

The Public Sphere

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Version 1.0 | Published 1 May 2026 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-116702>

Other language version: Öffentlichkeit (Deutsch)

Who or what is “the public sphere” (Öffentlichkeit)? And why is it important for theology and the Church? The three guiding topics in what follows should help answer these questions. First, a brief historical derivation of the term is provided, after which various dimensions of “the public sphere” are highlighted. Finally and using the paradigm of “public theology,” a brief explanation is given for why the public, the Church, and theology belong together.

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Editorial Note

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1. Who or What is “the Public Sphere”?

Public life is where we meet one another as strangers but seek to treat one another with civility, recognizing one another as fellow citizens and human beings even in our profound difference of identity and outlook. Public life is where we show a willingness to listen to and compromise with strangers and give of our private selves in the endless search for the public good.^[1]

The South African theologian Tinyiko Sam Maluleke  summarizes the British theologian Will Storrar's  understanding of the public sphere in the above way, only, however, to criticize it sharply immediately afterwards: “I would question where we might find this public sphere where strangers meet with civility – perhaps in Paris under the gaze of the Eiffel Tower? Such space is not available in the middle of Kotze Street in Hillbrow,

Johannesburg.”^[2] Storrar’s colleague in the Global South clearly perceives the former’s Habermasian ^{GND} understanding of the public sphere as “elusive”^[3] and unrealistic. Evidently, not only do the phenomenon and concept of the public sphere differ, but the concept itself also carries different normative connotations. So who or what is “the public sphere”? Three guiding topics can help us approach this question in what follows. First, a brief historical derivation of the term is provided, after which various dimensions of “the public sphere” are highlighted. Finally and using the paradigm of “public theology,” a brief explanation is given for why the public sphere, the Church, and theology belong together.

2. The Public Sphere – A Brief History of a Relatively New Term

Maluleke’s response to Storrar makes it clear that the public sphere must always be understood contextually. Following the work of Wolfgang Huber ^{GND}, this section briefly outlines the history of the term in German-speaking countries.^[4] It is, however, important always to bear in mind that there are other understandings of the public sphere and that the public sphere as a concept and a phenomenon (e.g., the public sphere in digital space) is constantly evolving (see section 3).

The term “public sphere” emerged in the context of social changes in the late 18th century, when bourgeois society emerged as a new element alongside the existing entities of state, home, and Church. In the ancient world, life was mainly characterized by the two spheres of *polis* and *oikos*. This is reflected in the fact that no linguistic distinction was made between the political and the public. When the church emerged as an independent authority, this two-tiered structure changed. The new three-tiered order took on its dogmatic form in the influential teaching on the three orders (*Dreiständelehre*): *politia*, *oeconomia*, and *ecclesia*.

The modern era brought with it major upheavals, particularly for the first two elements: *oeconomia* separated from the household and became an independent sphere known as “business” or “economics,” while *politia* significantly expanded its sphere of influence. This led to the emergence of the modern state and a new entity, namely, “society.”^[5] Along with the separation of state and society, another independent concept emerged: the public sphere.^[6] The public sphere transcends dualistic notions of state and society while at the same time gaining its critical dimension through its self-differentiation from the state. The state does not stand above society; it is considered part of it. Accordingly, democratic structures are not limited to the state-political sphere but encompass all areas of society. In this framework, the public sphere is understood as participatory: it aims at the greatest possible participation of all those affected. “Society and the state mediate themselves in the medium of the public sphere, for it is the locus of the complex process through which public and private, individual and group interests are brought into agreement or conflict.”^[7] Torsten Meireis ^{GND} helps us clarify this by distinguishing between three levels of meaning of the public sphere: (1) as a “space of asymmetrical conflicts” (“*Raum asymmetrischer Konflikte*”) in which controversies are played out; (2) as a “fragmented space of articulation” (“*fragmentierter Artikulationsraum*”) in which common ground can also be found; and (3) as a “regulatory idea.”^[8] The latter offers a normative corrective to the first two levels of meaning, as it brings into focus a space of “access-free and equal negotiation” (“*zugangsfreien und gleichberechtigten Aushandlung*”).^[9]

3. Different Dimensions of the Public Sphere

The above brief history of the term already shows that “public” (*Öffentlich*) is a multifaceted term that can no longer be defined solely in relation to its counterpart, namely, “private” or “secret.” Huber ^{GND} highlights the following four strands of meaning that shape today’s understanding of the “public sphere.”^[10]

1. “Public” as “state-related” (State)

In his 1754 “Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts”, the lawyer and philosopher Christian Wolff ^{GND} uses the terms “public regiment” (*öffentliches Regiment*) and “public affairs” (*öffentliche Geschäfte*) in connection with

state governance.^[11] The adjective “public” is here used largely synonymously with “*staatlich*” (state-related). This specific meaning of “public” is still recognizable in the German language today: for example, constitutional law in Germany is referred to as “public law.”

2. “Public” as “corresponding to the benefit of all individuals” (*Economy*)

With G. W. F. Hegel ^{GND}, the term “public” takes on a meaning that links it to the interests of the individual, albeit those whose realization is dependent upon others.^[12] Civil society thus appears as a market-oriented association of interests in which the needs of the individual members are satisfied. No longer linked primarily to the state, “public” now refers to what is in the interest of all.

3. “Public” as “that which is common to all” (*Civil Society*)

Both conservative and liberal circles alike have criticized the one-sided instrumentalization of the public sphere that focuses on its benefits. From the conservative side, legal philosopher Friedrich Julius Stahl ^{GND} offers the following criticism: “The public sphere is not merely what serves the benefit of all, but also what serves a higher order above all benefits.”^[13] With their emphasis on what is common and universal, liberals also reject a concept of the public sphere that does not go beyond the sum of private interests.

4. “Public” as the “entire realm of cultural communication” (*cultural communication*)

If the public sphere is directed toward what is common to all, then it needs public opinion as the “common consciousness, conscience, and will”^[14] of citizens. So understood, the public sphere is “constructed publicity” (*gestaltete Publizität*), whose construction is not simply a matter of the technical mass media but rather extends far beyond them so as to include the “entire sphere of cultural communication.”^[15] This makes it possible, on the one hand, to communicate about what is common (*das Allgemeine*) and, on the other hand, simultaneously to form an understanding of one’s own place in relation to what is common.

Two further aspects, which interpenetrate each other as well as the above four dimensions, can be added to the latter fundamental dimensions of the public sphere:

5. “Public” as “global public sphere” (*Globalisation*)

Meireis ^{GND} draws attention to the ongoing changes in the public sphere, which for over fifty years “can be described as an expansion and intensification subsequent to economic, cultural, and political globalization in the context of the development of information and communication technologies.”^[16] This dimension of the public sphere in the context of globalization is what is meant when, for example, the United Nations speaks of a “global public sphere.”^[17]

6. “Public” as “imagination and social practices” (*Digitalization*)

The globalized public sphere mentioned above goes hand in hand with “a digital transformation of the public sphere,” as described by Florian Höhne ^{GND}.^[18] He suggests that we understand the public sphere in terms of imagination and social practices that express themselves as “conversation, exposition, and reception.”^[19]

4. Consequences for a Public Theology

It has become clear that, instead of “the” public sphere, we should actually talk about multiple public spheres that interpenetrate each other. What does this mean for the Church and theology, both of whom participate in these public spheres but at the same time also stand opposed to them? Public theology offers a particularly convincing model for thinking about the interpenetration of theology, the Church, and the public sphere.^[20] Contrary to the post-Enlightenment postulate of a separation between the private-religious on the one hand and the public-secular on the other, public theology upholds both the continuing relevance of theology for the various public spheres and the continuing relevance of the public spheres for theology. Public theology thus incorporates into theological reflection issues stemming from the economy, civil society, etc. and, at the same time, clarifies what theology’s genuine contribution to these issues is.^[21] In doing so, public theology is bilingual or multilingual, i.e., it communicates in a recognizable Christian-theological language and at the same time translates this into secularly understandable

language games. With its unique combination of local roots and global perspective, public theology is “glocal.” It is rooted in the church and goes hand in hand with a “spirituality which enables a lived experience of God.”^[22] Its Christological orientation gives public theology internal coherence and external contours, especially in the international and interreligious chorus of different “public theologies.”^[23] Against this background, theology and the Church are always public. Or, in the words of the public theologian *avant la lettre* Dietrich Bonhoeffer ^{GND}: “Just as the reality of God entered the reality of the world in Christ, what is Christian cannot be had otherwise than in what is worldly.”^[24]

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- ² Maluleke, Public, 85.
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- ⁴ See especially Huber, Wolfgang, Kirche und Öffentlichkeit, München 1991, 11–48; Casanova, José, Public Religions in the Modern World, Chicago 1994; Habermas, Jürgen, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. Mit einem Vorwort zur Neuauflage, Frankfurt a. M. 1990; Meyer-Wilmes, Hedwig, Ist Öffentlichkeit öffentlich? Kritische Anmerkungen zum Öffentlichkeitsbegriff aus feministisch-theologischer Sicht, in: Arens, Edmund/Hoping, Helmut (Eds.), Wieviel Theologie trägt die Öffentlichkeit?, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 2000, 113–126; Benhabib, Seyla, Modelle des öffentlichen Raums. Hannah Arendt, die liberale Tradition und Jürgen Habermas, in: Soziale Welt 42/2 (1991), 147–165.
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- ⁶ Cf. Huber, Wolfgang, Öffentliche Kirche und plurale Öffentlichkeiten, in: Evangelische Theologie 54 (1994), 157–180, 164.
- ⁷ Vögele, Wolfgang, Zivilreligion in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Gütersloh 1994, 388, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
- ⁸ Meireis, Torsten, „O daß ich tausend Zungen hätte“. Chancen und Gefahren der digitalen Transformation politischer Öffentlichkeit – die Perspektive evangelischer Theologie, in: Bedford-Strohm, Jonas et al. (Eds.), Digitaler Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf politische Partizipation im Wandel, Baden-Baden 2019, 47–62, 49–51.
- ⁹ Meireis, Transformation, 52, translation by Dylan S. Belton.

- ¹⁰ See Huber, *Öffentliche Kirche*, 164–167; Schliesser, Christine, *Theologie im öffentlichen Ethikdiskurs. Studien zur Rolle der Theologie in den nationalen Ethikgremien Deutschlands und der Schweiz (Öffentliche Theologie 37)*, Leipzig 2019, 15–21. Open-Access Version unter <https://www.eva-leipzig.de/de/theologie-im-ffentlichen-ethikdiskurs-buch-2>, accessed on 09.02.2025.
- ¹¹ Cf. Wolff, Christian, *Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts* (1754) (Gesammelte Werke I/19), Hildesheim/New York 1980, 725f.
- ¹² “The concrete person who, as *aparticular* person, as a totality of needs and a mixture of natural necessity and arbitrariness, is his own end, is *one principle* of civil society. But this particular person stands essentially *inrelation* [*Beziehung*] to other similar particulars, and their relation is such that each asserts itself and gains satisfaction through the others, and thus at the same time through the *exclusivemediation* of the form of *universality*, which is *the second principle*.” Hegel, Georg W. F., *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, eds. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge 1991, 220.
- ¹³ Stahl, Friedrich Julius, *Philosophie des Rechts II/1*, Berlin ⁵1878, 302, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
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- ¹⁵ Huber, *Öffentliche Kirche*, 165.
- ¹⁶ Meireis, Torsten, *Evangelische Orientierung im öffentlichen Raum. Überlegungen zum Stand der protestantischen Ethik im deutschsprachigen Kontext*, in: *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 01 (2021), 3–20, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
- ¹⁷ Cf. <https://unece.org/environment-policy/public-participation/high-level-panel-un-civil-society>, accessed on 09.02.2025.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Höhne, Florian, „Öffentlichkeit“ als Imagination und Ensemble sozialer Praktiken. Zur Relevanz einer Schlüsselkategorie Öffentlicher Theologie in digitalen Kontexten, in: *Ethik und Gesellschaft* 1 (2019) (<https://dx.doi.org/10.18156/eug-1-2019-art-1>), accessed on 09.02.2025.
- ¹⁹ Höhne, Öffentlichkeit, 9ff. Höhne summarizes the consequences of digital transformation for this dimension of public life as follows: “While conversational practices are gaining in importance under digital conditions of communication, the newly emerging practices of reception and exposure can theoretically no longer (or less) be claimed as a place for the creation of a shared perception of reality.” Höhne, Öffentlichkeit, 24, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
- ²⁰ Alternative models for relation the public sphere and theology are offered by, among others, ethical theology (Trutz Rendtorff ^{GND}), Christian politics (Eilert Herms ^{GND}), hermeneutical ethics (Johannes Fischer ^{GND}) as well as critical contemporaneity (Eberhard Schockenhoff ^{GND}). See Schliesser, *Ethikdiskurs*, 89–115; Höhne, Florian, *Öffentliche Theologie. Begriffsgeschichte und Grundfragen*. Leipzig 2015.
- ²¹ Its representatives in German-speaking countries include, among others, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm ^{GND}, Florian Höhne ^{GND}, Wolfgang Huber ^{GND}, Torsten Meireis ^{GND}, Frederike van Oorschot ^{GND} and Christine Schliesser ^{GND}.
- ²² De Gruchy, John, *Public Theology as Christian Witness. Exploring the Genre*, in: *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007), 26–41, 40.
- ²³ The video “Public Theology – Contributions of Religions to the Common Good” explains what public theologies are all about in an international context and how they relate to education. The film was produced in the context of an international conference at the Research Unit of Public Religion and Education (RUPRE) at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gY-xkmKRgY0>, accessed on 09.02.2026.
- ²⁴ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Ethics*, in: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 6*, eds. Ilse Tödt, Clifford J. Green, Ernst Feil, and Heinz Tödt, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Scott, Minneapolis 2009, 58.

Citation Style

Schliesser, Christine: „The Public Sphere“, Version 1.0, in: Online Lexicon for Systematic Theology, ISSN 3052-685X, 1 May 2026. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-116702>

Metadata

DOI	https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-116702
Creative Commons Licence Type	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs CC BY-NC-ND (4.0)
peer reviewed by	Florian Höhne
Translator(s)	Dylan S. Belton
Index Theologicus (IxTheo)	Church , Globalization , Politics , Public Theology
Subject Headings (LOC)	Church , Globalization , Politics , Public Theology
Keyword	Church , Globalization , Politics , Public Theology
Mentioned People	Heinrich Bedford-Strohm , Dietrich Bonhoeffer , Johannes Fischer , Jürgen Habermas , Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel , Eilert Herms , Wolfgang Huber , Florian Höhne , Tinyiko S. Maluleke , Torsten Meireis , Frederike van Oorschot , Trutz Rendtorff , Christine Schliesser , Eberhard Schockenhoff , Friedrich Julius Stahl , William Storrar , Christian Wolff

KEYWORDS

Church

Globalization

Politics

Public Theology