

Keeping Faith in the Public Square: An Autobiographical and Contextual Approach

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How do we live authentically as a people of faith within our secularized societies? The challenges to public representations of faith underline the tension between personal expression and corporate identity. This article argues for engagement in the public square that signifies being present in positive social action and change. Charles Mathewes's A Theology of Public Life offers a useful lens through which to interrogate this argument. Through biblical examples, we recognize the epicenter of this notion of engagement as relational, at an individual and a collective level. Faith intersecting with the public square emphasizes the recognition of the other and of their need, as well as our own identity as a people called to bear witness. This article explores this integrated and holistic approach that decompartmentalizes faith and affirms its rightful location in the public square.

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William Temple once said, “Belief in God is used by many Christians as a means of escape from the hard challenge of life.” I wish, however, to argue that it is faith lived that truly equips us to deal with the challenges of being in the public square.

Many objections exist to the presence of faith in the public square. For example, in the UK, members of the National Secular Society called for the practice of prayers before the start of council meetings to be axed, as they felt it breached their human rights and excluded

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nonbelievers and people from other faiths.¹ In 2012, a UK High Court ruled that council prayers were unlawful as part of a formal meeting.² In December 2014, a private member's bill supported by the two major political parties in Britain gave its support for councils to once more hold prayers or be involved in religious activities. Another government minister, giving her backing to the bill, said, "The bill will not compel anyone to pray or any local authority to include prayers in their official business, nor does it define what constitutes prayer. The bill will ensure that local authorities can support, facilitate and be represented at events with a religious element."³ The National Secular Society accused the communities and local government secretary of "seeking to impose religion by tyranny of the majority."⁴

As the Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons in Great Britain, one of my main tasks involves leading the parliamentarians in prayers every day at the start of their proceedings. In fact, I am the first item on their agenda. My role has been in existence for over three hundred years. I am the seventy-ninth chaplain and the first woman in that role. I applied for it because I believe that faith ought to be at the heart of the public square. I am consciously aware that I am not in this role to proselytize nonbelievers. Instead, I am there to encourage faith, thus enabling those of faith who work in Parliament to make the connections between their faith and the issues they wrestle with daily—in other words, to affirm the place of faith in the public square.

When we think of the public square, none is more prominent than the Palace of Westminster—the place deemed the "mother of all parliaments" or indeed as the "mother of all democracies." This is where laws have been made for hundreds of years, stretching beyond the geographical boundaries of the United Kingdom through its years of empire, and still today, through its strong links as the seat of leadership of the Commonwealth of Nations. This Parliament is the place where laws become the foundation on which British people build a public life together in the wider community for the common good of

¹ See the National Secular Society, <https://www.secularism.org.uk/>.

² Rosalind English, "Prayer in Council Meetings Was Unlawful, Rules High Court," *UK Human Rights Blog*, February 10, 2012, <https://ukhumanrightsblog.com/2012/02/10/high-court-bans-god-from-council-meetings/>.

³ Rowena Mason, "Councils to Be Allowed to Hold Prayers at Meetings under New Bill," *The Guardian*, December 18, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/dec/18/local-councils-pray-meetings-bill>.

⁴ Mason, "Councils."

all. It is this public life that I am referring to as synonymous with the public square—a place I believe political action cannot (and should not) be separated from one's expression of a life of faith lived out. In his book *A Theology of Public Life*, Charles Mathewes argues that “we become better Christians and churches and better Christian communities, through understanding and participating in public life.”⁵

Beginning with the first book in the Bible, we are reminded by Scripture that the God who created the world also asks that we govern it through the stewardship of creation:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen. 1:26–28)⁶

In this story of creation, we are reminded that responsibility for the earth and its inhabitants was not just given to us after the fall, but at the very point of creation. We are to govern each other and all of God's creation. In the beginning, we are all endowed with equal worth and dignity, and this in reality should become the starting point for all human government. Our involvement therefore in the public square or in public life should not be seen as an optional extra. Neither should our involvement in the public square be left to so-called professional theologians or special interest groups. I believe this should be a part of all Christian discipleship training. Imagine a society where all who profess faith could competently engage with the wider community without apology. Engagement in the public square should be part of our DNA as Christians or people of faith.

⁵ Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

⁶ All Scriptures quotations NRSV.

Throughout the Old Testament we find examples of engagement in the public square. In the story of Joseph—most famous in the public square as the Broadway production, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*—God uses his anointed people to govern in an alien land with the apparent purpose of protecting his people from a devastating famine. Further on in Genesis, we find the children of Israel experiencing oppression. God does not sit idly by contented that they are meeting their expected religious requirement. God actively engages with the issue of the day. In this, God demonstrates what it means to identify and engage with the public square—to be at the heart of the change that is needed. In the book of Exodus, Moses, as a person of faith, becomes a significant political leader. He receives the Ten Commandments and shares them with the people of God. These same Commandments, hundreds of years later, are still the very bedrock of our laws today. Moses is drawn into speaking and acting on behalf of the people of God. His speaking on behalf of the Israelites is not just about spiritual freedom or their spiritual life. Due to his intervention, the children of God experienced political, economic, and geographical freedom.

In the book of Leviticus, we get a sense that God is not just interested in our personal morality; our corporate morality is highlighted—we find that how humans live with one another matters greatly. The kind of holiness that is required is not dependent on how many times we pray or in those acts we describe in a purely “spiritual” manner. Holiness instead is described in Leviticus 19 as caring for those who are most vulnerable in society. A liberated people, defined by the gift of God’s law, is called to ordered relationships with each another, with people beyond their community, with God, and with the rest of creation. As the story unfolds in the Hebrew Bible, we see a democratic process under God being proposed with the selection of representative leaders. For example, the prophet Jeremiah is called on to speak truth to power, and he is to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). This can surely be described as a mandate for engaging in the public square.

In the canonical Gospels we catch a glimpse of the inbreaking of God’s governance through the authority of Christ (Matt. 28:18) and in interactions and relationships that Christ values. We learn that there is a cost involved in engaging in the public square. Indeed, John the Baptist loses his head (Mark 6:14–29)! We learn how important it is to speak up for those who are on the fringes of society (Matt. 25:31–46).

We learn that peace and reconciliation are priorities (Matt. 5:43–48). We see that vengeance has no place in justice (Matt. 5:38–42) as the commandment to love one’s neighbor is set center stage (Matt. 22:39). We learn that leadership is to be characterized by faithfulness as depicted in the story of the shepherd and the sheep (John 10).

In the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that the growth of the early church was not just about “spiritual virtues” but very much dependent on the fact that no one should be allowed to be in need (Acts 4:32–36). 1 and 2 Timothy impress upon us the necessity to pray for the government, the importance of young people in leadership, and the danger that wealth can corrupt. So, we read,

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim. 2:1–4)

Further, 1 Peter 2:13 calls on believers to be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.

Coming from a black Christian tradition, I can still hear the sermons encouraging what can only be described as the complete opposite of engagement in the public square. Some of those experiencing the pain of slavery coped with the indignities by believing that beyond death, all would be well: “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5). Everything was divided up into good and bad. The church was good, and the world and its agencies, such as politics or government, were bad and should be avoided at all costs. The world we live in was seen as just a temporary blip; this was captured very well in the Jim Reeves song:

This world is not my home I’m just a passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckoned me from heavens open door
And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.⁷

⁷ Jim Reeves, “This World Is Not My Home,” written by Mary Reeves Davis, copyright Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC. For complete lyrics, see Lyrics.com, <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/5991925/Jim+Reeves/This+World+Is+Not+My+Home>.

With songs like this, we rather convinced ourselves that we did not have a part to play in the public square. One could argue that it was a so-called spiritual approach that allowed the gospel to be separated from its impact on society.

Black spirituality has often run the danger of compartmentalizing the spiritual from the earthly. But look what happens when a more holistic approach is embraced. Indeed, it is interesting to note that some of the significant figures who fought against slavery were inspired by their faith. They had read what had happened to the children of Israel and they therefore believed that being enslaved was not what God wanted for them. Their reading of Scripture had led them to believe that all humanity was made in the image of God. Sam Sharpe, a Baptist lay preacher and a slave in the Caribbean, was in no doubt that the message of the gospel was more than just spiritual freedom. He challenged the plantation owners. This public theologizing cost him his life, but it also contributed to major unrest that was eventually to lead to those enslaved persons winning their freedom.

Perhaps it is not just black spirituality that is seen to take a rather Gnostic view. In 1985 the Church of England published the *Faith in the City Report*. The report proved challenging to the sitting government because it strongly criticized its policies and their effects on society. The report's subtitle was equally provocative: *A Call for Action by Church and Nation*. The church was daring to hold the country's elected representatives in power to account. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is supposed to have said to the archbishop, "Some may say that the church's job is spiritual." The kind of secularism that exists today also appears to compartmentalize church and state. Jesus taught, however, about the kingdom coming now "on earth as in heaven." The early church resisted heresies that separated body from spirit in dualistic fashion. It is possible that such heresy has never really gone away. Churches today still run the danger of being part of a "huddling spirituality" rather than being a community of holistic engagement with the world. I witnessed such "huddling" firsthand in more recent times when a young father in the parish I served in northeast London was murdered. I organized a vigil one evening on the estate where he had been killed. No one from the local Pentecostal church joined in; they continued with their planned program in their church. Yet even the book of Revelation envisions a new heaven and a new earth. It is not talking about escaping somewhere else. It is this earth that is going to be transformed and restored.

What, then, should engaging in the world—the public square—look like? In the Gospel of Matthew, someone asks Jesus, “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus thought that he was missing the point—after all, eternal life was a gift of God through faith in Christ Jesus. There was no exceptional act for him to do. He simply needed to follow the commandments of God. When reminded of the commandments, he appears to be pleased. “Oh! I’m already keeping these.” The reality, however, is that the keeping of the commandments is not meant to be some private box-ticking exercise. If we are obeying the commandments, then this will be evident in how we live in the public square. Perhaps Jesus identified this when he responded to him with these most revealing of words: “Go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Matt. 19:16–22)

In *A Theology of Public Life*, Mathewes speaks about “a theology of human community”—our destiny before God being found in our coming together. I believe that it is in this coming together that we create the public square. In this movement and space, we learn about each other’s needs irrespective of whether we speak the same language, look alike, or share the same faith. Time and time again throughout the Bible we are reminded to include the stranger and the alien. We cannot engage from a distance. According to Mathewes, “What the contemporary world calls pluralism we should see, in theological terms, as the fundamental challenge of otherness, a challenge demanding a rich theological response.”⁸ He believes, however, that modern theology is not equipped to help us in this quest, as it is more “committed to avoiding than confronting the challenge.”

Sadly, from the various actions of the worldwide church, one can be left with the impression that we have a church that would rather spend its energy looking inward. We fight among ourselves while children around the globe become child soldiers and women and young girls are abused and trafficked. One massacre follows after another, and we see hate crimes and intolerance rising in the context of a planet where the minority overuse the earth’s resources. The church will only truly come into its own if it recognizes, as William Temple once said, that it “is the only society that exists for the benefit of those

⁸ Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 108.

who are not its members.”⁹ It means that we should be constantly looking outward, allowing our knowledge of the gospel to challenge and speak into the various situations as they arise. Wherever Jesus was, in the synagogue, by the sea, up a mountain, or on a plain, our Lord was always ready to engage and challenge the status quo. He leads those of faith to a place where they can move beyond just praying so that their faith inspires action. James puts it succinctly: “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. . . . Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:22, 27)

If those in the so-called secular sphere fail to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable in society, then the people of faith must act. The people of faith must act, though, from the premise of the psalmist: “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it” (Ps. 24:1). In my conversations with members of Parliament, I am often told that they were moved to become parliamentarians because of their faith. I believe that if we are going to truly live our faith, it must never be locked away behind great brass doors and incensed-filled rooms. Faith must be lived at the heart of the public square.

In more recent times there has been much reported about Christians taking employers to court because they have not been allowed to wear a chain with a cross on it (a symbol, they say, of their faith) or because they have been dismissed for speaking about their faith at work or offering to pray for others. Such cases underline our apparent contentment to only engage the public symbolically. Our faith should draw us toward responding to the needs of the homeless and challenging political decisions that victimize the poor and widen the already divided line between the haves and the have-nots.

In the light of my role in Parliament, I am often asked, “Should the church be involved in politics?” My response is always clear: politics is about the governance of people’s lives. In my reading of Scripture, both Old and New, I recognize a God who is interested in people’s lives. He cares about people and believes that all should be provided for (Matt. 6:25–34). It is the church’s responsibility therefore to speak truth to power and to make sure that the voices of those

⁹ This assertion by Archbishop William Temple, circa 2007, is cited in many sources, among them, “Anglican Icon, Spiritual Giant: 9 Quotes from Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple,” *Christianity Today*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/anglican-icon-spiritual-giant-9-quotes-from-archbishop-of-canterbury-william-temple/117042.htm>.

who fall through the net are heard. According to Mathewes, “not only is there a fruitful role for faith to play in public life, but that proper faithful engagement in public life is conducive to the deepening of participants’ faith as well.”¹⁰ I am not surprised to learn that one’s involvement in the public square can lead to a deepening of faith. As we become bold enough to reach out to others, we cannot help but be touched by their lives and blessed by the God who created them also in his own image. We become mirrors, reflecting something of the glory of God to each other.

Mathewes dedicates a whole chapter of his book to speaking about “faithful citizenship.” In it, he tries to get his readers to tolerate the coming together of faith in the public square as it encourages civic life and community involvement. In his words, “Today religion is looked upon by some as a source, and perhaps the most powerful source, of civic commitment.”¹¹ These are of course qualities that are needed in any society in order to ensure the kind of cohesiveness for the “smooth” running of a society. Mathewes, however, is cautious about faith or religion being embraced in this way. He refers to this approach as a trap—a trap in that faith is just seen and embraced for its political usefulness instead of being innately something of “religious” value only.

We should reclaim the presence and engagement of faith in the public square not as a prop to be wielded when deemed necessary by a cynical political class, but simply as a “faithful presence.” Such presence recognizes the Bible’s call to all followers of Christ to look after God’s world, to love their neighbor, to do good to all people, and to commend the goodness of Jesus’s lordship for all people for all life. A practice of presence also is a recognition of the biblical theme of “common grace”—that God scatters gifts of wisdom, goodness, justice, and beauty across all cultures (James 1:17); or, as in Romans 2:15, that the requirements of God’s law are written on every human heart. In Jeremiah 29:4–14, we are reminded to seek the *shalom* (total flourishing) of the city. Christians are not meant to be shouting from the sideline on occasional political issues that matter only to an individual or groups of individual Christians with “a cause.” Instead, we are at all times to be present and committed on the political field, all of the time applying God’s wisdom to all of life. Consequently, we should be

¹⁰ Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 169.

¹¹ Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 170.

asking questions about how the management of public finances, welfare budget, and employment policies best serve the poor. How does immigration policy serve the needs of political and economic migrants from other countries? How do adoption policies serve those children in the care system? How much of the GDP should be spent on foreign aid and development? As we engage with all these issues and more, we do so not from a position of triumphalism or antagonism but from a position of humble cooperation. Christ calls his followers to love all, including those who would hate us and persecute us and tell us we have no place in the public square. Just imagine what our politics around the world would look like if politicians and all those of faith modeled being “present” in all parts of God’s world and especially in the political arena.

Being present in the public square is only one part of the equation; we need to be “faithful” to God by being what can be described as “respectfully provocative.” We should not be reticent in recognizing God’s word as our authority in the public square and being respectfully provocative with its ideas. This does not mean that we just quote Scriptures at every opportunity. The Christian’s faithful presence will also be visible in their lives. We have had instances of those professing faith behaving contrary to what faith demands of us either in their “private” lives or in their interactions with others. God’s word should be interpreted through our lives and in our witness as we seek to be present in the public square. Perhaps a good example of faithful presence can be seen in the story of the prophet Daniel. He was very much present and embedded in Babylonian and Persian society and served under three different leaders of empires, and yet was prepared to be utterly faithful and provocative in his dealings with King Nebuchadnezzar. He challenged him to repent of his sins, practice righteousness, and show mercy to the oppressed.

Another example of this can be seen in the story of the abolition of slavery. William Wilberforce was present and faithful, spending the majority of his political life campaigning for the abolition of slavery. He was faithful in his use of the Bible—it informed him and spoke to him about enslavement removing the dignity of those who were also created in God’s image. He remained present in politics for his entire life in order to achieve his aim; and he made common cause in humble cooperation with other abolitionists who perhaps did not look to the Bible for their moral guidance, but who were nevertheless

convinced of the justice of the cause. *Faithful presence* in the public square is desperately needed today. I believe Christians' faith should lead us to be involved in politics not because this will lead to a "redeemed" and Christian culture as a whole, but because our Scripture teaches us that loving our neighbor and serving others is what Christians are called to do and be. Such public involvement can bring real transformation and real change for the common good.