

Justification and Justice

The Relevance of Lutheran Distinctions in Church and Society

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Introduction: Public Theology

“Today’s challenges are no longer defined by local or national borders. They are glocal, both global and local. Borders are no longer what they used to be. That should not scare us. Because at the center of Christianity, there is a God crossing the most dramatic border of all: the one between divine and human. Transgression of borders always entails “Berührungsangst”, the anxiety of touching and being touched by what is different, strange, other. As people of faith, we can live with these anxieties, remaining centered in the Gospel of the incarnated Christ and open, very much open, to the world. And so, united in prayer for God’s creation and the church of Jesus Christ, we say with confidence: Veni Creator Spiritus, Come Creator Spirit. “

This was how I concluded my address to pope Francis on my visit earlier this year. Indeed, the challenges today, of global warming, poverty, people fleeing from the atrocities of war and terror, are large-scale. Our mission as church can never be isolated from these and other challenges - that was a clear message from both the pope and myself.

And if the mission of the church is ‘public’ in the sense that it aims at the whole world, then our theology also must be public. Here we find ourselves with a challenge in itself: what is *public theology*? It raises further questions and often leads to misunderstandings. Do we mean a theology for the public? Or a theology in public? Or theology contributing to public life? Or a theology to constitute a new public? or universal theology? Or simply theology as such?¹

And how can a Lutheran theology ever be a public theology? At first sight, the two kingdom doctrine and its separation between state and church, justice and justification, does not encourage a direct involvement in the common challenges of today. At times Lutherans have endorsed a rather passive, quietist ethics when it comes to public issues, justified with reference to the two kingdoms.

¹ James Haire “Public Theology”. In Jesper Svartvik and Jakob Wirén (ed.) *Religious Stereotyping and Interreligious Relations*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013, 25ff.

Sometimes, public theology is unwelcome, both in the church and ‘in the world’. In ‘the world, secularization and decreasing knowledge of Christian faith imply that many people do not understand or do not want to understand theological language. In my context, it is a permanent challenge to explain the theological rationale behind our involvement in public, political issues: the love of Christ forces us. In church, particularly majority church contexts, the transition from ‘authority church’ to a ‘church from below’ is also not easy. It causes both fear and trembling; the sense of a lost identity or loss of religious language.

I think that the task of interpreting public theology and the notion of two realms is even more delicate when it comes to (former) state churches, such as my own. Due to the close relationship between church and state, there was a neat division between law and gospel: the law was the business of the state, whereas the gospel was the business of the church. When the church lacks the capacity of handling both in theologically sound ways, there is a toll taken on the sense of relevance of the church and its theological language.

The Church of Sweden and its Role in Society

The Church of Sweden ceased to be a State Church 15 years ago. This does not mean that state and church do not have any relationship at all, however. There is a state law defining the Church of Sweden as an Evangelical Lutheran faith community, organized in congregations and dioceses. It has to be a folk church, which is governed by a democratic organization in cooperation with the clergy line of responsibility. According to the law the Church must operate throughout the whole country. The state assists with collecting the church fees and contributes financially to the maintenance of the cultural heritage of the Church, that is, the numerous church buildings, many of them medieval.

Membership numbers are declining and will continue to decline, mostly due to demographic changes. Religious diversity is increasing. More church members die than new ones are born. Since 2000, we have seen a continuous decline in membership, yet at a slower pace than pessimists have feared. The name “Church of Sweden”, Svenska kyrkan, although a theological disaster, works quite well as a brand name. It suggests that the Church of Sweden is THE church to relate to. It will be interesting to see how long this perception will last.

However, in comparison the Roman Catholic Church that never has been national in the way churches of the reformation have been, does a better job at providing Christian identity for people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds than we so far, have been able to do in the Church of Sweden.

Our economic resources are shrinking, and yet we still are a rich church compared to most others. We own lots of buildings besides our church buildings, whose maintenance takes large chunks out of every year’s budget. We have many employees, which allows for lots of activities in parish houses all days of the week. In most places considerably more people pass through church activities during the week than on Sundays. This allows for a multiplicity of

programs and activities, but it may contribute to impoverishing Sunday worship life. On the bright side we have a multiplicity of activities, often planned and presided over by church employees. On the flip side we have church members who have been led to understand themselves as consumers of religious experiences and services provided by employed professionals. We embrace them, we answer to their needs and desires, but we are not equally good at empowering them in living a Christian life and sending them to the world as disciples of Christ. This is worlds apart from the stewardship thinking I have met elsewhere. The consumer pattern is nourished by the fact that the average Swede does not feel a need to belong to a faith community in order to have a network of social security. Swedes are used to public welfare covering all of that, hence no need to contribute actively (apart from paying your fees) in order to sustain your local faith community.

One of our challenges is to rediscover the baptismal theology of gift and mission. Another challenge is to prepare for a situation with less employees and greater dependence on volunteers. And a third challenge is to finally take responsibility for Christian teaching and education. In many ways, it seems that we still think that society provides a basic knowledge about Christian faith, which we can build on in confirmation class for example. But that has not been the case for decades!

Religion is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools. Students have a good grasp of the major religions in the world. However, often religion is represented as a historical phenomenon, or an exotic phenomenon (people who believe strange things, are against a lot of modern things, eat funny things at funny times, or don't eat, have funny clothes etc). The conclusion that many students draw must be: faith is not normal; it is always the others (Muslim immigrants) who believe. A modern Swede is a non-believer.

Church and State as Two Kingdoms?

Needless to say, there are many ways to relate church and state to each other and some of them are unfortunate. Let me briefly mention four examples of the latter. First, we have the alliance of church and state where the church dominates the state, as in Calvin's Geneva or at times Medieval Catholicism. Second, the alliance of church and state where the state dominates the church, as in Constantinian Christendom and Colonial Christianity in Latin America. Third, there is the separation of church and state where politics are demonized and theology proclaims salvation as an escape from this evil world. Fourth and finally, we have the separation that is often associated with the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms: a separation of church and state where politics is seen as autonomous from all religious influence and, as a consequence, religious faith runs the risk of being privatized and spiritualized.²

² Walter Altman, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress 1992, 71-75.

No doubt, the doctrine of the two kingdoms has played a central role in our Lutheran tradition and, as we are too well aware of, it has sometimes had disastrous consequences, not least during the 20th century, where there are examples of Lutheran churches who have failed to work for justice and resist evil regimes.

And as I have sketched above, there are other examples where the consequences have not been as fatal, but where the model of thinking has led to a focus on the gospel as good news, but not for *this* world.

So, there is a rather constant need to revisit the relationship between justice and justification, law and gospel, state and church.

The Blessing and Danger of our Lutheran Distinctions

In his commentary to the Galatians, Luther elaborates on the distinction between Law and Gospel and connects it to the distinction between the secular government and the spiritual government.³ Clearly, in Luther's thinking, the two belong together and they both apply to God's twofold struggle against evil: in the spiritual government through gospel to promote salvation and in the secular government through law in order to achieve political justice and social order.⁴ Moreover, in Luther's thinking the notion of two kingdoms or realms had a pastoral dimension, enabling even the executioner or hangman to understand themselves as faithful Christians.

But how do they belong together? As my former colleague Vitor Westhelle at LSTC points out, it is a rather new thing to consider the idea of two kingdoms a 'doctrine'. Westhelle is very critical of the way the relationship between justification and justice has been interpreted in our tradition. He reminds us that the two kingdoms 'doctrine' is a 20th century construction, originally coined by Franz Lau in 1933.⁵ Cutting a long story (very) short, the creation of two kingdom doctrine, now a Lutheran identity badge, is perhaps not very Lutheran at all. It was from the beginning an unfortunate project, both theologically and politically. In the words of Johannes Heckel (d 1963),

*Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, as it has been articulated in protestant theology [I think it is fair to say German], is like an ingenuous labyrinth whose creator lost its plan in the middle of the work, so that one cannot find the way out.*⁶

How, then, can we understand the two kingdoms today? One important thing to keep in mind is that in New testament, as well as in Luther's own thinking, there is ultimately only *one kingdom* - the kingdom of God. This is the kingdom that Jesus speaks of in the gospels, in

³ Luther WA 40.I, 40:16-41:26; 392:19-393;29.

⁴ Carl-Henrik Grenholm "Law and Gospel in Lutheran Ethics". In *Justification in a Post-Christian Society*. Eugene: Pickwick 2014, 91f.

⁵ Vitor Westhelle "God and Justice: The Word and the Mask". In *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* vol 3, No 1 2003, 2.

⁶ Heckel "Im Irrgarten der Zwei-Reiche-Lehre". Quoted from Westhelle 2003, 3.

sayings and parables; when sins are forgiven and when miracles are performed. This is the kingdom which, according to Paul, is the destiny of all creation. Thus, if we were to identify two kingdoms in the New testament they are not church and state, but rather the kingdoms of God and Evil.

Consequently, [as Craig Nesson has argued,] we make a categorical mistake when we read Luther's two kingdom teaching as a spatial metaphor. They are not two *unrelated realms*, but rather two *related strategies*⁷. Evil is resisted in a twofold way: through the proclamation of the gospel and the through the establishment of just order in society through the institutions of the state, law, education, economy etc.⁸ Hence, we have two complementing strategies for working against evil and for God's kingdom in this world.

Understood this way, the gospel strategy - *justification* - liberates the sinner from preoccupation with one's own self and salvation and enables him or her to do good works for the sake of others. The law strategy - *justice* - serves to order the world justly by political means.

This way of arguing comes close to Westhelle's claim that the notion of two kingdoms does not present "a particular Christian justice, a Christian alternative to the world, but the alternative of Christ in the midst of the world".⁹ Thus, Westhelle provides us with an approach to the notion of two kingdoms, not as a doctrine where the church must not interfere in political matters, but as an hermeneutical principle: to know Christ is to know justice, and where justice is found, there we also find Christ.¹⁰

So, what is Public Theology?

When speaking of the public role of theology, I imply both the public relevance of theology and the responsibility of theology to relate to the public sphere. I understand the public sphere as constituted by a diversity of overlapping publics, such as religious institutions or organizations, academia, society at large, local and global and everything in between. The public sphere is thus marked by a differentiated relationality. Though it sounds like an abstract principle, this differentiated relationality finds concrete embodied expressions, for instance in the academic who at the same time is a church member, citizen in a specific society and often also a world citizen.

The public role of theology requires continuous analysis of the surrounding world, dialogue in and with the current context of space and time, as well as skillful popularization of the results of theological research.

⁷ Nesson remarks that "'Strategy' is a constructive and dynamic translation of the German word *Regimente* just as the English term 'regimen' suggests a strategy", Nesson 2005, 311.

⁸ Craig L Nesson, "Reappropriating Luther's Two Kingdoms". In *Lutheran Quarterly* vol xix 2005, 306.

⁹ Westhelle 2003, 8.

¹⁰ Westhelle 2003, 10.

Public theology is not only possible, I would say that it is necessary, both for its own sake and for the sake of society. For its own sake: theology needs to be exposed to interdisciplinary and public discussion in order to develop and remain relevant. It is impossible to pursue critical and self-critical reflection without relating to something beyond one's own area.

For the sake of society: Good solutions in many areas require cooperation between the best scientific, technological and theological knowledge and skills. Religion, its doctrinal expressions and its rites are robust and changeable at the same time.

Let me exemplify the public role of theology by turning to how many prophets live out their prophetic task. They present themselves as three-in-one: a critic, a child and a clown in a single person. I think this scheme applies perfectly well to public theology, too. Let me try.

As a *critic*, theology will hold rationality in highest regard and pursue standards of high intellectual rigor and integrity, but also be respectful of the limits of rationality and the penultimacy of all knowledge. This commitment will demand careful, daring and wise navigation between more than one set of Scyllas and Charybdises. Furthermore, a prophet will not be a prophet without knowing history: as a critic, the theological prophet will have to be well-acquainted with the history of ideas. As a critic, the theological prophet will also dare to use the language of sin, forgiveness and blessing and convincingly claim that sin and blessing are relevant to all discourses in the course of the world.

As a *child*, theology will never grow tired of asking its why-questions. With the hunger for life and the curiosity of a four-year-old, theology will keep the dimension of awe and wonder alive. It will also insist on asking those questions that the adult world has learned to avoid as inappropriate. In their dealings with all kinds of powers and sovereigns, theologians will remember that it took a child to point out the true transparency of the Emperor's clothes. According to the teachings of Jesus, it is a child who is the greatest in the reign of God (Matthew 18. 1-5). This is a relevant memento for the dealings of the world. "Whatever you do to the little ones ..." (Matthew 25. 31-46) is a robust criterion also in secular ethical reasoning. How will this particular project affect the little ones of this world? What will it do for them? What will it do against them?

A *clown* is about good and healthy laughter. As a clown, theology's only power is the courage to look odd and to let itself be laughed at. The success of clowns is grounded in their ability to play with the categories of causation in such a way that they make everybody else burst into laughter. Not unlike the epistemological ambition of postmodern thought to gain knowledge from the cracks in the pot of objective knowledge, the clown releases something through the cracks that put an end to the serious composure of a face when it bursts with laughter. Or maybe, the trick is an extra boost of those mirror neurons, our prerequisite for trust, empathy and thus even solidarity. Beyond words.

Clowns do embarrassing things, but they never embarrass anybody else – they always take the embarrassment upon themselves. By taking embarrassment upon themselves clowns create liberation for those who laugh at them. The best clownery always carries traits of vicarious

suffering by which others are liberated. Thus it is an image of the salvation that scientists and theologians along with all humanity and the rest of creation are longing for.

In the clown-role, theology will not start out by speaking explicitly about God or the Holy Trinity; rather it will start with sharing and enacting a specific culture while at the same time opening it up toward transcendence. It is an approach from below, as it were. [The clown performs this approach by subtly playing with the category of causality: by doing the absolutely predictable (like stumbling and tripping) in always astonishing ways, the clown surpasses predictability in a stunning symphony of vulnerability and surprise. Causality is vigorously affirmed – in their gawkiness, clowns seem to be subject to the laws of nature even more than anybody else. Yet, the clown's radical submission to the rules of causality serves something more and other; it evokes in the spectator a vision that reaches beyond the limits of mechanical causality. Causality is vigorously affirmed, yet opened from inside towards transcendence. This is creativity: something new emerging not by negating cause-and-effect but by participating in the symphony of vulnerability and surprise, finitude and freedom, fall and grace.]

This approach is radically different from world views that build on a supposed dualism between the natural and the supernatural. Such views routinely adhere to a rigid scheme of distribution: the natural goes to science and technology and the supernatural goes to faith. Although outmoded, such views are still in use, especially in circles that have an interest in exposing the supposed irrationality of religion. The line of argument seems compelling: when the irrationality of the category of the supernatural is successfully claimed, religion and theology are automatically redundant at best, harmful at worst. The prophetic image of the clown questions these assumptions convincingly by undermining the dualism of natural and supernatural. Theology works without that dualism.

Another way of saying this is to describe the clown as an ideal figure that is deeply rooted in a clear analysis of reality. This is clown identity: Clowns bring together playful idealism and utter realism in a way that creates liberation. In doing so, they bear Christ-like traits. It is precisely this combination of realism and idealism that maintains human fascination with the figure of the clown.

The clown's subtle and liberating play with causality is deeply theological. In taking on the clown-role theology bears witness of the divine: creativity is born where the seriousness of the cause-effect mechanism is trumped by liberating laughter. In other words: Creativity implies a transcended cause-effect relationship such as the clown models it – not by negating the cause-effect-structure of the natural but by allowing for something new to emerge out of the symphony of surprise and vulnerability. Just as the reality of death is trumped by the great Easter laugh, the *risus paschalis*, known as a powerful element in some late medieval traditions of Christian liturgy.

Conclusion

Critic, child and clown: in each of these roles, theology has something specific to offer to our common search for adequate and sustainable knowledge: knowledge that pays due attention to the twofold strategy of gospel and law and that knows how to use the key of deconstruction as a hermeneutics of the kingdom of God. When theology acts prophetically, as critic, child and clown, it will respect differences in ways that enable relationships and create environments where love can flourish.

We can find a basis for a Lutheran public theology, not by rejecting the distinction between the two kingdoms, but by revisiting it. And by joining God's twofold mission of justification and justice for this world with confidence and hope.