

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I truly appreciate the opportunity to discuss a topic with you which I do not get involved in on an everyday basis but which has rather been with me like a *cantus firmus* for a long time. **It is the question of an appropriate relation between the church and politics, religion and society as well as the questions of Moral Theory within the political discourse.** In fact, these systematic and ethical questions are the basis for my current research, which is more focused **on historical questions.** I am for one year now member of a research group who leads the title: Protestantism in different political and ethical discussions in the context of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, 1949 – 1989). It is mainly about the role of Protestantism in different political and ethical debates in the context of the FRG. In which ways is Protestantism impacting society and which interactions are being developed between the two?

Due to this academic background I will not approach the topic of „religion and change“ from a standpoint of religious-philosophy but I will rather maintain a strong focus on a functional and phenomenological approach. At the same time my analysis will deal with the potential role of religion within society based on historical facts. I am not claiming the following statements about religion to be universally true but I would like to shine a light on one **specific historically determined manifestation** of religion: the **so-called Public Theology.**

Einleitung

If one were to inquire about the role of the Protestant church in today's ethical debates, as I do historically for the 50ies and 60ies in my research, the first thing that appears immediately is the following: Individual but important

voices within the Protestant church in Germany keep commenting political situations or ethical debates in a way that makes us believe, there were decisions any alternative and that are to prefer - if one wants to live and decide in a Christian Way – so happened in a comment of Margot Käßmann, the former President of the council of the EKD, when she proclaimed: God doesn't want that – her comment was about the military engagement of Germany in international conflicts.

This kind of engagement of Protestants in public debates is often labeled with the concept of **Public Theology**. **This name points out and outlines, that political questions, questions of public interest are a main topic of the churches work and of their genuine interest.** These voices include for instance the former President of the EKD council, Wolfgang Huber, as well as the current bishop of the ELKB, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm. Giving another name to the concept, the current President of the council, Nikolaus Schneider, speaks of a public religion. He sees the churches as civil-society stakeholders in our pluralistic public community. He emphasizes that the churches are part of an overlapping consensus (Rawls) with other active participants, and do not stand alone in their endeavour for common welfare, justice and peace.

This view, **namely that the churches are not supposed to keep quiet in political arguments but ought to take a clear position when it comes to global and national political issues** is currently put forth by the German theologians I have just mentioned in a number of ways: For example they **comment** on the current examples of the humanity crisis in Iraq or Israel and Palestine, or on the discussions about the reception of refugees and non-citizens in Germany. And they do so not only via debates on television and newspaper

commentaries but also on Facebook and Twitter – their **presence in the mass media** is remarkable.

Newspapers and tv-shows are often quite happy about citable comments of the Protestant Church, not only because they need a pendant to a quotation of the Pope, but also because plurality and the freedom of mind belong to the main goods within Protestantism.

This takes me already right to the core of the topic of my talk: **which is “public theology’s” concern as it is proclaimed in Germany nowadays? And how does it relate to the concept of a civil religion, which may be what John Rawls describes as overlapping consensus? A “minimal common ground of values” as a support for society, legitimating its institutions and legal foundation and promoting social integration?**

Further, I would like to approach this topic in three steps and clarify these questions:

- 1. What is public theology and how does it relate to civil religion?**
 - 2. Which understanding of religion and society is this concept based on and what part do the churches play in this respect?**
 - 3. What is to be gained or risked when speaking of public theology?**
- 1. What is public theology and how does it relate to civil religion?**

First of all it should be noted that the term public theology (being the analogue to the German “Öffentliche Theologie”) does not comprise a fixed program - *which is of course true for most theological programs and key words, as theological headlines are contextually and historically determined and often serve to reduce complexity without yielding new information.*

Therefore, I will not bore you with the conceptual history of that term but would still like to outline the discourse relationship in which public theology emerged.

Let us go back in time to the 1970ies when **Martin E. Marty**, a Lutheran pastor and church historian that used the term public theology for the first time in a speech in the United States. He did so to describe the personality and the legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr. Then Robert N. Bellah, who is the creator of the **term civil religion**¹ gladly adopted Marty's wording since it enabled him to **sharpen his understanding of civil religion**. Bellah interpreted civil religion as the religious and theological content of political discourse, which is focused on the consensus among citizens. Thus, civil religion legitimates the state and the community and contributes to social integration – **citizens share a common canon of values and common ideological view on aims and taking actions** – this is how Bellah saw it, a view which was of course influenced by the separation of government and church in the United States as well as the frequent use of religious symbols and biblical quotes in public life.

Thus, we may constitute the following genuine characteristic features of a civil religion: 1. **It is not represented by an institution**; 2. **It is not possible to become a member of this “religious community”**; 3. **It does not have a uniform “ body of teachings”** – and above all; 4. **Its teachings are not communicated explicitly but rather practiced and lived**. It is here where Bellah employed Marty's definition of the term public theology: According to Bellah the **task of communication**, which is in a way its organization and orientation in the public in view of an ever changing civil religion is to be shouldered by public theology. It is supposed to give orientation from its genuinely Christian-theological point of view and help to sort civil religious teachings of political arguments and thereby represent a critical counter weight to civil religion. This

is **one of the contexts of the origin of public theology – public theology as an ethical-theological counter weight of a publicly present civil religion.**

A second context of origin can be found in the political theologies of the 60ies and 70ies, the successor of which public theology is considered. At least since the global conference for church and society of 1966 in Geneva the ecumenical Christianity has **developed a distinctive understanding for the economic injustice between the North and the South and much encompassing sympathy** for the resistance in central and South America. During the general assemblies of Upsalla (1968) and Nairobi (1975) new political theologies appeared on the agenda, for example the theology of liberation, which itself has fallen on fertile soil. So happened for instance in parts of the German academic-theological community (cf. Heinz-Dietrich Wendland, Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle).

The Liberation theology`s paradigm “Option for the Poor”, the conviction that faith in Jesus Christ sets us free from injustice and oppression, is the normative ground work for the political theologies of the 60ies/**70ies as well as for public theology.** Public theology can therefore only really be spoken of in plural, since it is always understood as both contextual and directed towards action. The strong social-ethical impetus of each public theology is directed at society in each and any form because the public commitment to Jesus Christ includes public political engagement. **Its motive is parrhesia, the candour to speak freely when others opportunistically remain silent** – it is not without reason that Dietrich Bonhoeffer is considered the theological authority of public theology with his dictum “blocking the wheel by the spokes”. **So, this is the second context of origin of public theology – public theology being a theology that is critical of society, which declares the gospel as an option for the poor and acts as a voice for those without a voice, for those who have no lobby.**

2. Which understanding of religion and society is this concept based on and what part do the churches play in this respect?

Following this rather historical localisation of Public Theology I would like to elaborate on one of the basic questions of this convention, namely the question of the „**dynamics of change**“ within religion:

What are the prerequisites for religions to contribute to transformation, development and progress of societies? Does religion rather obstruct or encourage transformation, development and progress? – **These were supposed to be the critical questions of this section.**

Summarizing the above findings about the connection of Civil Religion and Public Theology, it can be said that Civil Religion **itself does not postulate change; it does not contribute to social change.** Looking at it more closely the notion of Civil Religion does not even describe a **religion in itself, but rather a theory of religion: The basis of the Civil Religion are the citizens of a society,** who do not have to be aware of their so-called religion though it is **expressed in their actions**, e.g. in their wish for a solemn blessing of a marriage – as can be seen in the rising number of so-called “free” marriage ceremonies in Germany – or for example in their need of moral orientation, of discussion of ethical questions by “legitimate” theologians or representatives of the churches. **The increasing demand of such moral orientation, as well as the**

growing request for religious offers to help people in their quest for meaning are both symptoms of a changing society, symptoms of social transformation from within. **Civil religion, the shared consensus of values and norms of a society is open to discussion.** It can, however, only be described from an external angle; its bearers, its “protagonists” so to speak, are all of us, the civil society. The transformation of our Civil Religion is a sign of change in society, **it is not an impulse or a stimulus for it.**

According to the “Öffentliche Theologie” as it is defined in Germany today, the task of the churches, which consider themselves as part or even as „networks” of civil society, is the following: **to accompany social transformation processes, political debates, global political issues such as climate change, civil wars and other conflicts with a critical eye as well as to intervene actively.** “Öffentliche Theologie” is about **voicing the message of the gospel in the respective situations and introducing it to the political discourse.** The churches are being asked to be the voice of the voiceless. The “Öffentliche Theologie” picks up on the impetus of Political Theology and Liberation **Theology to move the option for the poor to the centre of society and into the light of the public.**

Accordingly, the Bishop of the ELKB, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm says: „In ideologically neutral states, the churches do no longer have a claim to exclusively having all the answers with respect to current basic orientation. If this development is affirmed positively from a theological-ethical point of view their mission to make their ethical convictions heard in the public debate of a healthy civil society is even more crucial. “Öffentliche Theologie” is **needed to prepare the churches for that.**”

If we get back to the question “What are the prerequisites for religions to contribute to transformation, development and progress of societies?”, **the answer according to the point of view of “Öffentliche Theologie” has to be:**

Religions can contribute to social change, can be the “pacemakers of society” if the institutions in which they are practiced represent “Öffentliche Theologie”, **if they accompany the political and public discourse with a critical eye, pipe up about ethical questions, if they “interfere”**. It is therefore a normative basic prerequisite of „öffentliche Theologie“ **to be actively involved in social transformations.**

Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, one of today’s harshest critics of ecclesiastical practice in Germany showed himself critical towards the way in which churches currently participate in political discourse, as he points out in an interview: “The word “interfere” does not seem appropriate to me. “We interfere”, that is ecclesiastical jargon. In a pluralistic, democratically constituted society, churches are nothing more **than large associations**. As many other associations they have a **right to express their opinion about political questions**. However, bishops and synods do not have a general political mandate. In our society, it is first and foremost political parties that are responsible for politics. The wisest form of political involvement of Christians is therefore to join a party and be an active member thereof.” I think that Graf recognizes **two elementary problems of the understanding of society as it is suggested** by the notion of “Öffentliche Theologie” here: **First:** While the church’s role as one protagonist of the civil society among many is being stressed, the term “interference of the churches in politics” evokes a **dichotomy**, an opposition of church and society, that contradicts the churches’ **claim to be part of society**. A **second** considerable difficulty with regard to the political positioning of the church in ethical questions **is the suggestion that situations are morally unambiguous**, that can be found in the quoted statement by HBS: Is ethical orientation as simple as postulated by Bedford-Strohm? *“Basically, it is very simple: Whenever those who are responsible in politics orientate themselves on ethical norms,*

whenever they promote social justice, whenever they show the wish to preserve nature, to protect life and to overcome violence, they deserve support. Whenever they counteract these norms and concepts, a clear word of criticism has to be spoken at the right time and the right place.”

Graf accuses ecclesiastical statements like this one of **disrespecting the contradictoriness of life and the different approaches that are connected with it**. At the same time he criticizes the moralizing nature of such a “theology of preambles”. I’ll leave it to you to choose your own position and shall arrive at my conclusion:

3. What is to be gained or risked when speaking of public theology?

By positioning themselves so clearly, the protagonists of „Öffentliche Theologie“ **contribute immensely to the orientation of a civil society**. However, when they speak up, they are always seen as **spokespersons of the church**. Simultaneously, “Öffentliche Theologie” is put completely in the service of the church this way – while the individual believer is reduced to being a recipient, a receiver, a listener to this theology. I would like to oppose this view with a concept of **being Christian that Dietrich Rössler coined in the 80s**. He describes the model of Christianity in modern times as **consisting of three basic forms that also show in the way the church acts: The individual, the ecclesiastical and the public Christianity**. And I will go one step further: I think it can be accepted as a given that the way in which faith is lived will **always touch all of these three spheres**: People find out about their own religiousness when they are faced with existential **borderline experiences** that give them the feeling of being part of something larger than themselves. People experience **community and understanding** and an encounter with the contents of the Christian tradition in **church groups and services** or at the **Kirchentag**.

They make decisions, they form civil societies, and they take responsibilities for their families, their jobs and in social relationships. “Öffentliche Theologie”, the **way I want it to be understood right now**, is aware of the trias of individual, ecclesiastical an public Christianity and takes it seriously **by valuing the individual as reasonable and responsible for their personal life choices**. The public role of the gospel is foremost aimed at the **person to whom** - through the biblical message, through an encounter with God of any kind – **something is revealed**. Something that is convincing and that opens the person to the Christian message of God incarnate. The Christian Religion is more than a collection of moral rules and more than a system that leads through ethical conflicts without loss.

Therefore, if theological political and moral pleas coming from the churches shall not go unnoticed among the many others, the most important public of the gospel has to be the Individual: The word Public in German is related to Open, openness and as well with revelation, Offenbarung in German –Public theology understood this way can enlight the power of Religion to open a person to a wider understanding of life, beside everyday issues and to open people for the *dynamics of change* brought by this wider perspective of life.