

Nurturing reason: The public role of religion in the liberal state

ABSTRACT

In the article an attempt is made to deal with the so-called Böckenförde dilemma: “The liberal secular state lives from sources it cannot guarantee itself”. The dilemma behind this phrase consists of the following two alternatives: either the liberal state ignores religion and thus runs the danger of losing its cohesive forces. Or it promotes religion with the risk of losing its neutrality in religious affairs. First, three traditional models for describing the public role of religion in liberal democratic societies are critically discussed: the civil religion, the Western Occident and the discourse models. Second, the re-affirmation of a positive public role for religion in democratic societies in recent sociology and social philosophy is pointed out. Third, a case is made out for the recognition of a positive freedom, instead of only a negative freedom of religion. In conclusion a number of guidelines for a public theology that gives content to the positive freedom of religion in an adequate way are provided.

1. INTRODUCTION

When a German speaks about the public role of religion before a South African audience, the treatment of this topic must include a thorough awareness of its contextual character. There are few topics in which the historical and political context from which one speaks is as important as in this one. In most of German history the public role of religion was not even a question. Church and state were closely intertwined, even though, from the Middle Ages onwards, they were regularly involved in conflicts of power struggling for predominant influence in their particular territories and in the Roman Empire as a whole. Only in 1918, the revolution that meant the end of monarchy created a new situation. In the new Weimar Republic church and state were separated, but even in this separation they considered each other as partners.

Most formative for contemporary German theological thinking concerning the relation between church and state, however, is the period of National Socialism, the so-called “Third Reich” from 1933-1945. The strategically well planned use of the churches for legitimising the National Socialist terror, the mass events of the Nazis full of religious elements, Hitler’s speeches that intentionally used religious language to reach people’s hearts: all these historical data on the public role of religion are present when a German speaks on this topic today. And, of course, the

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confessing church that resisted only in a very limited way, but had brave people like Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in their midst who struggled not only against the Nazis' attack on the church but also against their attack on civil rights and, in the case of Bonhoeffer as early as 1933, against the persecution of the Jews that would end in the unconceivable crime of the Shoah.²

The Barmen Declaration of the confessing church (declared 1934) did not include a thesis in defence of the Jews. Nevertheless it remains to this day one of the most important reference points when we think about how a theologically appropriate public role of religion could look. It is an example for how theological insights won under dictatorship can remain central when a nation struggles to form, develop and maintain a new democratic society.

South Africa is in the middle of this struggle to develop a new democratic society after a long period of dictatorship of one race. The South African situation is in many ways different from the German one. For example, South Africa has not had the same history of secularisation as Germany. But the vivid attention that the Barmen declaration and the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer have received here in South Africa indicates that our two histories have convergences that make an increased theological exchange all the more rewarding.

When we develop a public theology by assessing the public role of religion in the liberal state, we have to be aware that it is not one universal public theology applicable everywhere in the world, but one of many public theologies, each one for its own context. John de Gruchy, in his contribution to a volume on public theology published to the honour of Duncan Forrester in 2004, has made this point very clearly³ and offered a genuinely South African perspective reflecting the transformation from political theology of resistance against the Apartheid regime to a public theology in a democratic society. If I nevertheless speak of "public theology" in the singular, I want to express the need to relate the different contexts to each other in search for the will of the one God who guides God's people each in their own context but at the same time united as an ecumenical whole.

2. THE BÖCKENFÖRDE DILEMMA

I will speak about the public role of religion in the *liberal* state. This theme is contextual in itself and implies a specific dilemma. In a *theocratic state*, the role of religion is clearly defined as the extended arm of a certain government, which tries to secure the authority of one particular religion coercively by preventing anyone from living a life without religion or with a religion diverging from the ruling worldview. In an *atheist state*, the role of religion is equally clear, namely by being non-existent in any institutional form. The government tries to suppress all expressions of religion by its own authority, because it sees religion either as a dying phenomenon or as a danger for people's development into citizens of a commonwealth that transcends religious illusions. Freedom of religion is seen as a threat to such development.

In both forms the government guarantees social cohesion and people's loyalty to the state, if necessary by force. The liberal state is in a different situation. If it demanded a certain conception

2 For a closer look at Bonhoeffer's involvement in the "Jewish question", see H. Bedford-Strohm, "Nur wer für die Juden schreit, darf auch gregorianisch singen" – Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die Juden, in: M.-P. Baumann/T. Becker/ R. Woebis (eds.), *Musik und Kultur im jüdischen Leben der Gegenwart*, 2005, 89-106.

3 John de Gruchy, From Political to Public Theologies: The Role of Theology in Public Life in South Africa, in: W. F. Storrar/A. R. Morton (eds), *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Duncan Forrester*, London/New York 2004, 45-62, 56.

of the good, like a religious one, from its people by force, it would cease to be liberal. If there were no conceptions of the good alive among its people, the liberal state would lose its viability and its social cohesion in the long run.

In 1967, the German Supreme Court judge Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde has described this dilemma in words that have become a quote carrier in the German speaking academic world, as well as in the political world, that is rather unique. Meanwhile it is simply called the “Böckenförde dilemma”: “*The liberal secular state lives from sources it cannot guarantee itself.*”⁴ The dilemma behind this phrase consists of the following two alternatives: either the liberal state ignores religion and thus runs the danger of losing its cohesive forces. Or it promotes religion with the risk of losing its neutrality in religious affairs.

How should we react to the challenge placed by this dilemma? To simply trust that there will be enough forces of cohesion in society in the future as there have been in the past is not enough. If traditions like Christianity as a source of cohesion in the former Christian state erode more and more and make place for a culture of individualism based on patchwork religion, the left over cohesive forces of society might largely be based on spiritual resources of the past that are more and more being used up. What, then, will the future bring? Which kind of new sources will nurture the involvement of the citizens needed in every democratic society?

Drawing on sociological thought, I will describe three different models and a sociological and social-philosophical reformulation for defining the role of religion in democratic societies⁵ and then explore theological resources for a constructive public role of religion by drawing on and further developing the concept of “public theology”.

3. THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES – THREE TRADITIONAL MODELS

3.1 Civil religion

The first model of describing the public role of religion in a democratic society is the model of civil religion. When Robert Bellah wrote his famous essay “Civil Religion in America” published in *Daedalus*, he described a pattern to be found in the public appearances of U.S. American political leaders throughout the history of the U.S.A. Bellah found a striking density of religious language in the public life of a country that carefully watched over the constitutional separation of church and state. And indeed, it was not explicitly Christian language that he discovered, but the referral to the Almighty, to the creator, to a divine force or simply to “God”. This relationship to a divine being as the source of social cohesion of this nation of immigrants with widely differing heritages is what Bellah called “American Civil Religion”. Introduced as a sociological conception

4 “Der freiheitliche, säkularisierte Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht garantieren kann.” (Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Säkularisation und Utopie. Ebracher Studien. Ernst Forsthoff zum 65. Geburtstag*, Stuttgart 1967, 93, und Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Recht, Staat, Freiheit: Studien zur Rechtsphilosophie, Staatstheorie und Verfassungsgeschichte*, 2. Auflage, Frankfurt 1992, 112. Vgl. Wolfgang Vögele, *Zivilreligion in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Gütersloh 1994, 183 und 309. Recently Böckenförde explicitly related to his phrase from almost 30 years ago and reaffirmed it: “Meine nahezu vor 30 Jahren formulierte These: ‘Der freiheitliche säkulare Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht garantieren kann, ohne seine Freiheitlichkeit in Frage zu stellen’ halte ich nach wie vor für richtig” (Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Fundamente der Freiheit*, in: E. Teufel, ed., *Was hält die moderne Gesellschaft zusammen?*, Frankfurt 1996, 89-99, 89).

5 I further develop here an account of these models given in H. Bedford-Strohm, *Geschenkte Freiheit: Von welchen Voraussetzungen lebt der demokratische Staat*, in: ZEE 49 (2005), 248-265.

drawing on Talcott Parsons and other sociologists who included religion in their theoretical design, he increasingly moved from a descriptive use of the concept to a programmatic use involving political theory. Relating to the years of the Nixon and Reagan administrations Bellah spoke of the “broken covenant”, meaning the violation of the constitutional values of liberty, equality and justice for all that were advocated by Martin Luther King so well and that he saw as an intrinsic part of American civil religion.⁶ The present Bush administration constantly gives new examples for the direct political use of civil religion that Bellah saw as a misuse.⁷

It would be too easy to dismiss the concept of civil religion as a basis for social cohesion because of its misuse. One could argue against the Bible in the same way. Civil religion may represent values very close to Christian faith. An account of German civil religion could include thorough efforts to atone for the Shoah and an emphasis on “Never Again” which was ingrained in many post-war hearts and implies a commitment for peace and reconciliation now. For South Africa, “civil religion” could accentuate the active memory of apartheid and of the struggle against it leading to a deep-rooted commitment to the dignity of every human being, that is rejecting any kind of racism and that is claiming economic justice as the identity basis for a modern post-apartheid South Africa.

However, both examples show problematic aspects of the concept of civil religion. The first problem relates to its inclusivity: the more specific the content of the assumed civil religion is, the less inclusive it is. If it is used as a strong critical concept in the public debate – as used by Bellah in the Reagan years – it becomes controversial and is not a civil religion in the general sense connecting all the citizens. The second problem relates to its religious quality: if the commitment to human dignity and to justice and reconciliation is not just a civil moral *consensus*, but also a civil *religion*, it does not unite all citizens anymore, at least if we assume that not all citizens automatically share the religious perspective. If the state promotes an assumed civil religion it violates the participation rights of those who explicitly reject every religious perspective. It is more appropriate to speak of a civil consensus nurtured by many perspectives including the religious ones.

Civil religion is therefore not a convincing model for the public role of religion. Let me turn to a second possibility especially prominent in Europe but maybe also, due to its European roots, not unknown in South Africa.

3.2 The image of the “Christian Occident”

The image of the Christian Occident presupposes the assumption of a cultural and historical superiority of the Christian religion and its fruitful role as the foundation of the state. It is currently evoked explicitly or implicitly in the debate about the future constitution of the European Union and especially about the possible future membership of Turkey in the European Union. If Europe

6 *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, New York 1975.

7 In his speech at the Republican Convention, which nominated him for a second term, Bush told a story about thankful Iraqi people liberated by his war: “Not long ago, seven Iraqi men came to see me in the Oval Office. They had “X” branded into their foreheads, and their right hands had been cut off, by Saddam Hussein’s secret police, the sadistic punishment for imaginary crimes. During our emotional visit one of the Iraqi men used his new prosthetic hand to slowly write out, in Arabic, a prayer for God to bless America. I am proud that our country remains the hope of the oppressed, and the greatest force for good on this earth.” In the same speech Bush emphasised the call for America to be a bringer of God’s gift of freedom: “I believe that America is called to lead the cause of freedom in a new century. I believe that millions in the Middle East plead in silence for their liberty. I believe that given the chance, they will embrace the most honorable form of government ever devised by man. I believe all these things because freedom is not America’s gift to the world; it is the Almighty God’s gift to every man and woman in this world.”

is seen as a place whose identity is intimately connected with its Christian history, then the possibility of a country joining the European Union that is not historically grown on the ground of Christianity, but on the ground of Islam, is threatening to the “European” identity. An everyday example for this may be seen in the following: If female teachers want to wear head scarves at school on the basis of their Muslim faith, they face strong objections in some European countries, even if these objections rely on different backgrounds in the particular European states. While in laicist (Laïcité) France the objections are based on a radical ban of all forms of religious expression from public schools, in neighbouring Germany there is a considerable constituency of objectors arguing with the fact that Christianity, not Islam, is the main source of identity for our society and therefore advocating a privileged role of Christian cultural expressions as opposed to those cultural identity elements expressed by immigrants from another religious and cultural background.

The privileged role of Christianity as a spiritual and ethical base for the state or a union of states is based on the assumed historic role of Christianity for the development of the fundamental values of Western democracies. In this perspective, the protection of the basic rights of our constitution against other cultural influences, e.g. expressed by the discrimination and humiliating treatment of women, converges with a certain balance of religious influences. Therefore the Christian Democratic party of German chancellor Angela Merkel has repeatedly spoken of a “main Christian culture” (“christliche Leitkultur”) that is obligatory for every German and has to be respected by every German, even if he or she does not come from the same cultural background.

The basis for such referral to the “Christian Occident” is the assumption of a cultural homogeneity still mainly characterised by Christianity. This model seeks the solution to the disintegrating forces faced by every religiously and culturally pluralistic society by attempting to re-homogenise society.

This model has the advantage of giving a clear basis for ethical orientation in a pluralistic society. Even if there is a plurality of cultural backgrounds, which come together in one state, the public expression of such cultural background is not equally pluralistic. In this view, public expression of religion is and should be dominated by what could be called the “host culture”, that is, by the culture that has played the pre-eminent part in the historical roots of a present society.

There are two reasons why this model does not withstand critical challenge. The first reason is its tendency to historical dishonesty. The need to legitimise the predominant role of a certain religious and cultural tradition by its historical influence includes the temptation to overlook the plurality of historical influences. Even in the past, Europe was not simply the Christian occident, but profited from a lively exchange with Islam and Judaism. Islamic Spain between 711 and 1492 gave testimony to a harmonious coexistence of the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions under Islamic rule. These influences in European culture are suppressed when we speak of the “Christian Occident”. In addition, if the founding role of Christianity for European culture is emphasised, another crucial aspect of history tends to be deemphasised or even be forgotten: “Christian Europe” was the place in which the cruelest wars of history originated – the Second World War alone left 50 million people dead. The leading nations that fought these wars against each other were all “Christian nations”. And even more troubling: it was a nation of the “Christian Occident”, which was responsible for the systematic genocide of the Shoah. It remains one of the most disturbing questions in contemporary Germany and especially in its theological scholarship and church life how the murder of 6 million Jews could be strategically planned and executed in a culture, which - in its self-image – always looked at itself as thoroughly Christian. The concept of “Christian Occident” presupposes a direct synthesis of “Christ and culture”⁸ which is deeply questioned by an honest look at history.

8 Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, New York, 1951.

Thus, the first reason for arguing against the concept of “Christian Occident” is its tendency to view history in a prejudiced or even manipulative way. The second reason is its inability to take a pluralistic society seriously. A democratic state demanding loyalty to its constitution from all citizens, no matter what religious and cultural background they come from, cannot privilege one religion, because that would imply continuity from the past to the present. Even if a culture has been formed especially by one particular religion in the past, this does not necessarily induce an ongoing predominance of this religion in the public reasoning now. Rather, loyalty to the constitution is only to be expected if all citizens know that the values of the constitution are something to be agreed to from the perspective of their own tradition to which they are deeply loyal. The image of the “Christian Occident” does not meet this requirement.

The third conception of the role of religion in public takes a completely different direction. It basically says: there is no public role for religion.

3.3 The Discourse Model

The discourse model as represented in the main philosophical works of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, but shared by most European and North American sociologists of the 20th century and usually combined with what sociology has called “secularisation theory”,⁹ starts with the analysis of traditional societies. In traditional societies law is nurtured by the self-authorising power of religion. No king or emperor can put himself above the norms of religious law.¹⁰ Modernisation introduces a radical change in this respect by denying religion the power to hold a society together. What then can prevent modern pluralist and secularised societies from disintegration? The answer of the discourse model is: communication and rules that guarantee a societal discourse not governed by the use of power, but by the power of the argument. If a discourse is truly free, that is, governed by rules that prevent the dominion of some over others, the result of this discourse can orient political action. The constitution of a country is the document in which those rules are laid down. Of course, it is easy to discover the idea of democracy behind this reasoning. So it is no wonder that this idea has a lot of intuitional appeal to most of us living in democratic societies.

However, what is the place of religion in this? In Habermas’ main works there is no public role of religion as such except a negative one when he describes mechanisms of legitimising authority that lack democratic substance. In his theory of civil society, the churches as the institutional voices of religion are put in a row with other associations like sports clubs, interest groups or leisure activity groups – a diagnosis which has led Michael Welker to see grave deficiencies in Habermas’ analysis of reality and grave theoretical deficits in his theory.¹¹

The deficits in the conceptual acknowledgement of religion in the discourse model – this is the thesis I dare to express – are probably rooted in nothing less than religious illiteracy. The founders of sociology Durkheim and Weber developed their theories against the background of pre-modern religious institutions that were in many ways very different from those we know today. The reliance on these old conceptualisations of religion in modern sociology has distorted the image of religion to be integrated in sociological theorising. An increasing number of examples

9 For the basic ideas of this theory cf. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago/London 1994, 11-39

10 J. Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*, Frankfurt 1992, 42.

11 M. Welker, *Kirche im Pluralismus*, Gütersloh 1995, 23f. Other sources with a similar critique can be found there.

that testify to the churches' positive involvement in the development of civil societies have to be taken into account by contemporary sociology. A functioning civil society is the decisive prerequisite for every strong democracy. To ignore the churches' part in the formation of civil society would come close to a sociological dishonesty paralleling the historical dishonesty of the "Christian Occident" fallacy.

The churches' contributions cannot be appropriately assessed without understanding the place of liberation theology in the democratisation of the Latin American continent. It cannot leave aside the impact on civil society that the German churches have had on issues of peace and social justice. It can certainly not abstract from the role that the South African Council of Churches played in liberating South Africa from apartheid.

There are clear signs that this message has already reached sociology and social philosophy.

4. PUBLIC RELIGION – A SOCIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL-PHILOSOPHICAL REFORMULATION

4.1 Questioning the secularisation thesis: José Casanova

In an inspiring study on "Public Religions in the Modern World", the North-American sociologist José Casanova has forcefully criticised those versions of secularisation theory that conceive the process of secularisation as a progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices in the modern world. These "are indeed reproducing a myth that sees history as the progressive evolution of humanity from superstition to reason, from belief to unbelief, from religion to science." This mythical account of secularisation – says Casanova – "is indeed in need of 'desacralisation'".¹² Astonishingly, the theory of secularisation, which was upheld almost like a dogma, was never really empirically grounded. It served as an axiom of sociology, even though there was clear evidence against it. The reason Casanova sees for this phenomenon is the hidden contextuality of the major sociological works. Authors like Max Weber and Émile Durkheim developed their thinking in the context of Western Europe and saw the decline of religion in this context. By universalising their experience they failed to take the very different situations in Japan or the United States, equally modern societies, into account.¹³

Casanova tries to give a more accurate account of religion in the modern world by undertaking five case studies (Spain, Poland, Brazil, US-American evangelical Protestantism and US-American Catholicism), drawing several conclusions. His main insight is an empirically visible movement of societies from private to public religion. He agrees with the old secularisation thesis on the importance of differentiation: The differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms "remains a general modern structural trend."¹⁴ But this – and there he disagrees - does not necessarily mean the general decline of religion. Whether secularisation in the sense of differentiation also leads to secularisation in the sense of religious decline apparently depends on how religious institutions react to it: "... the more religions resist the process of modern differentiation, that is, secularisation in the first sense, the more they will tend in the long run to suffer religious decline, that is, secularisation in the second sense."¹⁵

If religions react constructively to differentiation, if they do not work against the modern individual freedoms, - Casanova shows – they can become influential public voices. Insofar as this

12 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago/London 1994, 17.

13 Ibid. 27.

14 Ibid. 212.

15 Ibid. 214.

happens one can even speak of the new phenomenon of “deprivatisation of modern religion”.¹⁶ As Casanova shows in the case of the U.S. American Catholic bishops’ letter on the economy (1986)¹⁷, and as can equally be shown in the case of the German ecumenical “Sozialwort” of 1997,¹⁸ “public interventions of religion in the public sphere of modern civil societies can no longer be reviewed simply as anti-modern religious critiques of modernity.” Casanova indicates that these public interventions of religion rather criticise specific institutionalised forms of modernity in a normatively creative way. The churches emerge as intrinsic parts of modern civil society in their critiques, as opposed to an interpretation that diagnoses these critiques as anti-modern. By claiming a public voice in civil society, the churches accept the validity of the fundamental values and principles of modernity. Thus, the churches’ public interventions apply and support genuinely modern touchstones such as the individual freedoms and institutional differentiation by pointing out problems of modernisation. Casanova concludes: “In other words, they are immanent critiques of particular forms of modernity from a modern religious point of view.”¹⁹

If one takes account of such modern religious forms the old secularisation thesis does not hold anymore. This insight seems to spread in the academic account of religion. Interestingly enough, it is not only a new generation of sociologists worldwide, like José Casanova, who are moving beyond the dogmatic presuppositions of the old secularisation theory, but it is also the old authorities in social philosophy who have at least begun to rethink some of their old views. Let me illustrate this diagnosis by looking at the late works of the two most influential social philosophers of the recent past: John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas himself.

4.2 Religion as a nurturer of the overlapping consensus: John Rawls

In the case of Rawls, I tend to see more of a development in emphasis than a change of ideas.²⁰ However, his treatment of religion in “A theory of justice” has widely generated the objection that in his theoretical design, religion is inappropriately privatised. Referring to Habermas and Rawls, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has stated: „Both Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls relegate religion as well as conceptions of the good life to the private sphere.”²¹ In the case of Rawls one can at least say that he has meanwhile made very clear that religion cannot be banned from the public sphere.

In his 1987 essay “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus”, in which he clarifies some points

16 Ibid. 215.

17 Ibid. 191ff. I have analysed the wide discussion on this document in: *Vorrang für die Armen: Auf dem Weg zu einer theologischen Theorie der Gerechtigkeit* (Öffentliche Theologie 4), Gütersloh 1993, 41-122.

18 See H. Bedford-Strohm, *Öffentliche Theologie*, in: *Katholische Sozialakademie Österreichs* (Hg.) *Zivil zivil? Kirchen in der Zivilgesellschaft* (Nachrichten und Stellungnahmen der Katholischen Sozialakademie Österreichs 03/2001), 6-9.

19 Casanova, 221f.

20 I have elaborated my understanding of Rawls and his attractiveness for theological ethics elsewhere: Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Vorrang für die Armen: Auf dem Weg zu einer theologischen Theorie der Gerechtigkeit* (Öffentliche Theologie 4), Gütersloh 1993, 204-292. In what follows I further develop ideas first explored in: *Theological Ethics and the Church: Reconsidering the Boundaries between Practical Theology and Theological Ethics in Light of the Debate on Liberalism and Communitarianism*, in: M. Welker/F. Schweitzer (Hg.), *Reconsidering the Boundaries between Theological Disciplines. Zur Neubestimmung der Grenzen zwischen den theologischen Disziplinen*, Münster 2005, 175-186.

21 For this critique see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Church as a Community of Interpretation: Political Theology between Discourse Ethics and Hermeneutical Reconstruction*, in: D. Browning/F. Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, New York 1992, 66-91 (78).

that had been too vague in his theory of justice from 1971, Rawls – referring to Kant and Mill – makes very clear that religion does have a public role.²²

What Rawls stands for, is liberalism as a *thin* conception of the good or, as he also says, “political liberalism” which may not be misunderstood as a political option as we know it from a liberal political party. Liberalism as a “thin” conception of the good only tries to design the basic structure of society in a way that allows all the “thick” conceptions of the good (like religions) to find an optimal framework for a lively and fruitful debate. The objection that political liberalism is sceptical of religious and philosophical truth, or indifferent to their values, says Rawls, is mistaken.²³ According to liberalism as a thin conception of the good, strong religious or philosophical convictions are not to be banned to the private realm. On the contrary, as long as they are compatible with the overlapping consensus that is expressed in the constitution, they can be something like life-givers to pluralism in a democratic society. For Rawls, such comprehensive doctrines, whether they are religious or non-religious, are the “vital social basis” of reasonable political conceptions, “giving them enduring strength and vigour.”²⁴

These different philosophical or religious contributions should normally be presented in a language that is understandable to other traditions as well. But Rawls goes even further and sees contributions to the public debate by religious traditions in *their own language* as sometimes crucial for the development of a pluralistic society, and he quotes the Christian involvement against slavery in the 19th century and Martin Luther King’s involvement in the civil rights movement as examples. It is, however, decisive for such contributions that good political reasons confirm what is expressed on the basis of a comprehensive moral doctrine. In the case of the Abolitionists and of the Civil Rights movement this proviso was fulfilled, “however much they emphasised the religious roots of their doctrines, because these doctrines supported basic constitutional values – as they themselves asserted – and so supported reasonable conceptions of political justice.”²⁵

Rawls also sees a place for biblical language in public. He explicitly stresses the value of the public use of the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, and adds: “... citizens who cite the Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan do not stop there, but go on to give a public justification for this parable’s conclusions in terms of political values.” In a footnote, especially interesting for theological ethicists, Rawls explicitly confirms and acknowledges the parallel between his difference principle and the Catholic option for the poor.²⁶

These examples make very clear that Rawls, at least in his later works, is far from limiting religion to a private realm. On the contrary, he sees reasonable comprehensive doctrines of religion as viable and precious agents in the public culture of a democratic society.²⁷ The same can be said

22 John Rawls, The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7 (1987), 6; also in: John Rawls, *Collected Papers* (ed. Samuel Freeman), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 427.

23 Ibid. 447.

24 Ibid. 592.

25 Ibid. 593. Rawls adds in a footnote: “I do not know whether the Abolitionists and King thought of themselves as fulfilling the purpose of the proviso. But whether they did or not, they could have. And had they known and accepted the idea of public reason, they would have” (footnote 54).

26 Rawls, John, *Collected Papers*, 594, footnote 55. This parallel was one of the central reasons for my own account of the convergence between Rawls’ theory and theological ethics (*Vorrang für die Armen: Auf dem Weg zu einer theologischen Theorie der Gerechtigkeit* (Öffentliche Theologie 4), Gütersloh 1993, 306).

27 As far as I can see, the only theologian who has really honoured this endorsement of the public role of religion by Rawls is Ronald Thiemann in his brilliant book *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy*, Washington D.C. 1996, esp. 80-90, where he gives a thorough account of Rawls’ development in this respect.

of the late Habermas.

4.3 Citizenship as a complementary learning process of faith and reason: The later Habermas

In the last years Jürgen Habermas has developed his thinking in a way that would certainly not justify speaking of a “religious turn”,²⁸ but indeed indicates a new acknowledgement of the public role of religion. Because of his new openness to the public role of religion, the speech he gave when he received the most important German peace prize in October 2001²⁹, has been described as a “sensation for the German public”³⁰ Already earlier, in a book on “new eugenics”, he had given a widely received impulse into the bioethical debate in which he honoured the role of religion in grounding basic ethical concepts like the dignity of the human person.³¹ In 2004 Habermas had a public exchange on the role of religion in the Catholic Academy of Munich with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger - who, a little more than one year later, became Pope Benedict XVI. In this dialogue, Habermas further developed his new thoughts on religion.³²

What is the core of his reformulation?

Habermas goes beyond the argument normally connected with secularisation theory according to which a modern liberal state has to base its political decisions purely on reason instead of faith. He speaks of a “post-secular society” which is in danger of losing a scarce but very important resource: a sense for the meaning of life (“Sinn”).³³ Therefore the civil public has to develop a new sensitivity for the potential of religious traditions to open up resources for such a sense for the meaning of life. Habermas describes a kind of “osmosis” of reason and faith.³⁴ Both have to be open to each other. Each has to try to understand the language of the other.³⁵

Habermas’ new interest in the public role of religion is motivated by more than just respect for people who integrate faith and reason. There are *philosophical* reasons for learning from religious traditions: Holy Scriptures and religious traditions have kept alive intuitions of false life and redemption from such false life. Thus, they have a hermeneutical function for society as a whole. Religious communities, as long as they avoid dogmatism, can help society to develop sensitivity for misdirected life, for societal pathologies and the deformation of societal relationships.³⁶ Habermas speaks of a “complementary learning process”³⁷, in which both secular citizens learn from the unique potential of religious traditions and religious people show readiness to engage in a critical dialogue with the secular public based on reason.

Of course, this presupposes overcoming a secularist exclusive understanding of modernity according to which religious convictions are a relic from archaic times. Freedom of religion – in such a mindset – is not much more than a legal expression of something like a World Wild Life

28 Some interpreters have already spoken of a “religious wisdom of his old age”.

29 J. Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, Frankfurt 2001.

30 H. Joas, *Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz*, Freiburg i.Br. 2004, 122, my own translation.

31 J. Habermas, *Zur Zukunft der menschlichen Natur: Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?* Frankfurt 2002.

32 J. Habermas/J. Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung: Über Vernunft und Religion*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 2005.

33 J. Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, Frankfurt 2001, 29.

34 Ibid. 15.

35 Ibid. 22.

36 J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt 2005, 115. Also in: Habermas/J. Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung: Über Vernunft und Religion*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 2005, 31.

37 J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, 116.

38 Habermas speaks of cultural protection of the environment (“kultureller Naturschutz für aussterbende Arten”, *ibid.* 145).

Fund activity for endangered species.³⁸ Habermas affirms that it is unreasonable to reject a priori the thought that the world religions have a place in modernity, because their cognitive value has not been fully redeemed. It cannot be excluded that they harbour a semantic potential that can inspire society as a whole.³⁹

Let me describe some consequences of these remarkable developments in the thought of worldwide leading social philosophers for the constitutional design of modern pluralistic democracies, before I devote my conclusive thoughts to the appropriate response by theology.

4.4 Negative and positive freedom of religion

If we take seriously that a secularist view of society and its public realms is a misunderstanding of what modernity means, this must have consequences for our understanding of the constitutional right to freedom of religion. For a secularist understanding *freedom of religion is purely negative*. It simply protects the individual from the interference of the state into private religious practice, but it does not see any role for the state in publicly encouraging religious expression. The norm is secular. Therefore in the public education system the knowledge of religion is exclusively taught from the “bird’s eye perspective”, that is from a cognitive detached point of view.

If we take the public role of religion and its role in forming responsible citizenship seriously, this negative understanding of freedom of religion is deficient, because it stands the risk of interpreting the secular as an unquestioned universal norm. We must gain a concept of *positive freedom of religion*. In such a positive concept the state avoids as much privileging one particular religious perspective as it avoids privileging the secular perspective as the basis of moral and civil formation. Instead, the state encourages religious forces as much as secular forces in these processes of socialisation. As a consequence religion from a particular faith perspective can be chosen as a class at public schools just as well as secular ethics. Teachers of both classes are financed by the state. Theology is part of the publicly financed university system just as much as philosophy to train future teachers.⁴⁰

This is one of many legal designs characterising the relationship of religion and state that would honour the important public role of religion as a nurturer of reason and moral formation, while at the same time maintaining the religious impartiality of the state necessary for a pluralistic democracy.

If “positive freedom of religion” is the concept with which social philosophy and political theory can do justice to the public role of religion, what then is the concept in Christian theology that corresponds to this concept? How can a “public theology” be described that ploughs the space opened up by positive freedom of religion?

By using the term “public theology” I refer to a phrase that has been proposed in the U.S. especially by Ronald Thiemann, Max Stackhouse, Don Browning and David Tracy, in Great Britain by Duncan Forrester and Will Storrar, and in Germany by Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfgang

39 Ibid. 149.

40 This understanding of “positive freedom of religion” can be seen as the characteristic of the German Constitution. Cf. W. Huber, *Kirche in der Zeitenwende: Gesellschaftlicher Wandel und Erneuerung der Kirche*, Gütersloh 1998, 121-127; W. Huber, *Gerechtigkeit und Recht: Grundlinien christlicher Rechtsethik*, Gütersloh 1996, 450-455.

41 For a more thorough discussion of the concept and its terminological roots in the U.S., France and Germany cf. Wolfgang Vögele, *Zivilreligion in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Gütersloh 1994, 418-425. This book is part of a book series with the programmatic title „Öffentliche Theologie” (“public theology”), edited by Wolfgang Huber.

5. PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN THE LIBERAL STATE

To characterise the difficult task of public theology, the British theologian Duncan Forrester has used the ancient Greek image of sailing between Scylla and Charybdis. Scylla represents “those who denounce modernity and all its works and insights, proclaiming that social theory in particular and modern thought in general are heretical ... We must go back, to the Bible, they say, or to Aquinas or Augustine, sources unsullied by the acids of modernity.”⁴²

On the other side is Charybdis, representing “the extreme liberal, with a banner proclaiming godless morality, and a wonderful ability to communicate acceptably to secular men and women. I say acceptably, because the question is how much the message is simply the surrounding sea that has been swallowed now regurgitated.”⁴³ Charybdis – says Forrester – risks to be irrelevant because it simply repeats the spirit of the time.⁴⁴

As the bark of “public theology” – he continues – “steers its way ahead and avoids both shipwreck and enticement from port or starboard, it may make a modest but truthful, constructive and challenging contribution to public debate, and beyond that, one hopes, to human flourishing in community.”⁴⁵

Forrester’s characterisation of the task of public theology points towards an understanding of reality which has been emphasised decades ago by a theologian whose brilliance in theological thinking and authenticity in witness has made him one of the most widely read theologians in the world to this day: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose 100th birthday we celebrated on 4 February 2006 in his city of birth Wroclaw (the former German Breslau) in Poland.

Bonhoeffer, in his Christological understanding of reality, emphasised the necessity to fully engage in the reality of the world without simply repeating what the world says: “In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not in the one without the other. The reality of God discloses itself only by setting me entirely in the reality of the world, and when I encounter the reality of the world it is always already sustained, accepted and reconciled in the reality of God. This is the inner meaning of the revelation of God in the man Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer’s theological thoughts open the way for a public theology that does not separate itself from the world into a self-sufficient counter-community with its own religious language, but knows how to speak the language of the world and how to be in dialogue with the world; a public theology that, on the other hand, is grounded in Christ and therefore challenges the world to make God’s way for the world visible, a prophetic theology that leads the world beyond its worldly ways. Bonhoeffer himself developed his ethics as an “ethics of responsibility” a heritage which

42 Duncan Forrester, Working in the Quarry: A Response to the Colloquium, in: W. F. Storrar/A. R. Morton (eds), *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Duncan Forrester*, London/New York 2004, 431-438 (431).

43 Ibid. 432.

44 Forrester’s characterisations converge in many ways with my own typology of a church-based and a culture-based approach of theology in: Theological Ethics and the Church: Reconsidering the Boundaries between Practical Theology and Theological Ethics in Light of the Debate on Liberalism and Communitarianism, see footnote 20.

45 Forrester, 432.

46 D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, New York et al. 1995, 193.

47 See Wolfgang Huber, Toward an Ethics of Responsibility, in: *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (Oct., 1993), pp. 573-591; Etienne de Villiers, The Vocation of Reformed Ethicist in the Present South African Society, in: *Scriptura* 89 (2005), 521-535, especially 527.

contemporary public theologians have taken up and further developed.⁴⁷

As my assessment of sociological and social philosophical thought has shown, public theology is not in contradiction to the foundations of a modern democratic society, but even represents one of its lifelines. Pluralism in a democratic society is not an end in itself but guarantees everyone the right to publicly express their firm convictions on the direction society should take. An understanding of pluralism that is based on general relativism is the gravedigger of a democratic society. What I have called the “Böckenförde dilemma” is true: “The liberal secular state lives from sources it cannot guarantee itself.” It needs communities and institutions that regenerate the traditions necessary for every passionate involvement.⁴⁸ Only if citizens, each from their own deep convictions, and on the basis of an overlapping consensus regarding basic human rights, passionately engage in the debate on a more humane society, will civil society and with it democracy flourish. Public theology participates in the debate on a more humane society on the basis of its tradition.

John de Gruchy has drawn international attention to a beautiful example of how this theoretical claim is filled with life in the context of South Africa. During the “Multi-Event 99”, a theological event in Cape Town in February 1999, which served to examine the role of religion in public life with specific reference to South Africa during its period of democratic transition and transformation, right before the speech of then Vice-president and now President Thabo Mbeki, representatives of small groups of rural community Christians gave the following statement:

“It is we – the ordinary people – who are not only the backbone of our religious institutions but also the foundation on which our democratic state is built. When we constantly demand and work for justice, the foundation is broad and strong. When we are apathetic and do nothing the foundation is like sand on which no stable structure, be it religious or political, can be built ... Our religion ... propels us into public space to function as agents of transformation, but people merely see us as ‘agents of transformation’. They miss one thing and that is our religious or Christian calling and conviction. It is our faith conviction, that we have a responsibility towards our fellow human beings that brings us where we are. This conviction urges us not only to be concerned with what happens at the bottom of the hierarchy of our society but to act. Our faith and values drive us to be involved in social transformation and in the improvement of the lives of ordinary members of our communities by mobilising our resources and energies into establishing various community-based projects relevant to the needs of our communities.”⁴⁹

This statement is the most beautiful answer to the “Böckenförde dilemma” which I know. It shows exactly from what sources the liberal state lives and what vital role religion plays in it. Public theology is the theological reflection of such practice.

Theological reflection is based on practice. As a result of such reflection its task is to give orientation for practice. I want to conclude my reflection by giving five guidelines to characterise the task of public theology and give orientation for its practice in what has been called a “public

48 Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has argued that “churches as religious communities have a function within an impoverished and colonized life world ... as communities of interpretation of substantial normative tradition” (Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Church as a Community of Interpretation: Political Theology between Discourse Ethics and Hermeneutical Reconstruction*, in: D. Browning/F. Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, New York 1992, 66-91, 85f).

49 Quoted in de Gruchy, see footnote 2, 60.

50 Wolfgang Huber, *Kirche in der Zeitenwende*, Gütersloh 1998, 97-127

church”.⁵⁰

6. FIVE GUIDELINES FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY

6.1 Public theology must be grounded in tradition

The Christians from the rural communities that have been quoted above emphasise that it is their faith convictions that drive them. Such witness reflects a crucial point for public theology. If public theology “seeks to be a theology that makes a difference”⁵¹, it needs to give public witness for the sources from which this drive for change is nurtured. Defending oneself for 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”,⁵² 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.”⁵³

In light of this assessment, Thiemann’s effort 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.”⁵⁴

If public theology is based on the biblical and confessional traditions of Christian faith, it also has a natural connection to the church as the community of interpretation that has carried these traditions through the centuries. Public theology and public church are to be in mutual exchange with each other. Both draw on traditions of faith, which are not only a resource for spiritual regeneration, but also for public witness in ethical questions concerning everybody.

Then, the question arises: In what language can such public witness be given?

6.2 Public theology must be bilingual

One of the central tasks of public theology is what Etienne de Villiers – speaking of his own context - has called “the effective translation and promulgation of the Christian vision of a good South African society in broader society.” The question he asks is: “Should it be promulgated in the broader South African society in its distinctively Christian form, or is some translation of it needed to ensure its wider acceptance?”⁵⁵ In order to respond to this challenge, 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 for the semantic potential of religious language, religious communities in general, and the churches in particular, must translate their contributions to public discourse into

51 Forrester, *ibid.* 432.

52 Huber, *Kirche in der Zeitenwende*, 10, 12, 31.

53 Thiemann, Ronald, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*, Louisville 1991, 40.

54 *Ibid.* 19.

55 Etienne de Villiers, The Vocation of Reformed Ethicist in the Present South African Society, in: *Scriptura* 89 (2005), 521-535 (530).

56 Stackhouse, Max L. (2000), General Introduction, in: Stackhouse, Max L. / Paris, Peter J., *Religion and the Powers of the Common Life (God and Globalization Vol. 1)*, Harrisburg, 1-52 (7).

a generally accessible language. As Max Stackhouse has stated, public theology “works with, but also beyond, confessional and dogmatic theology.”⁵⁶

In this sense the famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth can be seen as an early example of a public theologian, both in practice and theory. He made controversial contributions to the public debate himself – especially controversial was his rejection of Western anti-communism – but he also gave a theological-ethical foundation of how to base ethical judgment on the bible and tradition and at the same time communicate it to the wider public in generally understandable language. In his 1946 treatise “Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde” he shows how one can make analogies between faith based ethical claims and secular arguments and participate in the public debate by communicating faith based ethical claims in secular language.⁵⁷

It is noteworthy that the last two decades have seen the development of an international grassroots oriented ecumenical social teaching of the churches that follows exactly these lines and can therefore be seen as public theology at its very best. The origin of this development was the 1986 Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Catholic bishops on the economy, which presented its argument in two steps: a biblical argument and a reason-based argument. “Human understanding and religious belief” – said the bishops – “are complementary, not contradictory” (paragraph 61). Among other documents in the context of Europe, the widely discussed 1997 ecumenical statement on the economic and social situation in Germany (“Sozialwort”) followed the American bishops not only in its main emphasis on the option for the poor as a central guideline, but also in its basic methodological pattern. The fact that this statement was eloquent both in its biblical foundation and in its reason-based argument was one of the main reasons for its wide reception. It showed that the accessibility of public theology for a wider audience does not necessarily imply neglecting the importance of the roots in its own tradition.

6.3 Public theology must be inter-disciplinary

If public theology intends to speak to the wider public and if it claims to speak of and to present realities, it needs to engage in a vivid dialogue with the other scholarly disciplines.⁵⁸ 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 into 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 a confessional self-expression of believers but seeks to be heard in the publics of a democratic society and its political decision bodies, it needs to take account of political science.

The public theologian constantly walks the line between the necessity of thorough scholarship in his or her own field within theology, on the one hand, and as much competence as possible, on the other hand, in the scholarly fields which deal with the empirical reality to which public theology speaks.⁵⁹ Bound to the interdisciplinary perspective public theologians need to learn to be imperfect in their scholarship. Yet, this school of humility is not to be avoided, but built into the perspective of public theology.

57 Karl Barth: *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde*, Theologische Studien 20, Zürich 1946.

58 See de Villiers, *The Vocation*, 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”.

59 In this, there is a convergence with social ethics as a theological discipline, see H. Bedford-Strohm, Art. *Sozialethik, Soziallehre*. Allgemein, in: *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* Bd.4, 325-334 (being published in a revised form in English, in the Eerdmans-Brill *Encyclopedia of Christianity* in 2007).

6.4 Public theology must be critical

Drawing on the biblical tradition with its prophetic criticism and on Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God with its good news to the poor (Lk 4), public theology always takes account of the difference between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world. Thus, there is a natural element of critical companionship with one's own society. The prophets who simply affirm people in their ways of life are seen as false prophets. "Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely. They have also healed the hurt of my people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace!' When there is no peace" (Jer 6:13f; see also 14:13 ff and 23:9ff). 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 of this poor man to prepare a meal for his own guest. King David becomes very angry about the injustice the rich man has done. The story ends with Nathan's courageous and challenging words: "You are the man!" Public theology follows the track Nathan set. It does not legitimise injustice but speaks up to power in favour of justice.

Like prophets, public theologians are "connected critics"⁶⁰, 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. This includes speaking the truth about history, remembering injustices in the past and thereby showing a new self-critical form of patriotism. As Donald Shriver has argued in a recent book with case studies on remembering the Holocaust in Germany, the Apartheid in South Africa, and the oppression of African and Native Americans in the USA, honest patriotism means "loving a country enough to remember its misdeeds".⁶¹

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 voicing concerns of 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.

6.5 Public theology must be universally oriented

One of the most distinctive characteristics of public theology is the universality of its reference frame. The universal character of public theology is not to be mixed up with an ignorance of its unavoidable contextuality.⁶² Feminist scholarship in the last decades has made us aware of the danger of universal concepts being disguised power claims.⁶³ But from its context public theology speaks to the world in the global sense of the word. This is true for the church in its ecumenical universality. The one, holy catholic and apostolic church is not simply and may be not even primarily be the small and limited particular churchdom in which each one of us lives. If we speak of "brothers and sisters in Christ" we hopefully mean our close neighbours with whom we worship, celebrate, mourn and maybe sometimes fight. But we certainly also mean the fascinating

60 Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Cambridge 1987.

61 Donald W. Shriver, *Honest Patriotism: Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds*, Oxford/New York 2005.

62 I have underlined John de Gruchy's warning at the beginning of this lecture, see footnote 2.

63 See e.g. Sharon Welch, *Communities of Resistance: A Feminist Theology of Liberation*, New York 1985. I have tried to show why this well justified critique of universalism cannot lead to giving up truth claims as such. See H. Bedford-Strohm, *Community and Diversity: Social Ethical Reflections on a Challenge for Church and Society*, in: *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 49 (1995), 147 - 168.

brother- and sisterhood which connects the campesino in Guatemala with the elementary school teacher in South Korea, the civil society activist in Tonga with the car worker in the U.S.A., the book keeper in Rwanda with the university professor in Germany. It is not an abstract theological phrase, but a daily reality of ecumenical texts identifies the unity of the church as a sign for the unity of humanity.

The universal orientation of public theology is not only based on the universality of the church. It is also based on the universality of the basis of all Christian ethics in the Bible: the commandment to love one's neighbour. The characteristic of this commandment is its drive to transgress barriers between people whether they are ethnic, national, religious or – to be added in today's mobile world - geographical. Love of neighbour is not abstract, but concrete. Nevertheless we can develop a "concrete universalism" which connects the concrete experience of loving the people with whom we live and the love and care for those whom we don't know, but who share our common humanity. Because we know human vulnerability from our close relationships, we are moved to care for those in the world who are extremely vulnerable and unprotected.

It is this connectedness of the concrete experience of abundant life in relationships, connected with a sense of universal brother- 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 being at the same time universal in the fullest sense makes the church an ideal agent of a global civil society. To develop a public theology for a global civil society – this is the thesis with which I want to conclude - is the most urgent challenge to which theology has to respond in these times.