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Church and public theology in times of a pandemic

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Public Theology is a paradigm in theology which has gained ever increasing importance in recent decades. This is the case in academic theology where the “Global Network for Public Theology” was founded in 2007 at a conference in Princeton, including institutes for Public Theology in all continents of the globe. But it is also the case in church life all over the world. How the church can gain a public voice in modern pluralistic societies and deal responsibly with its public influence is a question that confronts church leaders as well as local church representatives every day. The sudden challenge of a new coronavirus spreading quickly around the globe is the most recent and maybe the most challenging example of this in recent history.

1. Public theology for a public church

Why we need a public theology has been explained by Dietrich Bonhoeffer with words so telling that I quote them repeatedly. In his *Ethics* he writes:

In flight of public controversy this person or that reaches the sanctuary of a *private virtuousness*. Such people neither steal, nor murder, nor commit adultery, but do good according to their

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abilities. But in voluntarily renouncing public life, these people know exactly how to observe the permitted boundaries that shield them from conflict. They must close their eyes and ears to the injustice around them. Only at the cost of self-deception can they keep their private blamelessness clean from the stains of responsible action in the world.”²

Bonhoeffer’s words are rooted in his experience of Nazi Germany, where grave injustices could take place without strong protest from those who would have seen themselves as good Christians on the whole. Public theology in Germany has been deeply motivated by drawing the consequences for the future of this massive spiritual and moral failure. War, social injustice, the destruction of the natural world, but also an ethically sound reaction to a global pandemic are themes which are reflected on theologically, because they might be the issues focused upon when historians in the future will look back on our times.

Ronald Thiemann has well described the task of what we have come to call “public theology”. It is “to show that a theology shaped by the biblical narratives and grounded in the practices of Christian community can provide resources to enable people of faith to regain a public voice in our pluralistic culture. Our challenge is to develop a public theology that remains based in the particularities of the Christian faith while genuinely addressing issues of public significance.”³

How can the six guidelines for public theology, which I have developed elsewhere⁴, help us focus the questions to deal with when we try to respond responsibly to the global COVID-19 pandemic?

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 80 (original italics).

³ Ronald Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology. The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 19.

⁴ H. Bedford-Strohm, *Liberation Theology for a Democratic Society. Essays in Public Theology*, Lit 2018.

2. Six guidelines for public theology in times of a pandemic

2.1 Public Theology must be grounded in tradition

Public theology needs to give public witness for the sources from which it speaks. Defending one's religious claims or emphasising the ethical profile at the cost of the spiritual profile, something that Wolfgang Huber has called the "self-secularisation of the church",⁵ is therefore not the appropriate basis for public theology. When communities – as Ronald Thiemann has stated – "lose touch with their own traditions, they also undermine their ability to participate in and influence the public discussion. Communities that are undergoing a perpetual identity crisis do not make for interesting conversation partners."⁶

In the light of this assessment, Thiemann attempts "to show that a theology shaped by the biblical narratives and grounded in the practices of Christian community can provide resources to enable people of faith to regain a public voice in our pluralistic culture. Our challenge is to develop a public theology that remains based in the particularities of the Christian faith while genuinely addressing issues of public significance."⁷

For me, a verse from 2 Timothy 1,7 has gained special importance since the pandemic began to develop. I have repeatedly quoted it in public: "For God has given us not a spirit of fear but of power, love and prudence." Even though it is a verse from the Bible, which is a spiritual source only for a part of our pluralistic society, it resonates in the souls of more people than just Christians. **Inner Power** is what people yearn for in times of insecurity. **Love** is certainly one of the primary resources in a society looking for coping strategies in experiences of threatened health and danger of death, but also of drastic economic decline, loss of jobs and destruction of many peoples' life plans. **Prudence** is sorely needed in difficult situations that cannot be simply resolved, but always imply unsatisfactory consequences no matter what decisions you make. Substantial values, accompanied by good information and sober judgment, are the necessary ingredients for prudence.

⁵ Huber (1998), pp. 10, 12, 31.

⁶ R. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville 1991), 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

The most controversial example in Germany was the restrictions on contact in nursing homes. Should the hospitals and nursing homes be shut down for visitors in order to keep the virus out? A large number of deaths because of the virus in some nursing homes led to such policy. But yet, can it be responsible to leave old or sick people without the physical company of their relatives? What if the protection from physical death leads to social death? There is no clear solution to this dilemma. All the more reason to call for prudence.

Thus, we see: a biblical verse can be a resource that transcends the horizons of religious communities. “For God has given us not a spirit of fear but of power, love and prudence.” – this sentence can radiate energy against the crisis, even when people cannot affirm the “God”-word in its full sense for themselves.

Nevertheless, biblical language is not sufficient in the public voice of the church. Then, the question arises: what can be the complementary language in which the church’s public witness can be given?

2.2 Public theology must be bilingual

Public theology needs to be bilingual: it needs to be eloquent in its own biblical and theological language and thus needs to give an account of its origin. But it also needs to speak a language that can be understood by the public as a whole, using reason and experience to show that biblical perspectives make good sense and give helpful orientation beyond the boundaries of a specific religious tradition. As much as the public must be open to the semantic potential of religious language, it is necessary for religious communities in general, and the churches in particular, to translate their contributions to public discourse into a generally accessible language.

A good example of how this becomes relevant in times of a pandemic is the debate around the question of solidarity. Many people lose their material means of support. This is the case even in affluent Western societies where small businesses, shops or restaurants face bankruptcy, even though they have done whatever they could to make their enterprises work, sometimes over decades of hard work. Vast numbers of poor people, without any savings, are struggling hard to make ends meet. In countries where the level of absolute poverty is very

high and where national resources in general are very limited, this challenge is even more drastic.

The biblical option for the poor is a clear guideline for how to deal with this situation of injustice. Solidarity is a clear mandate of faith. In order to make this basic orientation plausible for all people of goodwill and be a voice to be heard in the public discourse, the language of reason is needed. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus himself gives a good basis for this. He explains the commandment of love in terms of the so-called “Golden Rule”: “Do unto others what you want them to do unto you. This is the law and the prophets” (Mt 7,12). If you put yourself in the position of the other, what would you wish for?

The American philosopher John Rawls has used the philosophical method of the “veil of ignorance” to form an original position in which people try to find good rules for the society in which they want to live. They know everything about how societies work. But they do not know who they will be when the veil of ignorance will be lifted. This idea is very helpful in finding reasonable strategies in dealing with the pandemic. Will they be a restaurant owner who is losing his or her material livelihood? Or will they be owners of a company which sells software for video conferences and thereby makes a fortune in times of a pandemic?

The most reasonable rule for the distribution of wealth will be the “difference principle”, which promotes the maximization of the worst position rather than using luck as the decisive principle of distribution. Once the veil of ignorance is lifted, it will be much easier to live with higher taxation of the immense additional earnings based on the video conference boom than with being left alone with the financial catastrophe caused by the pandemic.

In the end, it becomes clear that the biblical option for the poor is the most reasonable and intelligent strategy to deal with the material consequences of the pandemic.

2.3 Public theology must be interdisciplinary

If public theology intends to speak to the wider public and if it claims to speak of realities, it needs to engage in a vivid dialogue with the other scholarly

disciplines.⁸ If public theologians want to understand societal trends, they need to study empirical sociological research and to understand theoretical interpretations of such research in theoretical sociology or social philosophy. If they aspire to engage in public debate on economic issues, they need to have a basic understanding of economic processes, even if it leads to unmasking seemingly objective facts as ideological constructs to be challenged. Since public theology is more than the confessional self-expression of believers, but seeks to be heard in the public sphere of a democratic society and its political decision-making bodies, it needs to take account of political science.

The most obvious and relevant dimension of interdisciplinary exchange in times of a pandemic is medical research. For an ethically sound reaction to the pandemic the most recent and substantial results of virological research are extremely important. Knowing how effectively certain political strategies such as lockdowns or contact rules and mandatory hygiene habits can fight the virus is decisive for finding the right measures to combat the disease. For the public voice of the church to be responsible, it is imperative to take into account what virologists understand as increasing the danger for peoples' health and what they see as saving their lives. Conspiracy theories of all kinds are on the rise which poison such public discourse. Only a clear and solid account of scientific research can be the basis for guidelines in public life which protect the lives of all people, especially the weakest members of society.

2.4 Public theology must be prophetic

One of the most impressive stories of the Old Testament is the so-called "Nathan Parable" that the prophet Nathan tells to King David after the king's affair with Bathsheba. The parable tells about a rich man who does grave injustice to a poor man by taking the only sheep this poor man possesses to prepare a meal for his own guest. King David becomes very angry about the injustice the rich man has committed. The story ends with Nathan's courageous and challenging words:

⁸ See de Villiers (2005), p. 530: In developing a Christian vision of society "insights from academic disciplines other than theology have necessarily to be incorporated." This "can only be done responsibly if representatives from other academic disciplines and other social spheres are involved".

“You are the man!” Public theology follows the track Nathan set. It does not legitimise injustice but speaks to power in favour of justice.

Like prophets, public theologians are “connected critics”⁹, that is, people who are at home in a certain society, know its values and deficiencies, and speak up in public against what goes wrong.

Whether prophetic critique is needed or basic affirmation of government policies in dealing with the pandemic must be judged in each particular case. In Germany there were some voices that criticised the churches for not having spoken out prophetically against the massive contact restrictions in nursing homes, thereby – this was the accusation in any event – leaving people alone even when they were dying. But many ministers tried their best to keep contact with people in the nursing homes without risking their health. And should the churches have protested against the restrictions, knowing about the 30-40 people who had died from the virus in some of the nursing homes because the protection was not stringent enough? Such grave dilemmas are reasons for grief and empathy, but not for headlines the accusing a government trying to do its best to prevent a collapse of the health system. In this specific case churches in Germany chose a different path, which is based on a fifth criterion.

2.5 Public theology must make politics possible

A social ethic which only works if you never have to apply it is a bad social ethic. It is important to note that public theology is not fundamentally opposed to power. As opposed to liberation theology in times of dictatorship, public theology as a contextual theology for democratic societies makes use of the possibility of going public and expressing concerns about justice, peace and the integrity of creation in the public debate. Thus, it might be appropriate to say that public theology is liberation theology for a democratic society.

Avoiding a fundamental opposition strategy that might be necessary in a dictatorship, public theology can mean even backing the government in certain situations. During the beginning of the pandemic when the correct approach was completely unknown, the churches in Germany decided to back the government

⁹ M. Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Cambridge 1987.

in trying to encourage the population to voluntarily support the attempts to prevent the spreading of the virus and to stick with the legal restrictions serving the same goal. Adhering to not celebrating worship services in the churches, but rather developing all kinds of new formats that were mostly digitally-based was a conscious theological decision honouring the commandment to love one's neighbour and to protect the weakest members of the community. When the signs of love and respect that we were used to, such as handshakes or hugs, became the enemy of love, it was time to make an alternative policy possible and to support it in responding to this strange situation by restricting physical contact.

While these restrictions on physical contact apply to personal relationships, they are based on the same logic that also applies to the global horizon.

2.6 Public theology must be universally oriented

There is probably no institution in which personal connectedness in community is more local and at the same time universal than the church. It is the connectedness of the concrete experience of abundant life in relationships, connected with a sense of universal brotherhood and sisterhood, which makes me believe that the church plays a crucial role in the healing of the world. Being rooted in local parishes all over the world and at the same time being universal in the fullest sense makes the church an ideal agent of a global civil society.

Besides giving the comfort of God's ongoing love and care for everyone in times of the pandemic, it might therefore be the most important task of the church to open people's eyes to the suffering of those far away. When hunger increases and the number of people dying from the virus not only because of an infection but also because of the consequences of the economic breakdown, it is the churches' task to direct attention to this situation and speak up for global solidarity. In times in which many people struggle themselves at home this is not easy. But if the biblical theological assumption is true that very human being is created in the image of God, this is not a side issue. It reaches to the very core of the Christian tradition and the call that comes from it.

3. Conclusion

Doing public theology is always risky. It is all the more risky when academic reflection encounters the daily issues of public church life. Those who are church leaders have to take a stand and give answers to journalists whose task it is to critically confront those who hold public offices – whether in politics or in the church or in another societal institution – and who need to be held accountable for their actions. Sometimes those responsible can draw on clear judgements based on firm convictions and passionately stand for what they say. In other times they need to give answers on a much more fragile basis, either because biblical theological reflection leads to no firm result, or the assessment of the facts includes many unknown factors, or both.

As the example of dealing with contact restrictions in nursing homes shows, the answers they give can have grave consequences for peoples' lives and even for how they die. Practising public theology – this conclusion then becomes all the more evident – always means being ready to make mistakes, or even to become guilty. If doing public theology is a venture, then the hope for forgiveness is a prerequisite for it. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer has described so thoroughly, non-action due to uncertainty of judgment can be the less moral action. Responsibility means acting even under conditions of moral uncertainty. Freedom means knowing about both: the risk of becoming guilty and the courage to act based on trust in the possibility of forgiveness.