

LECTURE SERIES PUBLIC THEOLOGY

An International and Intercontextual Assessment



Berlin Institute
for Public Theology



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

A Communion of Churches

The 'Public' in Public Theology

Dimensions of a Contested Concept



1. First World Problems?
2. Dimensions of the Public
3. The Concept of the Public
4. Public Theology as a Discourse Paradigm
5. Challenges

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1. First World Problems?



„Distress knows no nationality“ (Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Chairman Evangelical Church in Germany)

Source: https://www.bundes-esg.de/termine/esg-news/esg-news/archive/2019/november?tx_ttnews%5Bday%5D=06&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=2236&cHash=bc3b1ec079c881754c0f1a0acb250d2a (accessed Feb. .02.21)

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1. First World Problems?



#we send a ship – Bishop Bedford-Strohm, mayors Orlando, Fegebank, officials 'United4Rescue' announce collaboration

Source: <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/163157/03-12-2019/evangelische-kirche-startet-spendensammlung-fuer-rettungsschiff> (accessed Feb. 02nd, 2021)

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1. First World Problems?



We send a ship! Church sets a beacon for humanitarianism!
Source: <https://www.gefluechtete-dortmund.de/wir-schicken-ein-schiff-ev-kirche-setzt-ein-zeichen/> (accessed Feb. 02.21)

With own ship! Evangelical church to support human trafficking gangs!

Source: <https://www.afd-archiv-bodenseekreis.de/2019/09/13/ekd-plant-mit-eigenem-schiff-unter-die-schlepper-zu-gehen/> (accessed Feb. 02. 21)

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1. First World Problems?

public debates address complex issues – in the case of maritime rescue:

- acts of mercy or political protest against an unfeeling European Union?
- humanitarian rescue missions or traffickers' involuntary instruments?
- ordinary migrants or refugees?
- 'brain drain' or freedom of movement?
- legitimate national interest or global injustice?
- church as moral, political or religious agent?
- religion in the public square or 'wall of separation' between church and state?

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2. Dimensions of the Public



What is just?
What is merciful?
What concerns
the church?
Who gets to
decide?

underlying normative
issues

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2. Dimensions of the Public

Who takes notice?
Who's interested?
Who understands?

Who's concerned?



German intellectual debate
German church debate
EU wide journals
UNHCR

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2. Dimensions of the Public



Who takes notice?
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What is just?
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What concerns the church?
Who gets to decide?

underlying normative issues

Who's talking
(on whom's behalf)?
Who may join the debate?
Who owns the media?
Who publishes why?
Who can count on being heard?

churches and political parties
civil society agents
newspapers, TV, radio
new media

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2. Dimensions of the Public

the public as
fragmented
space of articulation

many publics with
various participants

divergent practices of
producing the public

empirical

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Dimensions of a Contested Concept



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The 'Public' in Public Theology

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the public as
regulative idea

space of universally
accessible
deliberation of the
common good

deliberative practices of
producing the public

**normative -
organizing our
understanding**

The 'Public' in Public Theology

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3. The Concept of the Public

'The public' is a critical regulative idea incorporating difference:

normatively a place of deliberation on the common good implying universal participation and access of every person concerned,

it is empirically always a fragmented space of articulation

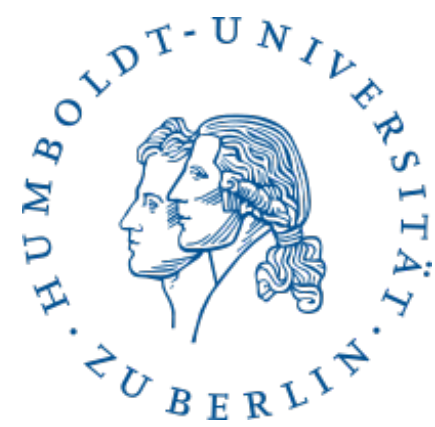
and a space of conflict with asymmetrically distributed power.

The term is never only descriptive, but always carries normative undercurrents. Thus, using the term of 'the public', we cannot but include those differences and reflect on them critically.

Using the term of 'the public' means measuring empirical reality against a normative criterion, i.e. deliberation and universal participation.

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3. The Concept of the Public

- historical places of citizens' participation: agora, forum, gate
- enlightenment idea: universal access to general deliberation
- **tension: regulative idea vs. empirical fragmentation and power asymmetry**

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3. The Concept of the Public

- historical places of citizens' participation: agora, forum, gate
- enlightenment idea: universal access to general deliberation
- **tension: regulative idea vs. empirical fragmentation and power asymmetry**
- **expansion of the public: globalized access, increase in literacy, mass media**
- **intensification of the public: ICT - beyond a one-way-communication**

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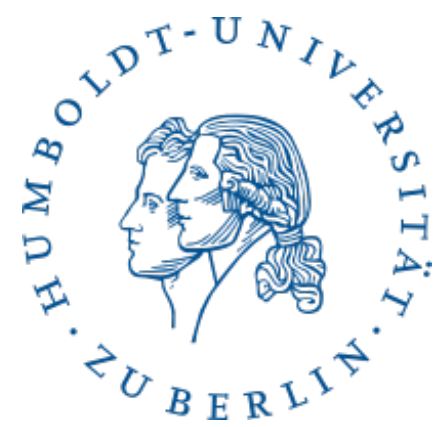


4. Public Theology as a Discourse Paradigm

- reacts to the global expansion and the intensification of the public
- reacts to increased pluralization in religion and world views

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5. Challenges to Christian Public Theology

Three challenges from a Christian perspective:

1. **Christians should contribute to a public of universal access and participation.**

For human dignity bestowed by the creating and redeeming God entitles everybody to have a say in the making of the rules that govern their lives.

2. **Christians should be self critical regarding their own quest for power.**

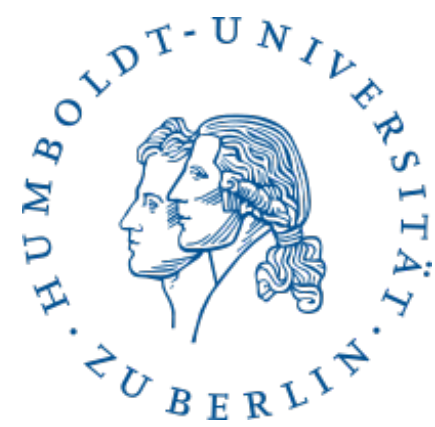
As they know about sin, criticism starts at the own doorstep – this applies especially in the global north, but is of course not limited to that context.

3. **Churches must avoid becoming 'church in excess' or 'church in defect'.**

Churches must not use the public to achieve hegemony for the best of their own organization, 'church in excess' for that means usurping the Lord's position. Churches must avoid becoming 'churches in defect', withholding their witness from the public.

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Albrecht Dürer, Twelve-year old Jesus among the scribes, 1506