

Churches as Agents for Justice and Against Populism Summary of Major Findings

*When truth falls away from the public square,
righteousness stands far off, and justice is turned back.*

Isaiah 59:14

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:21

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3

Introduction

From 2 until 4 May 2018 over 65 participants from 25 countries around the globe gathered at the Dietrich-Bonhoeffer-Haus in Berlin to confer on the theme “Churches as Agents for Justice and Against Populism. Public Theology in Global Intercontextual Dialogue”. The conference opened with words of welcome from the organizers of the event: Evangelische Akademie zu Berlin, the Lutheran World Federation, Brot für die Welt and the Church of Sweden. The opening addresses identified recent trends that suggest a crisis in democracies around the globe. Data shows that the space for meaningful participation of all in political processes and for jointly deliberating on matters of public concern is shrinking. Operational space for civil society actors is narrowing, including for churches and faith based actors, as they encounter difficulties to contribute to critical social and political discourse. Through interdisciplinary dialogue between theologians, ethicists, church leaders and social and political scientists, the conference sought to reinforce and reform the public role of theology, and strengthen the churches’ agency to create inclusive, just and safe participatory spaces within society.

This summary offers a précis of some of our major findings.

Understanding “Populism” and exclusionary politics

A variety of political, cultural and economic forces are root causes for the phenomena of shrinking democratic space in different contexts. At the outset, the conference discussed that the term “populism” is used to describe a broad range of alleged anti-elitist, anti-establishment reactionary and exclusionary movements. Such movements arise from very different historical and cultural contexts, and therefore deploy diverse conceptual differences, goals and methods that must be understood in their complexity. Exclusionary populism can be understood as a symptom of the crisis of democracy and unjust economic systems, as well as a factor

contributing to the crisis. In Europe and in the US especially, though not exclusively, ethno-nationalist populist movements are a threat to the functioning of democratic principles in societies, and these developments currently threaten to have repercussions in other parts of the world as well.

Exclusionary populist movements make use of some democratic processes to subvert and destroy essential preconditions and values on which democracy depends: a sense of honesty, sincerity, responsibility, respect for the other, compromise etc. Where hate speech, fake news and methods of shallow propaganda enter the center stage of the political discourse, the space for solid and serious democratic negotiation is severely narrowed. The conference sought to identify common features of exclusionary populist discourses that seek to restrict public space and deprive people of their right to participate in democratic processes and to access just living conditions.

Exclusionary populist movements often refer to concerns about unjust distribution of power, wealth or social representation and political participation. They claim to amplify the voice of “the people” and seek “popular sovereignty” against the political power of the so-called “intellectual” or economic “elite”, which gives rise to the term “populism” for this discourse in Northern American and European contexts. When these aspects are coupled with nativist ideologies, ethno-nationalist forms of populism can quickly colonize the public discourse. Nativism circumscribes “the people” in exclusionary terms, putting “the natives” over against others. The conference discussed that these underlying dynamics of exclusionary populism are not restricted to European and Northern American contexts, but are present in other global contexts as well (e.g. the Hindutva ideology in India).

Ethno-nationalist populism seeks to redefine “the people” in binary terms through a process of “othering”. Within that, those in the majority or dominant culture will identify the cultural, linguistic, religious, sexual, racial or gendered “other” as the scapegoat for social or economic anxieties and disparities. By propagating a post-truth climate of distrust of the media and other critical voices, the bases of social cohesion are eroded, and power is consolidated into patriarchal, authoritarian systems.

Ethno-nationalist populist discourse is rooted in a fundamental fear of ambiguity and the complexity of diversity. But the desire to resolve ambiguities through narratives of cultural, religious, racial or national purity results in exclusionary forms of identity politics that deny individuals’ belonging to “the people” and restricts their right to fully participate in society. Exclusion shrinks the public space and restricts access, and is the cause of the crisis as addressed above.

Churches as Agents for Justice

As a way of creating public space for civil discourse, the conference opened with a public evening panel on the role of the church in times of populism. EKD Presiding Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm called the church to answer the nihilistic populist narratives in Germany with an alternative narrative of hope that is rooted in the good news of God’s love revealed in Christ Jesus. Church of Sweden’s Archbishop Antje Jackelén underlined that the church, even if it also can be influenced by populist discourse, needs to see beyond the short-sighted and reactive politics in societies and act steadfast as a holder of visions. She highlighted the importance of being church as part of a global communion of churches, transcending boundaries of ethnicity and nation.

One of the insights of the conference was that church must always be self-critical. The church should continually ask, is the church different from society, or do we mirror patriarchal, authoritarian, discriminatory or exclusionary structures? Are churches creating spaces that encourage the full participation of every human being? During the conference we were reminded of times in history when the churches have not been able to answer in the affirmative. Churches have denied full participation of women, especially of women of color; churches have denied welcome to the stranger and succour to the needy; churches have denied love to their enemies and to their neighbours. In every generation Christians need to return to the marks of the church and the diverse epistemological sources of faith and wisdom. There we find the theological and spiritual resources that will shape and reform public theology and motivate vocation in civil society as a priesthood of all believers.

Many of our discussions revealed the difficulty of acting in unjust spaces where political persecution, the influence of media and religious fundamentalism challenge the church's ability to proclaim this inclusive narrative. Racism, sexism, xenophobia make it difficult to consistently bear faithful witness to radical inclusion that overcomes populist binaries. However, we remembered that we are called to be the salt that gives the world a taste of freedom and dignity of all, affirming meaningful participation in democratic procedures. The spiritual and theological heritage of the church provides the tools to challenge the desire to overcome creative ambiguity with simplistic binaries. The church embraces diversity as a gift and complexity as beauty. The church is a people, embodied in a diversity of genders, races, languages, ethnicities and cultures in majority and minority contexts around the world.

Belonging to the church does not depend on purity of any one society, culture, ethnicity, or political system. Rather the inclusive nature of God's love, which grants justice for every diverse and differently abled body in the world, defines this community and calls people into deep solidarity with every other creature. One implication of this call is to continually redraw the lines of belonging to include those bodies who live under marginalized conditions into new just relationships. The church is a community that witnesses to the life affirming nature of creating communities of ever widening complexity and full participation.

Conclusion

Conference participants encouraged churches and theological institutions:

- to promote education and spiritual formation as a means to continually transform our communities into non-violent spaces of full, just and safe participation for all,
- to acknowledge that there are different, sometimes conflicting perspectives within the church regarding populism, and to create spaces where these perspectives can be in sincere dialogue with one another to deepen discernment,
- to create spaces for neighbours to experience the transformative nature of ecumenical and interfaith encounter, and to build trust in "the other",
- to form networks with other actors in civil society, and to establish partnerships with civil society allies who share values and commitments,
- to critically remember where church and theology have been complicit in ethno-nationalist populist agendas and point to the need for repentance,
- to learn about the root causes of injustices, reclaim agency for justice and give prophetic witness against oppressive, exclusionary systems and structures,

- to share narratives of hope, inclusiveness and dignity and reform the narratives that will shape public theology,
- to renegotiate the meaning of justice, liberation and freedom and to rediscover democracy in its contexts.

The conference recognized that while the church has not always acted democratically or used its agency for the liberation of all, the church strives to grow in the knowledge of how to engage in the public space. Democracy needs to be renegotiated in each generation, and churches, while not commensurate to any political system or party, must reinforce their capacity to engage in civil society, and proclaim a prophetic narrative of hope in the public sphere. In this way, we drew on the thinking of two theologians, among others, whose works were important not only for the context where the conference was held, but also for the wider ecumenical movement:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness and pride of power, and with its apologia for the weak. - I feel that Christianity is rather doing too little in showing these points than doing too much. Christianity has adjusted itself much too easily to the worship of power. It should give much more offence, more shock to the world, than it is doing.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Evening Sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:9 (London 1934), in: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke 13, Gütersloh 1994, 411)

Dorothee Sölle wrote, “In a theological perspective it is evident that the content of this [right wing Christianity] contradicts the message of the Jewish-Christian tradition. The God of the prophets did not preach the nation-state, but community between strangers and natives... Jesus did not make the family the central value of human life, but the solidarity of those deprived of their rights.” (Dorothee Sölle, The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality, Minneapolis 1990, 138)

Conference participants came from: Argentina, Austria, Bethlehem, Brazil, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Haiti, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Italy, Lesotho, Myanmar, Norway, Poland, Rwanda, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Zimbabwe.