

Global Public Theology and Christology

Michael Welker

Basic Tasks of Public Theologies

In 1975 and in 1981 David Tracy, professor of theology at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, published two books which marked the beginning of a new agenda in Christian theology. The books were entitled: *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*¹, and *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*². In these books, Tracy insisted on the necessity of a genuinely public theology, and he combined this demand with the plea that theologies should analyze their pluralistic environments and should consciously operate within these pluralistic environments. In practical terms, Tracy analyzed "three publics" as primary contexts of Christian theology, namely (1) the society, (2) the academy, and (3) the church. He argued for a differentiated hermeneutics which permits (a) the differentiation of a political theology, an academic theology, and an ecclesial theology, and (b) the perception of their differentiated tasks. This approach made Tracy a leading voice in North American academic theology and an influential teacher of a new generation of prominent academic theologians in his country.

An evaluation of Tracy's achievements today would have to stress the fact that his most important work marked the *beginning* of an analysis of a public theology in the context of pluralistic societies. For three reasons, it did not develop further than that. *First*, it was basically *descriptive*, whereas most public theologies today intend to move from analytical and diagnostic tasks to all kinds of transformative praxis. *Second*, it limited the observations to *three* publics, the society (in the sense of a civil society), the academy (in the sense of academic theology and its neighboring fields), and the church. Other very important publics such as the media, the market, the legal system and politics went unnoticed although they shape

¹ D. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, New York, 1975.

² D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* New York, 1981.

the texture and the development of democratic pluralistic societies to a high degree. *Thirdly*, as early as in his most important book, *The Analogical Imagination*, Tracy showed a strong interest in *political and liberation theologies* with their movement “from manifestation and proclamation to history and praxis”³. But this again represented only a beginning, since Tracy was content with throwing some sharp short glances at these movements.⁴

However, later, in his next book, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*⁵, Tracy intensified this interest. From then on, he wanted to put his theology also in the service of various political, feminist and liberation theologies and movements with their, as he called it, combination of “resistance and hope”⁶. He also tried to do justice to soft post-modern sensitivities and world-views in literature and other media. Along with these interests, he increasingly focused his attention on old and new mystical theologies and on the apophatic and the hidden God. The problem with all these shifts of interest was that he unfortunately lost the analytic grip on societal, academic and ecclesial pluralism and on the theological resources to deal with these constellations. Rather, he navigated in a vague “plurality” of discourses and was in pursuit of various prophetic, practical and aesthetic impulses. As early as in the final part of his main work, *The Analogical Imagination*, the endangerment of his serious attempts to deal with pluralistic environments became obvious when he stated, “In our pluralistic, conflictual, near chaotic situation . . . everyone will be encouraged to risk his or her own journey of intensification into a concrete particularity and to articulate some primary focal meaning”⁷. An existentialism and a moral situationism takes over. This existentialism and moral situationism needs to be bound back to the societal-analytic diagnosis of pluralistic configurations, if it is not to be drowned in a global moral market of all sorts of concerned voices and discourses. Hegel and Marx, by the way, already aimed their scorching criticism at such a moral market of voices and discourses.

Four tasks have to be tackled in order to avoid the danger that public theology and the talk about pluralism get stuck in a vast realm of moral pleas with its constant alarms, laments, and claims, which in their turn only contingently reach the impact of the media, and only occasionally the real shaping power of ecclesial, educational, academic, political, legal and economic processes.

The *first task* is of a theological-sociological nature. Following the subtitle of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s brilliant dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* it could be ter-

³ Ibid., 390.

⁴ Ibid., 75-79; 390-398; 419f.

⁵ D. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, San Francisco, 1987.

⁶ Ibid., 82ff.

⁷ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 453f.

med “A Theological Study (dogmatische Untersuchung) of the Sociology of the Church (and the Society)”. This implies a careful analysis of the configurations of “Western” societies, many of which in late Western modernity are democratic and pluralistic. And it requires a careful analysis of the religious movements, institutions and organizations within them. These societies do not only develop powerful organizations or “social systems” such as politics, the media, the church, the market, education, the law. They also bring forth “civil societies”, a realm of associations, which challenge and shape the social systems. The civil societal associations want to have an impact on the systems, and they are in some part or to a high degree indirectly and directly shaped by public theologies in religious or secularized forms.

In order to understand and to consciously and systemically influence the power circulation of our societies, we *secondly* need a *hermeneutics of personal and interpersonal communication*, for which the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer also set the standards. Here theological dogmatics needs to focus on anthropological phenomena and practices and their interactivity on the moral, social, political, and universal levels. Bonhoeffer is aware of the fact that many mostly unconscious presuppositions underlie our ideas and our talk about the human being, the person, the individual, but also our talk about the community, society, the public and the publics. The perception of the single human being and his/her social connections interacts with visions of “the human” and “humanity” and the open and latent value systems which we connect with them. These value systems and our visions of normal and ideal social connections determine how we regard the condition of the individual, the basic I-Thou correlations and more complex social configurations. We have to distinguish between fluid social connections and institutionalized and organized ones. And here again we see that our determination of social forms and our concepts of the individual partnership and humankind are deeply interconnected. Bonhoeffer envisions several basic social constellations, which we must differentiate and relate in our analysis of, and talk about, church, society and the publics.⁸

With two further additions and extensions we have to differentiate seven dimensions:

1. The self-referential personality of the human being;
2. the basic interpersonal I-thou-constellations;
3. the social constellations of groups or associations of persons in fluid forms, which Schleiermacher so brilliantly analyzed in his theory of sociability (*Geselligkeit*). Their understanding helps us to get an idea both of the constitution

⁸ D. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Works, Vol. 1), C. Green et al. (Eds.), Minneapolis, 2009, Chapter 2.

and the operation of associations in our communities, in our social movements and in our civil societies;

4. the social constellations in institutionalized forms (schools, firms, administrations, etc.);
5. today we would add: The social constellations in the macro-organizations of pluralistic societies, which sociologists term "social systems" (the academy, the market, the media, the legal system, etc.);
6. the concepts and visions of the human and the humane;
7. the relation of God to these various forms of human interaction and being, respectively the relations to God in and from these different realms of life.

Only on the basis of the conscious perception and work with these seven differentiations can we avoid many severe mistakes in dogmatic theology – mistakes which we even find among the great classics such as Schleiermacher and Barth.⁹ Such mistakes are, for instance, the theological attempts to use for all theological analysis the mere perspective of the self-referential subjectivity; the attempt to analyze all human interaction with the help of the dialogistic or personalistic I-Though model; the attempts to understand complex social relations exclusively on the basis of sociable and moral interaction alone; the attempts to analyze complex social relations with the figure of the individual and society; the attempts to do justice to religious and ecclesial constellations by focusing on the abstract "relation of God and the human". These and other modes of thought have to be revealed as poor or even dangerous reductionisms, because they hinder or prevent insights into the dynamics of personal experience, to say nothing about the dynamics of church, society and public life. If they are not consciously applied and calibrated, they distort our perspectives on the relative power and the relative weakness of human beings involved in religious and political interaction. I suggest that we call this differentiation of the seven basic social constellations the *Bonhoeffer matrix*. I also propose that we make it mandatory for all ecclesiological and public theological contributions to at least show a conscious sensitivity to these seven dimensions of analysis and observation.

On the *third level* we have to locate the most pressing problems, the specific concerns, conflicts and tasks public theologies face in concrete situations and in their concrete individual and communal engagement. What are the primary contexts in which the most pressing dilemmas arise? What are the contexts in which our aspirations and hopes to constructively deal with these dilemmas and distortions can be nourished? What are the contexts in which we see practical, societal, potentially routinized and institutionalized means and practices, which can turn

⁹ Cf. M. Welker, *Theologische Profile. Schleiermacher – Barth – Bonhoeffer – Moltmann*, Edition Chrison, Frankfurt, 2009.

religious, political, and moral concerns into pedagogical, academic, political, legal, and economic processes?

The three complex tasks just described would not reach the level of "public theology" if there was not a *fourth level* which in fact should accompany and guide the investigations of the three previously named levels. On this fourth level we have to deal with God's revelation and God's sustaining, rescuing, saving and ennobling work and guidance. We must avoid the traps of metaphysics, existentialism and psychology which Bonhoeffer rightly targeted in his call for a critique of religion. We have to examine where reductionistic I-Thou talk, reductionistic talk about the God-human relation and the individual-society relation has been poisoned by equally reductionistic ideas of the content of theological dogmatics, be it the doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the doctrines of creation, of the church and of eschatology.

In the second part of my contribution I will try to show that a biblically oriented understanding of the resurrected and elevated Christ can provide such a fourth level. A biblically oriented dogmatic understanding of the elevated Christ, present in the power of the Holy Spirit, of New Creation and the coming reign of God can and will provide orientation for a public theology which takes seriously the challenges just described.

Christology and Public Theology

I propose that again we go back to the teaching of the *munus triplex* – the threefold office of Christ. This differentiation, which can occasionally be found in the church fathers, reached the status of a dogmatic teaching in Calvin's *Institutes*, book two, chapter 15. Here Calvin states: "To know the purpose for which Christ was sent by the Father, and what he conferred upon us, we must look above all at three things in Him, the prophetic office, kingship and priesthood." Calvin develops a biblically-based teaching of Christ's threefold saving activity, first the prophetic office, second the kingly office and finally the priestly office.¹⁰ The te-

¹⁰ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vol., The Library of Christian Classics XX and XXI, Philadelphia, 1960, I, 494-503. Edmund Schlink observed in his *Ecumenical Dogmatics* (*Ökumenische Dogmatik: Grundzüge*, Göttingen, 1983, 414) that the spread spreading of the doctrine of the threefold office of Christ is a unique ecumenical phenomenon. It reached its dogmatic shape not before, but after the separation of the churches and yet it became common teaching in the different confessional traditions. Through Johann Gerhard's nine-volume work *Loci theologici* (1610-1622, IV,15), this teaching was taken up by Lutheran dogmatics and transported into the 19th century by Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*. In the 20th century it reached all confessions and churches. Josef Scheeben (*Handbuch katholischer Dogmatik*, 1954, 5,2) implemented it in the Catholic tradition. Vatican II made ample use of it, and also in the Orthodox dogmatics (Staniloae, Trempala) it had a prominent position as well. In an emergent

aching of the threefold office of Christ allows us to focus clearly on the *public Christ* in different domains of life, and it allows us to differentiate and to relate Christ's presence in ecclesial, political and moral-diaconical contexts.

Two additional moves are crucial in order to gain the full impact of this dogmatic orientation. The *first* of these moves is already present in Calvin's *Institutes*. With reference to Is. 61:1-2 and Luke 4:18, Calvin states: "We see that he (scil. Christ) was anointed by the spirit . . . not only for himself that he might carry on the office of teaching, but for the whole body that the power of the spirit might be present in the continuing preaching of the Gospel" (*Institutes*, 496). Calvin stressed an insight which had already become most important in early Christianity: Jesus Christ is not only the one on whom the spirit of God *rests*, Jesus Christ *pours* the spirit to constitute his post-Easterly body, to live in his witnesses and to allow his witnesses to live in him.

The *second* move has to deal with the different offices of Christ. How do we avoid all sorts of arbitrary constructions of the three offices? How do we avoid the danger that all sorts of religious and moral ideas shape our view of the offices of Christ according to our own contingent desires and needs? In short, how do we avoid the problem that Christ is functionalized or even ideologized? In my view, the most helpful recommendations propose to orient the three offices of Christ with respect to his pre-Easterly life, his cross, and his resurrection.¹¹ For a long time, however, any orientation in this way was blocked. There was a consensus in the academic community that we have no knowledge of the pre-Easterly life of Christ. There was a constant association of the cross of Christ with the suffering God only. And there was a constant battle about the resurrection perceived as recuscitation, an understanding affirmed by fundamentalists and ridiculed by skeptics. The last 30 years, however, have brought a most welcome theological change in this agonizing situation.

The clear awareness of the multidimensionality of the real life of Jesus Christ opened up totally new potentials in the search for the historical Jesus and in the orientation derived from it. The search for the historical Jesus and for the radiation of his life, for the constitution of faith and fellowship has to take into account the likelihood that Jesus had a different impact on the rural population of Galilee than on the urban population of Jerusalem. It must consider the likelihood that all those who resisted the Roman occupation and wished to hold the Mosaic Law or

way it became ecumenical consensus not only in the Reformation churches, but also in the broad run from the Orthodox to the Pentecostal churches. For detailed references cf. *M. Welker, Gottes Offenbarung: Christologie, Neukirchen, 2012, 198ff.* (*God the Revealed: Christology, Grand Rapids, 2013*).

¹¹ *D. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, Grand Rapids, 2013, 155.*

the temple cult in high esteem received Jesus differently from those who wanted to embrace the Roman culture. We have to consider the likelihood that those who experienced Jesus' healing and acceptance gave different testimonies than those whose main impression of Jesus was formed in the conflicts with the religious and political forces in Jerusalem. It is the life of the historical Jesus itself which gives rise to and nourishes the multiplicity of memories, expectations and experiences. It is the pre-Easterly life of Jesus which leads to different images of Jesus which stand in tension and even in conflict with one another. This refined view of what is historical enables us to see that the despairing reductionistic search for the lowest common denominator is a mistaken path. We cannot treat Jesus like a stone in the desert. What is historically important and revealing are precisely the differences and tensions among clusters of biblical testimony which, however, are in themselves coherent and consistent.

We now see that the real life of Christ radiates in different contexts and thus generates different perspectives on him. One of these perspectives sees the diaconical dimensions particularly strongly: As John Dominic Crossan and others put it: Jesus saw the basic needs of human beings, nourishment, health and mutual acceptance.¹² His practice of love and forgiveness, table-fellowship and an egalitarian ethos actually characterizes his *kingly office*. This king, who is also a brother and friend, even a poor person and an outcast, shapes the constant movement towards radical democracy characterized by love and care, mutual acceptance, recognition and respect. In the power of the Spirit, the discipleship of Christ, consciously and unconsciously, gives shape to a reign of God movement, which has a gigantic impact on the political, social and cultural life across the earth.

The constant striving for mandatory education and health-care in many societies today has to be seen in this light. By the power of the spirit this office of Christ involves people across the globe and across the centuries. It constitutes one of the three *Gestalten* of his reign. What a great orientation for any public theology! However, this orientation alone is not sufficient. It can even lead to Christological and theological distortions. The prophetic office and the priestly office are of equal importance – indeed, the three offices have to be respected in their perichoretic union.

How do we have to conceive of the *prophetic office* and its relation to the cross? The cross of Christ witnesses to a most dramatic situation of the human condition. We are not only bound to finitude, fragility and the unavoidable brutality of life, all of which lead to the groaning of creation and to the search for God's guidance and God's goals with the world, with the human species and its

¹² *J. D. Crossan, The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant, San Francisco, 1992.*

fellow creatures. The deeper and much more dramatic message of the cross says that the good orders and institutions which should support human life, societies and cultures, that even religion and even the church can be misused, can be distorted and transformed into powers of sin, powers of the self-jeopardy of humankind and their disconnection from God.

In his book *The Crucified God* Jürgen Moltmann differentiated the message of the cross of Christ by saying that Jesus died in conflict with the Jewish religion as a *blasphemer*, in conflict with the Roman Empire as an *insurgent*, and in tension with God in God-forsakenness.¹³ I think that this differentiation is most helpful, although it does not cover all the dimensions witnessed to in the biblical message of the cross. Jesus indeed dies in conflict with the Jewish religion, he dies in conflict with the world-power of Rome, but he also dies in conflict with two types of law – the Jewish and the Roman law –, and he dies in conflict with public opinion: “And they cried out again: ‘Crucify him’ [...] and they shouted all the more: ‘Crucify him’” (Mark 15:13ff.; Matthew 27:22f.; Luke 23:21f.; John 19:6.15). Jews and gentiles, friends and foes, indeed the whole world conspires in its resistance against the saving presence of God.

Despite this dramatic message, however, the cross of Christ is a revelatory and salvific event in more than one way. In light of the resurrection and of the work of the pre-Easterly Jesus it is an event which marks a turning-point in the world and in the salvation of humanity and all creation. It is not without reason that the cross of Christ stands at the center of the church and stands for the center of Christian faith. Christian piety loses its gravity, its weight and its orientation when faith no longer comes from the cross and from the crucified Christ.

The cross of Christ reveals the situation of global hopelessness without escape. It is a situation in which the so-called enemies, the relative global public and even the resistance fighters – i.e., the disciples – conspire and are involved. The situation of God-forsakenness here is not only one of individual and collective disorientation. Rather, this situation of God-forsakenness displays itself in global public anomie, in global public chaos and in a triumph of sin, all of which pervert the good forces of life. Religion, law, politics, and public opinion work together and bring about this situation. The cross reveals the abysmal situation that in the name of justice and the good, in the name of truth and salvation innocent people can be ostracized, tortured and killed. The cross reveals the law in all its dimensions under the power of sin. It thus reveals the radical difference between God and humanity. The cross does not reveal the absolute “death of God”, but indeed the serious possibility that from this point on God is dead to human beings.

In the light and darkness of the cross of Christ, the prophetic office gains

¹³ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, Minneapolis, 1993, Chapter IV.

its shape and its depth. A constant critical and self-critical search for truth and justice is generated, and a public proclamation and education is connected with it. This prophetic office is not limited to the realms of the church. In partly or fully secularized forms it captures truth- and justice-seeking communities in the academy, in the legal system, in education and in civil societies. The prophetic office can even turn against religious communities and churches. It can become executed in most dramatic forms up to the level of non-violent resistance and suffering. Again, what a great challenge and task for a global public theology!

Finally, we have to focus on the *priestly office* of Christ, the priestly shape of the reign of God. This office has all too often been limited to the topics of sacrifice and atonement. I propose to seek and to unfold its orienting power in the light of the resurrection witnesses. The fragmentary and almost modest character of the witnesses to the resurrection is striking. That may be the reason why the arts have had such difficulty in depicting the event of the resurrection. The biblical witnesses contradict the few attempts in the fine arts, such as the Isenheim Altar, to represent Jesus the *victor* as an icon of the resurrection. Rather, the biblical texts speak of testimonies which on the one hand are characterized by personal authenticity and certainty of the experience and on the other hand by its fragmentary, fleeting and perspectival character which easily invites doubts and necessitates the search for truth.

Francis Fiorenza has emphasized that this character of testimony, fragmented and perspectival, is indispensable to the resurrection witnesses. He assumes that these necessarily multiple testimonies push towards metaphorical speech when they refer to each other and seek to thematize the complex reality which they present perspectivally. Above all he has called attention to the fact that these testimonies seek to be anchored in actual and symbolic actions which become basic ritual forms of the early church.¹⁴

The testimonies to the resurrection are expressed in the breaking of the bread, in the greeting of peace, in the opening of the scriptures and in other ritualizable actions and signs, which form the basic life of the early church. This somehow fragile theophany, mediated through proclamation, the opening of the *messiah-secret* in the scriptures and the celebration of Holy Communion, the sending of the disciples and the command to baptize – this is what is witnessed to by the resurrection accounts of the biblical traditions. This view paves the way towards an understanding of the reign of God and of the reign of the resurrected Christ as an emergent reality. Out of a structured and definite multiplicity of witnesses the resurrected Lord edifies and shapes his church. Powerful monohierarchical forms

¹⁴ F. Fiorenza, *The Resurrection of Jesus in Roman Catholic Fundamental Theology*, in: S. T. Davis/ D. Kendall/ G. O’Collins (Eds.), *Resurrection – An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, Oxford, 1997, 213ff.

in the history of the church with its splendid feasts and great cathedrals should not tempt us to overlook the fact that the power of Christ's Spirit is operative in a different way. Emergent processes with a polyphony of witnesses to the triune God's creative presence constitute the reign of Christ in his evolving church.

With the breaking of the bread and the disclosure of the *messiah*-secret the resurrection witnesses clearly relate to the second dimension, the cross of Christ and its deep conflict with what scripture often calls "the world." In each celebration of Holy Communion a deeply distressing memory of this dimension of Christ's life and suffering is re-enacted.

Jesus celebrates communion with Peter who repeatedly denies him, with the disciples who fall asleep although he has asked them to stay awake with him and who finally forsake him and flee. He even celebrates communion with Judas, although he speaks the words of woe against him. The breaking of the bread indicates Jesus' and God's deepest merciful care for those who disconnect themselves from the presence of God. It shows the depth of the divine forgiveness of sins.¹⁵

Here we encounter the sacrificial love of God, who continues to forgive us and save us despite the victimization of Jesus Christ by the humans. The priestly office clearly relates to the kingly office. It witnesses to God's will that the humans constitute not only symbolic table-fellowship but also a community of mutual acceptance, mutual care, of justice and peace. But the priestly office reveals and conveys even more than that. It reveals a God who shows his mercy not only by healing and restituting human life, but rather by elevating and ennobling it. In this way the priestly office serves the cognition, adoration and glorification of the true and living God, who shows his mercy by elevating creation to divine glory. With the priestly office the definitely ecclesial responsibilities and loyalties of public theology come into view.

This does not mean that the main task of public theology would be to strengthen a specific institutionalized form of the church for its own sake. The main task of the priestly office and the priestly shape of the reign is to witness in proclamation, liturgy, teaching and mission to the sustaining, saving and ennobling God. This God is also present in the loving kingly office and in the truth- and justice-seeking prophetic office and shape of the divine reign. God seeks nothing less than winning his creatures for a share in his own life and glory. The priestly office conveys this salvific message and revelation. At the latest we have to notice at this point that global public theology has to rise to the challenge to understand itself as an ecumenical and eschatological public theology – without losing its moral, political and global responsibilities and virtues.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, translated by John Hoffmeyer, Grand Rapids, 2000, second printing: 2004.

Glocal Proclamation?

An excursion into "Public Dogmatics" inspired by Jürgen Moltmann and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm

Eva Harasta

Introduction

Public theology is essentially contextual because it voices theological concerns in given "publics" (in academy, society and church)¹. It aims at invigorating public discourse about ethical and/or political problems that need to be addressed. This means that public theology even depends on its context – at least in a pragmatic sense – because it can only be truly "public" as long as it manages to catch the attention of its particular public contexts. On this basis, then, one may ask: Why should public theology look *beyond* its given public context? If it is rooted in a certain, specific public context, and directed at its public context – why should public theology be programmatically "inter-contextual"? Given the ethical challenges within the regional contexts of public theologians, one may even argue that public theology should be decidedly focused on its given context. After all, the drive for inter-contextuality might only distract from investigating the immediate situation.

Of course, arguing against inter-contextuality goes against the intuition of public theologians, who, suiting intuition to act, founded the Global Network of Public Theology in order to strengthen public theological inter-contextuality. I think that this intuition for connecting different public contexts is rooted in the very project of "public theology". In the following paper, one of my points will be that public theologians have an essentially *dogmatic* reason when they ask for inter-contextuality. So far, this dogmatic reason has remained rather implicit; it is treated as a self-evident presupposition. I want to argue that actively engaging with the hidden dogmatic tenets of public theology might intensify and focus the inter-contextual dialogue between public theologians. Additionally, it is a first step

¹ The three types of publics follow David Tracy's definition (*D. Tracy, The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, London, 1981).