theology*] as *Sachlichkeit*, which refers to the competence to speak with insight and authority, but therefore also as *Interdisziplinarität*, which refers to the need for public theology always to speak together with other disciplines and fields. (Smit 2017:78)

2.See, for example, Baard 2022:1–17; Forster 2020:15–26, 2022b:11–13; Smit 2007:11–47; Smit 2017:67–94.

Thus, public theology is to be understood as one approach to (theological) reasoning and engagement, rather than a totalising or all-encompassing discipline. It does not usurp the agency, insights or commitments of other fields or those of experts, practitioners or activists in those fields. Neither should it speak on their behalf or 'recast' their voices and contributions in its own terms. Rather, it seeks to remain in dialogue, to learn, to understand and to develop in relation to the richness of theological diversity that operates in each context and across multiple contexts. In this sense, public theology is not the symphony that incorporates all music. However, it does participate, alongside others, in the production of the symphonic performance. This has frequently resulted in public theologies being aligned with the commitments and contributions of movements such as Kairos theologies (Buttelli 2012:90–105; Le Bruyns 2015:460–477), feminist theologies (Burns & Monro 2015; Carbine 2006:433–455; McIntosh 2015:63–74; Mwaura 2015), queer theologies (Burchardt 2013:237–260; Sewapa 2020:281–303; West, Van der Walt & Kaoma 2016:1–8), liberationist theologies (Bedford-Strohm 2018; Vellem 2014:1–6; Von Sinner 2007:338–363; West 2015:79–89), among others. Smit comments, in this regard, on the characteristic of 'inter-contextuality' saying that:

> [P]ublic theologians should learn from one another and from what is happening in other contexts without any attempt to emulate one another or to reduce what is called public theology to one comprehensive and all-inclusive methodology. Being inter-contextual, being widely divergent and different, belongs to the very nature of what is today known as public theology. (Smit 2017:85–86)

If this is the case, then how could Public Theology be informed and shaped by an engagement with different understandings of and approaches to Spirituality and vice versa? More pointedly, at the intersections of Spirituality and Public Life, what might a public spirituality entail?

Spirituality as a discipline

In his article entitled '*What is Spirituality*?' Kees Waaijman (2006:1) traced the study of the spiritual life to roughly 200 CE. He then pointed out that, from approximately 1200 CE, there was a parting of ways between theology, which used a conceptual framework derived from philosophy, and spirituality, which continued to depend on the reading of scripture and the ancient spiritual practices as its sources. In contemporary Spirituality research, at least two approaches can be observed. One is deductive and theologically oriented and the other can be called inductive and proceeds from lived experience. Waaijman provided examples of each before opting for a phenomenological approach, which he described as focusing on a phenomenon, considering the deeper structure of the phenomenon and then, from the deeper structure back to the phenomenon.

Waaijman provided what is personally believed to be the simplest and most compelling definition for spirituality, the study of a 'relational process between man and God',

showing how the emphasis (he called it 'accent') fell sometimes on the Divine pole and then on the human pole. The poles are considered as a whole and are not defined:

> In accordance with its position in the spiritual process the human pole is touched and made to tremble, applies itself to the search for God, devotes itself fervently to God, makes itself receptive and allows itself to be purified, appropriates God's life to itself, lets itself be transported outside of itself in love, and that on all the levels of existence. (Waaijman 2006:13)

Waaijman believed that the divine-human relational process is gradual. It starts with an initial 'touch' and may end in 'complete surrender-in-love' (2006:14). It is transformational in that it affects the entire self-understanding, way of life and even the social interaction of the human being involved. In her pioneering article, *Spirituality in the Academy*, Sandra Schneiders differentiated three levels at which a definition was warranted. Spirituality considered as: '(1) a fundamental dimension of the human being, (2) the lived experience which actualizes that dimension, and (3) the academic discipline which studies that experience' (Schneiders 1989:676–697). She defined spirituality as 'the field of study which attempts to investigate in an interdisciplinary way spiritual experience as such' (Schneiders 1989:692). Mary Frohlich, writing almost 20 years later, distinguished her definition in contrast to Schneiders' when she demarcated spirituality as being concerned with '[t]he living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life' (Frohlich 2007:71–81).

A clear example of this intersection, to be found in the life of a single person, can be seen in the life and work of Desmond Tutu during the South African apartheid struggle. Tutu's deep spiritual life, characterised by regular prayer and meditation, profoundly influenced his public actions and theological reflections on justice and reconciliation. His spiritual practices provided him with the resilience and moral clarity needed to engage in public theology that addressed the injustices of apartheid. This example demonstrates how spirituality can directly inform and strengthen public theological efforts, resulting in significant societal impact.

Sheldrake anchors such an approach in more practical manner. In a 1999 article, Sheldrake defined spirituality as:

> [T]he ways that individuals and groups seek to enter into a conscious relationship with God, to worship, to formulate their deepest values and to create appropriate lifestyles in dialogue with their beliefs about God, the human person, and creation. (Sheldrake 1999:162–172)

However, in 2016, he acknowledged that defining spirituality depended on '"choices and commitments" that were often "political" in the sense that they embody values and prior assumptions and can sometimes express the interests of dominant groups' (Sheldrake 2016:16) and that a single, generic, comprehensive definition of 'spirituality' is impossible. Sheldrake went on to point out that the academic study of spirituality is related to all other theological

subdisciplines, is interdisciplinary, demands an appreciation for historiography and can be approached from historical, hermeneutic and theological perspectives.

Towards a method for spirituality research

Mary Frohlich took a different route in her quest to define an approach and a method for the study of Christian spirituality. She called this approach 'critical interiority' (Frohlich 2007:77).[3] In shaping this 'methodological principle', Frohlich relied on the work of Bernard Lonergan and his basic methodological question: 'What are we doing when we are knowing?' (Frohlich 2020:37).[4] Frohlich changed the question slightly to illustrate her own strategy for discerning how to challenge her students to come to grips with the 'transformative spiritual process' at work in any subject, especially themselves: 'knowing what you are doing when you are doing it' (Frohlich 2001:70; 2020:78). Frohlich described her evolving methodology in shaping a curriculum for her doctoral students in spirituality. Frohlich proceeded from a pure literature review on the subject, to prescribing a text describing the lived experience of a person, to eventually engaging the students about their own 'real lived experience' (Frohlich 2001:67). The last approach yielded the greatest results.

'Lived spirituality'[5] (or spirituality as experienced)[6] was then, for Frohlich, the most important point of engagement in the study of spirituality and it is by nature self-implicating.[7] Schneiders preferred to refer to the study of spirituality as 'participative'.

In the study of spirituality, most, if not all, students come to the discipline out of and because of their personal involvement with its subject matter. What is also important is that most are likely not simply to conduct research and teach in the field but also to 'practice' it in some way.

The core category is experience that has its benefits[8] and challenges:

3. Frohlich qualified that 'the opposite of "interiority" is not "exteriority"' because the word is used to describe being a subject rather than an object. She suggested that perhaps the opposite of interiority may be 'non-aliveness' or 'not having experiences' (2007:77).

4. In this article, Frohlich recorded Lonergan's description of the human spirit's active process of expansion of consciousness in four steps: 'having experiences, to seeking understanding, to critically evaluating that understanding in order to verify it, and finally to asking, "What should I do about this?"'

5. Schneiders (1989:681) made the explicit connection between Christian spirituality as an academic discipline and 'lived experience' as early as 1989 in her pioneering article, 'Spirituality in the academy'.

6. Frohlich (2020:31) believed that the notion that 'spirituality begins from experience' is a convergence among scholars from both Latin- and English-speaking traditions but that the self-implicating nature of spirituality 'has received much more attention in the English conversation than in the Latin one'.

7. '[S]tudying spirituality is constitutively self-implicating: that is, one cannot even recognise the "data" of our field except by awareness of how they resonate in one's spirit' (Frohlich 2020:36).

8. Frohlich (2020:34) observed that spiritual experience is mostly conceived of as being 'taken by surprise by a sudden expansive joy in being embraced and included within a vastly greater reality than the everyday self'. This 'engages the whole person, including body, mind, feelings, and the most intimate center of the will. Its fruit is healing, liberation, and empowerment'.

We seem to be stranded on the shifting sand of lived experience, perhaps enjoying the dynamism but with no sure ground on which to move toward personal integration, let alone toward the more systematic thinking and communicating appropriate to the academy. (Frohlich 2001:69)

The earlier views of Sheldrake are in harmony, pointing out that even theology needed to be 'lived as well as studied'. A failure to be critical may lead to reductionism, eclecticism, rationalism or subjectivism (Frohlich 2007:80; Sheldrake 1999:164). After considering George Schner's five appeals for experience to be embraced by theological reflection (Schner 1992:40–59) and argument, Frohlich concluded that interiority, as described by Lonergan, who explored 'interiority as a science of consciousness', was the most compelling method for the study of spirituality (Frohlich 2001:70; 2007:78).

Frohlich defined the material object of spirituality as 'constructed expressions of human meaning' (2001:71) and the formal object, which describes the 'particular aspect under which the material object is studied', 'is the human spirit fully in act'. She further unpacked the phrase 'the human person fully in act' as:

[T]he core dimension of the human person radically engaged with reality … human persons being, living, acting according to their fullest intrinsic potential – thus, ultimately, in the fullness of interpersonal, communal and mystical relationship. (Frohlich 2001:71)

Interiority, as a method, involved the realisation that 'we cannot know "the human spirit in act" except as the human spirit in act' (Frohlich 2001:73; 2007:78; 2020:39). The implication was that the key to the method for the academic study of spirituality will be involvement at a self-implicating yet critical level. Frohlich admitted that how to access another's lived experience in a responsible academic way was not fully formulated (Frohlich 2020:39). Frohlich proposed a contemplative method that begins with attentiveness to the self, the other and especially the Divine (Frohlich 2007:79). This must be distinguished from simply and uncritically recording one's feelings or experiences in one's interaction with the Divine. Henri Nouwen's work, influenced by his initial encounters with the writing of Anton Boisen and his embrace of the Living Documents model,[9] resulted in just such a practice of interiority, as described by Frohlich. Nouwen 'read' his own spiritual life and put this 'on display' for his students, his readers and his friends, in the hope that such reflection would be valuable for others in their own spiritual journeys.

Interiority:

[I]s an appropriation of one's own experience in which intimacy precedes and grounds objectivity. The primary goal of interiority is not self-objectification, but self-appropriation – that is, enhancement of the self-presence that is the ground of all presence – with what is other. (Frohlich 2001:74)

9. See (Nouwen 1968:49–67) for a pioneering discussion of this method as displayed in the work of Anton Boisen.

Frohlich claimed that what is unique about the study of spirituality is its method, interiority, which is knowing 'the human spirit fully in act' by knowing our own spirits.

Spirituality and Public Life

In considering the connections between Spirituality and Public Life, Parker J. Palmer offered three initial points of contact. Firstly, Public life is the locus in which the spiritual seeker may assert their conviction that humanity is somehow united (Palmer 1981:56). Secondly, Public life is an arena where spiritual experience may be gained and a context in which the Divine may be experienced and thirdly, it is a realm in which the seeker may grow spiritually.

For Palmer, a key figure is the stranger. Strangers are met in public life. The stranger is a truth carrier. Everyday perceptions and assumptions must be challenged by the 'intrusion of strangeness' (Palmer 1981:58) if the spiritual seeker is to be influenced by the Divine. The function of a stranger in our lives is grounded in the need for various perspectives of truth to be seen to appreciate the complexity of any issue. The stranger, with her unique opinions, offers the seeker an opportunity to see what is perceived as familiar with new eyes. 'It is no accident that God is so often represented by the stranger'. The stranger is an instrument in the hands of the Divine to upset the seeker's conventional point of view, to open her to new possibilities.

Palmer introduces yet another thought about the stranger – the stranger is often marginalised, the object of prejudice and discrimination, 'among the lowliest and most outcast of society' (Palmer 1981:64). Sheldrake makes a similar point in referring to the power of 'otherness', which 'has the capacity to challenge traditional centers of power and privilege' (Sheldrake 2003:25). Hence, the stranger is central to public life. Palmer then reminds his readers of the spiritual injunction of attending to 'the least of these' to find spiritual transformation. For these reasons, Palmer argues that spiritual seekers need the stranger if they are to know the Divine.

Palmer invokes hospitality as a tool for welcoming the stranger who in turn becomes a bridge between the individual and public life. Might Spiritual seekers offer an open, safe and hospitable space in such a context? The Dutch Catholic priest, Henri J.M. Nouwen proposed the Dutch word for hospitality, *gastvrijheid* (literally 'offering the guest freedom') as an illustration of the necessity of freedom for or of the guest in hospitality. 'Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy' (Nouwen 1975:71). The hospitality required to welcome the stranger therefore cannot be manipulative and have strings attached but must necessarily be freeing and safe.

In his 2003 article, Philip Sheldrake challenged the idea that spirituality is purely an interior form of devotion, which is detached from everyday life. He showed how this idea had

also been criticised from within the Christian scholarly community by such authors as Friedrich Heiler, Owen Thomas and Rowan Williams (Sheldrake 2003:19). Even the English writer on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill (1993), asserted that 'a defining characteristic of Christian mysticism is that union with God impels a person towards an active, outward, rather than purely passive, inward life'.[10] Sheldrake proceeded to define 'living publicly' as transcending 'an incidental sharing of space with others where the individual self is still primary and demands protection' (Sheldrake 2003:26). Rather, he believed that living publicly involves an encounter with 'the other' in ways that may change the spiritual seeker. He also used the term 'hospitality' in a similar way to Palmer and Nouwen, as a vehicle through which this transformative encounter may take place. In the process, a sense of common life may be experienced, and active citizenship should therefore be understood as a spiritual practice. Sheldrake draws attention to the contribution of the French Jesuit, Michel De Certeau.[11]

Having explored the momentous changes in European society from the mid-16th to the 17th centuries, which displayed the declining influence of the Christian Church, De Certeau postulated that mysticism was a social practice rather than simply a series of subjective experiences. The changing religious worldview in Europe resulted in the rise of mystical writings (such as in Spain in the late 16th century). Mysticism initiated a different pattern of thinking and acting in the Christian tradition as it was now relieved of concern for on the polity or dogma of Church and could concentrate on a practice and action (Sheldrake 2010:102–103).

De Certeau is significant because he discerns a shift of the focus of mysticism, away from the ecstatic experiences of the mystics to the experience of ordinary people in everyday life, and, in so doing, he connects spirituality directly with public life.

Spirituality is, according to De Certeau, neither the domain of an institution nor yet another set of doctrines and beliefs. It is an open and reproducible set of practices. Mysticism is not confined to the purely personal and interior. It is actively social, affecting and transforming the world of ordinary people in everyday life and located away from the influence of the powerful. De Certeau's best-known designation is that spirituality is a 'way' of people who are socially, culturally and religiously on the boundaries, who wander through life (Sheldrake 2012:209) and who have no security apart from the story of Christ which they 'practice' rather than objectively assert. To De Certeau, Christian faith and practice belong to the ordinary person and are lived out in simple, everyday practices.

10. Underhill is here quoted in Sheldrake (2003:24), but the original quote is included in the list of references.

11. Sheldrake labels De Certeau as 'one of the most creative interdisciplinary minds of the twentieth century, a highly original writer on Christian mysticism' (Sheldrake 2010:100). For a good description of De Certeau's life and work, see Zemon Davis (2008).

By the end of Michel De Certeau's life, his thinking on faith and spirituality became disconnected from the institutional church and perhaps even from traditional faith. He became more captivated by the concept of everyday life. He believed that ordinary people needed to discover the transcendent for themselves, in their own contexts. Spirituality, for De Certeau, needed to be conceived of only as experienced in the ordinary and fragmented encounters of strangers in everyday life. The 'everyday' and the ordinary had a mystical quality.

Conclusion

The argument presented in this article transcends the seemingly obvious overlap between Public Theology and Spirituality by providing a careful examination of their dynamic interplay. This dialogue uncovered important insights into how spiritual practices can enrich public theological discourse, offering concrete examples of how faith can actively contribute to societal transformation. By grounding Public Theology in the lived experiences and relational dynamics of Spirituality, we gain a deeper understanding of faith's role in addressing contemporary issues.

This exploration reaffirms the necessity of keeping these two fields in constant dialogue, not only for the enrichment of theological scholarship but also for the practical outworking of faith in the world. The mutual influence between Spirituality and Public Theology underscores the importance of an integrated, or at least a coherent, approach that acknowledges the important interconnection between the spiritual and public dimensions of faith. Such an approach empowers the Christian community to act more faithfully in the world, embodying the transformative love of God in the various areas of both private and public life.

We have argued that the convergence of Spirituality and Public Theology offers an approach to understanding and engaging with the complexities of contemporary life without relegating faith to the private spheres. This convergence offers hope and direction for a world in need of transformative and authentic hope, providing opportunities for public wisdom for navigating contemporary societal challenges.

As such, in the engagement between Spirituality and Public Theology, we have considered the historical roots of Christianity's engagement in the public sphere and also some philosophical underpinnings that define its contemporary expressions. Through the lens of notable scholars and the lived experiences of communities, we have seen how Christianity has not only influenced but has been shaped by the societal, cultural and ecological environments it inhabits. We have sought to show that where the ancient discipline of Spirituality and the emergent field of Public Theology converge, a rich tapestry of theological reflection and action emerges that can transcend traditional boundaries.

Spirituality, in its essence, emerges as a relational dynamic, a transformative process that continually shapes and reshapes the human understanding of and engagement with the Divine. It is a journey marked by moments of profound intimacy, where the individual, touched by the divine, ventures into the depths of God's love and emerges with a renewed vision for life. This transformative experience, however, is not confined to the private realm but spills over into the public sphere, challenging and enriching the Christian engagement with the world. Here, Spirituality and Public Theology intersect, revealing a mutual influence that deepens our understanding of faith's role in public life and its potential to foster meaningful change across various societal domains.

The dialogical engagement between these two fields underscores an important insight: namely, that the public relevance of Christian theology is not merely a theoretical proposition but a lived reality. It compels us to recognise the intrinsic public nature of God's love and its implications for justice, peace and the flourishing of all creation. As we have seen, Christianity's commitment to the public good is rooted in its foundational values, calling believers to active participation in the world's transformation.

Furthermore, as we have argued, Public Theology is inherently inter-contextual and multilingual. It is a discipline that thrives on dialogue, not only within its own boundaries but also with other fields of study, inviting a collaborative approach to theological reasoning and engagement. This interplay of voices and perspectives is not just characteristic of Public Theology but is emblematic of the broader theological discourse, where diversity and complexity enrich the collective understanding of faith's role in the world. Hence, the intersection of Spirituality and Public Theology offers valuable insights for the contemporary Christian witness. They invite us to embrace a more integrated approach to theology, one that acknowledges the profound interconnection between the spiritual and the public dimensions of faith. They invite us to envision a Christianity that is deeply rooted in spiritual tradition while dynamically engaged with the pressing issues of our time. In doing so, we not only enrich our theological scholarship but also empower the Christian community to act more faithfully in the world, embodying the transformative love of God in all areas of public life. In the final analysis, this exploration reaffirms the vital importance of keeping Spirituality and Public Theology in dialogue. It is in their intersection that we find a wellspring of wisdom for navigating the complexities of modern life, offering hope and direction for a world in need of transforming and authentic hope.

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Competing interests

Authors' contributions

Each of the two authors (D.A.F. and G.W.M.) conceived the central idea for the research together. They worked together to research the topic, wrote the first draft together and then worked together to edit, review and finalise the article for submission.

Ethical considerations

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Disclaimer

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