

BEYOND TOLERANCE AND MODERATION: FRIENDSHIP AS RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN PLURAL INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to reconstruct public theology in plural Indonesia by calling for a relational epistemology of friendship rather than simply a private virtue or auxiliary theme of interfaith engagement. The study is based on a qualitative, constructive theological design that involves literature-based analytical mapping of public theology and contextual theology, a contextual hermeneutical reading of John 4:5–26, extended to 4:42, and an Indonesian debate on pluralism and religious moderation. The Johannine encounter is found to offer a public grammar that allows theological truth to surface in a shared space, across real boundaries, through truthful but non-humiliating speech, and in ways that restore the agency of the religious other. The article contends that friendship is a form of relational epistemology in which communities can know each other through encounter, receptivity, mutual conversation, and mutual risk. Friendship provides a thicker alternative to thin tolerance and administrative moderation in the Indonesian context, where religious plurality is experienced in neighborhoods, schools, markets, rituals, and digital publics. The article contributes to public theology in a global context by revealing that Indonesia is not only a place where imported theories are applied but also a place where relational categories can transform public theological reasoning.



INTRODUCTION

Public theology has become a means to render Christian reflection comprehensible in societies characterized by institutional complexity, moral pluralism, and conflicting visions of the common good. Its main formulations have made it clear that theology is not limited to describing the church or private devotions. Theology must address the church, the academy, and society; it must address institutions, civic life, public reason, human dignity, and the moral

conditions of co-existence (Breitenberg, 2003; Himes & Himes, 1993; Kim, 2011; Stackhouse, 2004; Tracy, 1981). The importance of this contribution is that it counters the privatization of theology and the denial of the public nature of Christian faith.

However, there remains a relational weakness in the same field. There is a strong connection between public theology and public discourse, institutional ethics, policy, rights, democracy, civic morality, and public witness. It is less developed when it has to explain how public theological life is sustained in daily relationships across religious and cultural differences. The public is often thought of as a sphere, forum, institution or policy arena to which theology speaks. Less attention is paid to the mundane relational practices that enable people to learn to live together, understand one another, and verify public speech. This weakness is particularly apparent in plural societies, where religious difference is not just a matter of the constitution but a common everyday social reality.

Indonesia offers such a context. In Indonesia, religious identity is related to ethnicity, locality, memory, regional culture, state ideology, histories of conflict, and everyday coexistence. Christian public theology in this context is not simply a matter of abstract pluralistic statements or a defensive description of the ecclesial presence. It must grapple with the question of how Christians can live in public with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, followers of indigenous belief traditions, and others without losing theological conviction or having it weaponized. Theological research in Indonesia has recently explored issues such as nationalistic ideologies, religious moderation, popular culture, democratization, interreligious relations, segregation, discrimination, and polarization (Adiprasetya, 2024; Iwamony, 2020; Kurniawan, 2024; Madung & Gaynes, 2025; Ruhlessin & Parihala, 2021; Singgih, 2019, 2023). Based on these studies, it can be seen that public theology in Indonesia cannot be divorced from the discussion of civic identity, social cohesion, religious freedom, and the public role of religion.

However, a conceptual gap still exists. Most debates are based on macro concepts such as tolerance, moderation, nationalism, public morality, public order, rights, and recognition. Although these categories are required, they are insufficient. Tolerance can lead to coexistence without transforming the other. Moderation can be excessively dependent on the state management of religious life. Rights language can help safeguard vulnerable groups without necessarily changing everyday power relations. Recognition can be symbolic without being manifested in the practices of listening, visiting, grieving, working, and speaking together. In summary, public theology needs a thicker relational grammar to move beyond the coexistence of procedures.

This article suggests friendship as such a grammar. The emphasis is not on friendship as sentimental intimacy, private affection, or an optional moral adornment. It is formulated as a theological category that brings together knowing, ethical relations, and public practice. Friendship cannot objectify the religious Other or make them the object of a conversion strategy, civic problem, or symbolic Other in another religion. It is about being close, about reciprocity, about being exposed, about being honest and about being held accountable. For this reason, friendship can provide public theology with a more socially situated understanding of the learning, sustaining and contesting of plural life.

The argument responds to three gaps. First, mainstream public theology has provided a good sense of the public vocation of theology; however, it has failed to theorize relational epistemology as a condition of public discernment. Second, pluralism, nationalism, polarization, and moderation have been discussed; however, friendship has not yet been fully developed in the field of public theology in Indonesia. Third, the text of John 4:5–26, extended to 4:42, has been interpreted from missiological, feminist, and interfaith-dialogical perspectives; however, it has been underutilized as a constructive script for public theology in plural Indonesia (Day, 2002; Natar, 2019; Okure, 2009; Yosia, 2022).

The novelty of this article is that it suggests friendship as a way to think about public theology epistemologically. Relational epistemology can be understood as the knowledge that is available to the public in the name of Christ not only being doctrinally correct, institutionally located, or universally morally valid. It is also learned through encounter, listening, exposure, receptivity, and the disciplined recognition of the other as a speaking subject. If theology is not relational, it can become monological, managerial, or simply strategic. A theology formed by friendship is better able to speak the truth because it has first learned to receive, listen, and be addressed by others.

Hence, the following questions arise: How can public theology in plural Indonesia be reconstructed through the category of friendship? How is such reconstruction possible in a theological grammar, as provided in John 4? What

are the implications of an Indonesian model of friendship for the wider world of public theology? To respond to these questions, this article adopts a qualitative, constructive theological approach, comprising literature-based mapping, contextual theology, a discussion of pluralism and religious moderation in Indonesia, and a contextual hermeneutical reading of John 4. The primary thesis is that public theology in Indonesia needs to transcend thin tolerance and moderation under administrative oversight to become a more dialogical, reciprocal, and publicly responsible form of friendship.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative and constructive theological research. It is qualitative in that it deals with texts, meanings, concepts, interpretive relations, and theological categories, rather than numerical measurements. It is constructive in the sense that it does not simply tell you what other people have written or provide you with a historical commentary on John 4. Rather, it aims to construct a model of public theology that is conceptually clearer for plural Indonesia. It is theological because it has a horizon of norms and values shaped by Christian resources and assertions, yet subject to public reasoning and dialogue with other disciplines.

The method moves in two interwoven movements. The first is literature-based analytical mapping. Dominant emphases and unresolved tensions are identified through reading foundational public theology, contextual theology, as well as recent discussions on pluralism, religious moderation, interreligious engagement, and public religion in Indonesia. This mapping is not comprehensive. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive list of the literature on public theology but rather to explain a conceptual issue: public theology has tended to focus on discourse, institutional ethics, and public argument, while neglecting to pay close attention to the relational conditions that make such public discourse credible.

The second movement consists of a hermeneutical reading of John 4:5–26 extended to 4:4 in context. It does not intend to use the text as a proof text, but rather as a generative theological narrative. Here, there are two directions of contextual hermeneutics. First, it notes the literary movement of the Johannine narrative, namely place, social boundaries, dialogue, disclosure, agency, and communal response. Second, it asks how these narrative dynamicities shed light on the current scenario of public life in Indonesia. This is not a reduction of the first-century Samaritan setting to the Indonesian context today. Instead, it enables the biblical story to serve as a resource for positive theology in a plural society.

This analytical procedure comprises four steps. First, discursive mapping is conducted in public theology, contextual theology, and Indonesian scholarship to identify the gap in relation. Second, John 4 is analyzed narratively, focusing on shared space, boundary crossing, speech, truth-telling, worship, agency, and the transition from personal experience to communal witness. Thematic synthesis is the third step, in which the narrative insights are grouped into three themes: friendship as relational epistemology, friendship as public virtue, and friendship as boundary-crossing praxis. Constructive application is the fourth step, in which these themes are discussed in relation to the reality of living together, polarization and religious moderation in Indonesia.

Because this is not an empirical field study but rather a constructive theological article, validity does not depend on statistical generalizability. Its purpose is rather analytic generalization and theological transferability. Analytic generalization involves arguing to explain a more general issue in public theology in light of a specific conceptual move. Theological transferability occurs when the proposed framework can be adapted to other plural contexts, despite being generated from Indonesian realities. Thus, the quality of the argument is related to hermeneutical adequacy, conceptual coherence, sensitivity to the biblical text, consistency with relevant scholarship, and plausibility for public theological practice.

The study also acknowledges limitations in interpretation and potential subjective bias. To reduce this risk, the reading of John 4 is juxtaposed with current feminist, missiological, contextual and interfaith interpretations of the text, rather than presented as a private theological impression. The analysis is also limited by the clear research goal that it does not claim that friendship is the answer to all the problems of pluralism, nor that John 4 is a full-fledged political theology for Indonesia. It does not claim that friendship can provide a better relational grammar than thin

tolerance or simple administrative moderation. This restriction ensures that the argument is constructive but not totalizing.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the contextual hermeneutical analysis of John 4:5-26, extended to verse 42 where the narrative's public implications become fully visible. Five findings emerge from the reading. Together they show how the Johannine narrative can function as a constructive script for a friendship-centered public theology in plural Indonesia.

The well as public space

John 4 is commonly treated as a revelation narrative, disciple narrative, mission narrative, or conflicting readings of the Samaritan woman. All these are acceptable. But to serve the purpose of the common theology, the story is particularly important since it enacts a theological experience within a common social world that is organized by division. It is not a temple liturgy or intra-ecclesial deliberation. It is an open place of need and exposure: a well. The story thus plays out the drama of theological truth, not as something existing outside social life, but as an experience that takes place in a situation of bodily need, of tension in history, of religious difference. Read thus, John 4 provides a grammar of public theology, which is programmatic but relational.

Place is the first detail that counts. The well of Jacob is not a symbol, which is not connected with real life. It is a commonplace place where bodies assemble, water is called, social practices are practiced and histories haunt. Narratively, it is an in-between place: not entirely private or institutionally designated, not synagogue nor market, but open to social exchange. This is important to theological practice in general since the scene indicates that theological work does not start in officially religious contexts. It starts in the common grounds in which human need, memory and encounter meet.

This migration is an argument in theology already. Public theology is frequently lured into believing that the public is in macro terms like state, media, law, education or policy. John 4 helps us remember that everyday places of dependence are also a part of public life. One of the reasons why people come to a well is because life demands it. The theological meaning of the scene thus is partly in its materiality. It is not a fight which is provoked by abstract discussion but thirst. This is essential since a friendship-based public theology starts not with the mastery but with the need. Jesus does not come into the scene as one who is above relation. He asks for water. The request itself disrupts hierarchies and provides a space where the other is not initially seen as problem, competitor, object, but as a subject whose agency is important.

The epistemic meaning of the request cannot be underestimated. An announcement is not a request. It opens up space to reply. It acknowledges dependence. It invites relation. The request of Jesus in the story does not eliminate asymmetry but it does not allow the encounter to start as domination. This is where public theology in plural societies tends to fail. It already comes into the open space equipped with the conclusions and treats other people as the audience to convince or to correct. Another mode is indicated in John 4. Public theology may start with need, receptivity and readiness to receive what the other has to offer even before it talks of what it offers. Relational epistemology friendship starts here: one encounters the other as someone of whom one may receive.

Crossing boundaries without abolishing difference

The second major feature of the narrative is the density of boundaries it crosses. The text foregrounds the hostility between Jews and Samaritans. It also stages a male-female interaction in a public setting and introduces a woman who carries social vulnerability and likely stigma in relation to prevailing communal expectations. The significance of the narrative lies not in pretending these differences are insignificant. On the contrary, the text heightens them. The woman's surprised response makes the tension explicit: why would a Jewish man ask a Samaritan woman for a drink? Difference is not denied; it is named.

This point is central for public theology. Too often public discourse oscillates between two inadequate options. The first is antagonism, which treats difference as threat. The second is flattening universalism, which neutralizes difference in the name of civility. John 4 offers a third option: relation across real difference without prior erasure of difference. The story does not depend on the fiction that Jews and Samaritans are already reconciled, or that gender

asymmetry has disappeared, or that past histories no longer matter. Instead, it shows that transformative encounter occurs precisely amid unresolved difference. Public theology therefore need not choose between identity and openness. Its task is to cultivate forms of encounter in which identities are not absolutized and openness is not naive.

In this respect, the narrative is not merely a lesson in tolerance. Tolerance would allow coexistence at a distance. John 4 stages nearness. The encounter is dialogical, extended, and risky. Both participants speak. Questions are raised, misunderstandings occur, and deeper matters surface gradually. Friendship is relevant here because friendship is not the absence of difference but the disciplined refusal to let difference become absolute hostility. It is a practice of crossing without conquest.

Theologically, this crossing reflects something fundamental about the public character of Jesus' ministry. Jesus does not wait until social or religious boundaries are safely mediated by institutions. He initiates relation at the point where they are most visible. This does not make him indifferent to truth. Rather, it suggests that truth is disclosed in and through boundary-crossing relation. For public theology in Indonesia, this has direct implications. Interreligious engagement cannot be conceived merely as the coexistence of self-enclosed communities or as managed dialogue among representatives. It must involve embodied encounters in which Christians and their religious others actually speak, listen, work, and negotiate life together in shared spaces. This friendship that transcends the boundaries of religion can be manifested in concrete forms in daily life in Indonesia, such as cooperation in the neighborhood, the way of mourning, cooperation in the disaster, and interreligious cooperation in the field of civic activities. For instance, when Christian and Muslim neighbors join forces to clean public streets, organize village festivities, help families with funerals or floods and fires, they are doing more than simply tolerating one another in the formal sense. Through repeated contact they discover each other's fears and values, vulnerabilities and moral expectations. In these contexts, friendship serves an epistemological purpose as communities experience religious others not as representatives of another religion but as neighbors whose dignity, grief, work, and hope are felt firsthand. This type of common social nearness provides public theology with a concrete relational foundation.

Truthful speech without humiliation

A third feature of the narrative concerns truth. The dialogue between Jesus and the woman moves from water to worship, from social surprise to spiritual disclosure, and from the woman's life history to a deeper recognition of who Jesus is. Crucially, the revelation of truth in this narrative is neither evasive nor humiliating. Jesus does not reduce the woman to her biography, nor does he avoid truthful speech for the sake of superficial politeness. The encounter becomes transformative because truth is spoken in a way that restores agency rather than annihilates dignity.

This is one of the sharpest lessons the narrative offers public theology. In plural societies, public discourse often fails either by weaponizing truth claims or by evacuating them. The first mode turns conviction into aggression. The second mode turns dialogue into thin proceduralism where no one may speak from depth for fear of conflict. John 4 models a more demanding alternative: truthful, patient, relational speech. Jesus' dialogue does not hide theological particularity. The woman also raises substantive religious disagreement, especially around the question of proper worship. Yet the conversation does not collapse into polemic. Truth emerges through dialogue and through the gradual expansion of understanding.

Friendship is indispensable here because it names the kind of relation in which truth can be spoken without violence. Friendship does not mean the suspension of conviction. It means that conviction is carried within a mode of relation that grants the other dignity, voice, and interpretive agency. Friendship resists the reduction of public theology to strategy. The other is not engaged merely to secure Christian influence, to demonstrate tolerance, or to manage pluralism. The other is engaged because relation itself belongs to the truthfulness of Christian public witness.

This point also challenges covert instrumentalization in interreligious relations. If friendship is reduced to a tactic for evangelization, then it ceases to be friendship and becomes manipulation. John 4 does not support such reduction. The narrative certainly has revelatory and missional dimensions, but these unfold through genuine encounter rather than through the use of the other as a means. A friendship-centered public theology must therefore guard against turning dialogical relation into hidden public relations. It must cultivate sincerity, patience, and the willingness to remain in difficult conversation.

From contested worship to widened public witness

The fourth movement in the narrative concerns worship and the public reach of theological encounter. The dialogue turns toward the dispute between Jerusalem and Gerizim, a dispute about legitimate location, authority, and access to God. Jesus' response does not simply arbitrate in conventional terms. The narrative decouples worship from the monopoly of contested sacred geography and speaks of worship in spirit and truth. This shift is profound for public theology because it relocates the divine-human relation beyond rigid spatial possession while preserving theological depth.

In public theological terms, the narrative critiques the assumption that God is most fully encountered only within bounded enclaves of religious control. The scene at the well is itself already a performative commentary on this issue. Theological disclosure occurs outside the presumed center. The well becomes a space of revelation, and the woman becomes not a passive observer but a bearer of testimony to others. The scene therefore subverts the imagination that theological significance flows only from recognized centers to marginal others. Instead, the public space of encounter becomes a site of theological disclosure and social reconfiguration.

This dimension matters deeply in the Indonesian context, where religion is publicly visible and where disputes over recognition, sacred authority, and public legitimacy remain socially potent. A friendship-centered public theology does not deny the importance of religious identity or worshiping communities. It does, however, resist the notion that God's work in public life can be contained within closed confessional circuits. Worship in spirit and truth is not privatization; it is a reorientation of divine relation that frees theology for wider public responsibility.

The narrative ending strengthens this point. When the woman goes to the city, the conversation becomes communal. Others come, hear, and respond. The movement from dialogue to widened witness shows that genuine public theology is neither solitary nor merely interpersonal. Friendship is never only dyadic. It opens social space. It invites broader participation. The public expands because the relation expands. This is precisely why friendship can serve as a model for public theology: it is personally enacted but socially generative.

Restored agency and dialogical witness

A final interpretive point concerns agency. Much scholarship has challenged reductive readings that cast the Samaritan woman as merely immoral or morally defective (Day, 2002; Natar, 2019; Okure, 2009). Whether one emphasizes feminist, postcolonial, or contextual dimensions, the narrative clearly grants her significant theological agency. She questions, interprets, responds, and eventually bears witness to her community. This is not a minor detail. For public theology, it signals that the other is not only the recipient of theological address but also a participant in theological disclosure.

This insight is decisive for the argument of the article. Public theology shaped by friendship cannot be monological. It cannot assume that Christians enter public space as the only active interpreters while others function as background or resistance. Friendship requires reciprocal agency. The public emerges when multiple voices become capable of participating in meaningful exchange. In John 4, the woman's subjectivity is neither erased nor merely affirmed sentimentally. It is activated. She becomes a public agent.

A friendship-centered public theology for plural Indonesia must therefore be committed to the public agency of religious others. This does not mean abandoning Christian conviction. It means recognizing that public truth is discerned in relations where others are permitted to speak as subjects with histories, questions, and capacities for witness. Such a theology will be less anxious about control and more committed to transformative encounter.

Taken together, these narrative features yield a constructive grammar for public theology. Public theology begins in everyday spaces of need. It crosses real boundaries without abolishing difference. It speaks truth without humiliation. It loosens monopolies over sacred legitimacy and widens the circle of witness. It recognizes the agency of the other. Friendship names the relational form that holds these movements together. It is therefore not a decorative moral theme imposed on the text from outside. It is a theological synthesis of what the narrative itself performs. The next section develops this synthesis as a model for Indonesian public theology.

DISCUSSION

The constructive claim of this article is that friendship should be treated neither as a decorative moral theme nor as a private virtue detached from civic life. It should be treated as a thick public theological category that reorients how theology knows the public, how it speaks within it, and how it participates in shaping shared life. When read in that way, the results of the Johannine analysis do more than illuminate a biblical episode. They provide a constructive grammar for rethinking public theology in plural Indonesia.

Theoretical contributions

The good news of this article is that friendship cannot be treated either as decorative moral topic or as a mere personal affective relation, but as a thick civic category with the power to reorient the grammar of a plural-society public theology. This statement is important in that much of popular theology, despite its value, still remains unspoken in a discursive as against a relational direction, an institutional as against an encounter direction, and normative declaration as against social embodiment direction. It is not that the popular theology will be undermined in its intellectual prowess. The danger is almost the opposite, it becomes intellectually well-to-do and socially anorectic. In such settings as Indonesia, which involve the negotiation of religious identities by the intimacy of day-to-day life, by locality of action, by local complaint, by mutual festivity, by common gossip, by periodical suspicion, a socially thin public theology is inadequate. It can call pluralism without making a viable form of common life possible.

The modern reading of John 4 suggests that it is time to make theology more relational with the assistance of a more relational anthropology. Jesus does not first meet the Samaritan woman in terms of the doctrinal coincidences, political accord or institutionalisation. He meets her in a controversial social space, addresses her as an interlocutor, speaks of truth without disgrace and lets the encounter have an enlarged witness in the community. In this aspect, friendship cannot be hinted in this as sweet harmony. An orderly mode of public relation is an open-minded, discriminating, vulnerable and honest mode of public relation. It can therefore be termed as relational epistemology. Truth is not spoken at the other, truth is learned, tried and is lived in coming to the other. This type of formulation extends the public theology to knowing with and before publics.

It is possible to make three theoretical contributions based on this reframing. First, it transcends traditional popular theology by anticipating relation as the main but not a secondary element. The different publics of Tracy cannot be ever removed because theology must remain answerable to church, academy and society. Stackhouse is significant because the social theology is not able to escape the institutional frameworks, the economic systems and the moral codes. Breitenberg is right when he states that theology of the people must be publicly involved and interdisciplinary. Nevertheless, the present paper asserts that these emphases are more operative based on the relational texture of the public life. Friendship does not replace discourse, institutions and normativity, but instead, it is the social medium through which they acquire a credibility, intelligibility and transformations in plural settings.

Second, this article is another contribution by contextual theology as it shows that context is not merely the social site where theology is rendered. The second relational area whereby theology is tested is the context. Pancasila, pluralism, or religious diversity cannot be used as the descriptions of the background of the contextually responsible theology in Indonesia. It must ask questions of how Christians lead a visible life where distinction is close, regular, embodied and even emotionally loaded. This denial of context to abstract culture and to state policy that makes friendship an urgent category. It informs the emphasis on the greeting, listening, visiting, mourning, cooperating, and telling the truth across difference. These practices are not alternatives to theological thought but one of its key points of verification.

Third, the article contributes to the Indonesian theological discourse by transcending the terms of tolerance and moderation that have been reiterated many times. The civic virtue of tolerance is also interesting, especially in those instances when the threat of violence and marginalization remains a fact. Even religious moderation has acquired a strong popular idiom in Indonesia, as it seeks to keep out the extremism and social order. Nevertheless, both of these may be limited since they are mostly procedural restraint or virtue that is governed by the state. Tolerance may be as innocent as non-interference. Moderation is no more than decency. None of them leads to the recognition of each other, shared vulnerability, and transformed imagination by default. Friendship brings about a more significant

horizon. Not only does it ask whether religious societies are not at war with each other, but whether they are learning to think of one another as neighbours whose well-being is in some measure interwoven.

This does not mean that friendship should reverse the rights, law or institutional protection. This would be uncouth politically. The non-symmetrical, discriminatory and unequally vulnerable societies require law, civil institutions and direct means of responsibility. The labor of constitutional order cannot be done by friendship. The moral imagination or trust cannot be generated by either law or policy alone. Friendship is therefore not an alternative to justice, but a relation of justice. It makes the overall experience personal and does not demystify the structural issues. Actually, in addition to the merits of friendship-based public theology it may subvert privatized spirituality and depersonalized politics. It raises the question of how structural problems and incarnated relations could be retained.

Implications for churches, theological education, and civic life in Indonesia

The Indonesian significance of this argument is substantial. Indonesia's pluralism is dense rather than merely demographic. Religious communities interact not only through official dialogue forums, but through schools, markets, local celebrations, neighborhood associations, disaster response, kinship ties, and digital media. Under such conditions, the public role of theology cannot be reduced to national statements or institutional advocacy alone. Churches are called to form Christians capable of inhabiting proximity with integrity. A friendship-shaped public theology therefore has ecclesial, pedagogical, and civic implications. In practice, this framework can be turned into small, consistent programs of relational formation for churches and theological institutions. These can involve visits to interfaith neighborhoods, interfaith social-service projects, students' experiences in plural community contexts, and structured reflection on interfaith experiences. It is not an attempt to make friendship a superficial program but to equip communities to listen, cooperate, and speak the truth without dominating. These practices can enable future church leaders to develop an understanding of pluralism as more than a classroom concept but as a reality that can be negotiated through the relationships that church leaders have in their daily lives.

Ecclesially, churches need to recover formation practices that prepare believers for public relationality. Much Christian discourse about mission, witness, and apologetics has often emphasized proclamation more than encounter. A friendship-based public theology does not deny witness, but it insists that witness becomes distorted when the other is approached instrumentally. The Samaritan narrative shows that truthful speech emerges within relation, not outside it. Churches should therefore cultivate habits of presence, hospitality, reciprocal learning, and neighborhood solidarity. Friendship in this sense is not an optional supplement to public witness. It is one of its most reliable forms.

Pedagogically, theological schools in Indonesia can benefit from a curricular shift that integrates public theology, contextual theology, biblical interpretation, and interreligious engagement around relational practices. Students should be trained not only to analyze pluralism conceptually, but also to interpret public life through ethnographic sensitivity, ethical discernment, and dialogical competence. Friendship as relational epistemology can function as a heuristic for such formation. It encourages the future theologian or church leader to ask: What can be known only through encounter? Which theological claims are clarified, corrected, or deepened when religious others are no longer abstractions but neighbors? How do truth and humility coexist in public witness?

Civically, the framework proposed here offers a more durable social imagination than coexistence based solely on distance. In many plural societies, peace is often imagined as the successful management of boundaries. Conflict is reduced by ensuring that communities do not interfere too much with one another. This arrangement may be necessary in fragile situations, but it is normatively thin. Friendship invites a more ambitious account of peace, one grounded in reciprocal recognition and everyday cooperation without requiring sameness. Such a model is especially important in periods of polarization, when digital circulation of fear and stereotype can rapidly undo the patient work of local coexistence.

Limits and future research

Simultaneously, there is a need to have four warnings. To begin with, friendship should not be idealized. History, power and memory determine relations across religious difference. Other communities are affected by trauma, distrust, or past experiences of not belonging. A theology of friendship publicly should thus have a place of

lament, criticism and asymmetry. Second, friendship should not be instrumentalized as a subterranean conversion strategy. When friendship has been turned into religious utility, then it no longer is the friendship. Third, friendship should not undermine doctrinal particularity. The model here is not relativist. It presupposes that communities are held responsible to their beliefs as they are entering into dialogical relation. Fourth, friendship cannot be separated of structural analysis. The aspects of policy, law, inequality, and civic institutions are yet to be tackled by public theology.

These warnings explain the particular form of the contribution. The friendship, as constructed in this paper is a disciplined social practice of honest, modest and solidaristic relation across difference. It is epistemic in the sense that it enables communities to know themselves and others in a more truthful manner. It is moral as it does not obliterate difference by affirming dignity. It is political in a small yet factual measure in that it extends the social conditions where the common life is made possible. And it is theological as it is to some extent an imprecise expression of the boundary-crossing generosity that is revealed in the ministry of Jesus.

This constructive framework should be enhanced in future research in at least three directions. One possibility is the empirical: ethnographic and interview-based research might explore how and why congregations, schools, and neighborhood networks in Indonesia are and are not practicing friendship across religious boundaries. A second line is comparative: other parallel societies in Asia and Africa might be explored where similar frameworks might be tested in the context of having to negotiate the postcolonial past and thick religious pluralism through public theology. A third way is positive doctrinal work: friendship might be developed further in the context of ecclesiology, pneumatology, and political theology. These studies would assist in knowing whether friendship can serve not only as a practical heuristic, but as a larger organizing category of the common Christian thinking.

To conclude, the main argument of the article is that the future of the public theology in plural Indonesia does not merely lie in what theology says in public, but also on the types of relations in which theology becomes intelligible in the public. To go beyond the civility of the state, the interreligious prudence, or an abstract moral language, it needs a richer social grammar. Grammar is provided by friendship. It does not do it by reducing the ambition of theology, but by rendering theological responsibility more tangible, more dialogical, more responsible to the harsh realities of common life.

CONCLUSION

This paper has suggested that friendship provides an interesting and conceptually sound methodology to restructure the public theology in plural Indonesia. The study has suggested friendship as a thicker category that unites epistemology, ethics, and praxis against other approaches that identify public theology as mainly discourse, institutional intervention, or procedural civility. The argument has been made based on a threefold gap in the literature: the little focus on relationality in mainstream public theology, the under-theorization of friendship in Indonesian theological response to pluralism, and the inadequate positive utilization of John 4 as a source of public theology and not just as a mission, gender, or interreligious dialogue tool.

The study utilized a methodological constructive theological design, which combined the analysis of literature and a contextual hermeneutical reading of John 4:5-26, continued to 4:42. In such a manner, the article was able to discover a coherent public grammar of the Samaritan encounter: the publicness of the meeting place, the transgression of ethnic and religious boundaries without difference imploding, the performance of honest but non-humiliating speech, the re-orientation of worship to an expanded horizon, and the re-establishment of agency which gives rise to communal witness. So read, the Johannine story is not merely a pious book. It is made a script of common theological fantasy.

The key contribution of the article is to conceptualize friendship as relational epistemology of public theology. Friendship here is not sentimental agreement, tactical co-existence and disguised proselytism. It is a serious practice of public relation by which individuals get to know each other, to tell the truth, to perceive dignity, and to envision ordinary life through difference. This framework mostly fits the Indonesian context, where pluralism is practiced in the context of daily proximity and where civic peace cannot be achieved by mere legal tolerance or state-sponsored moderation. A communal theology of friendship does not supplant rights, institutions, and policy. Instead, it provides a relational richness without which such structures tend to be weak or socially anorectic.

The implication is evident to churches and theological institutions in Indonesia. Public theology needs to be established not just in conferences, statements and academic discourse but also in a practice of hospitality, listening to each other, solidarity with the neighborhood, and honesty in relating to religious others. To play its role in the common good credibly, the church needs to develop believers who can occupy the public difference without fear, domination, or withdrawal. Friendship is thus not an outlier of public witness. It is among the most tangible forms, in which public witness is practiced.

In a broader sense, this paper proposes that attention to relational categories as a result of plural, postcolonial, and everyday situations benefits global public theology. Indonesia is not just a local case to which the existing theory is applied. It is also a place where new theoretical knowledge can be derived. In that regard, friendship as public theology is contextually situated and possibly translatable. It provides a bright way forward in the direction of future scholarship and of theological practice in societies where living together across difference is not an option, but an unavoidable necessity.

In addition to its ecclesial and academic implications, this study has practical implications for public actors, policymakers, and interfaith dialogue forums in Indonesia. A public theology of friendship can help expand programs of religious moderation beyond administrative harmony to ongoing engagement, shared civic responsibility, and mutual recognition between religious communities. From a policy perspective, this framework indicates that peacebuilding is not just about regulation, formal dialogue, or conflict prevention mechanisms, but also about creating spaces for citizens of diverse faiths to cooperate, deliberate, mourn, celebrate, and respond together to common social issues. Friendship provides a more transformative grammar than ceremonial tolerance for interfaith forums, as it allows for mutual agency, truthful conversation, and collaborative action without erasing theological differences. In this respect, friendship is not just a theological virtue of the church and/or seminary but also a public good that can be used for plural democracy, civic trust, and social cohesion in Indonesia.

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