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Dealing Theologically with Plurality: Contextual and Global Challenges for a Public Practical Theology

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Preface

As someone who has got to know the current transformations of South African society as a result of various stays in the country in recent years, one is extremely curious to hear what the Stellenbosch colleague D. Xolile Simon explores in his article. To say it at this point: My expectations and hopes to obtain through his reflections a decidedly theological orientation for the productive engagement of churches and religious communities with diversity and plurality are confirmed in many and highly positive ways. For me as a theologian who grew up, lives and thinks in a European context, the insights Simon provides are also highly informative for my own practical-theological understanding.

1. Perceptions of the South African context

As far as I have experienced in my encounters with people of different religious, ethnic, political and social backgrounds, the South African society - possibly just as dramatically as before the end of the apartheid regime - is going through a considerable rift. Apparently, it is not only the effects of the racist policies of the 20th century that are now appearing in a threatening way. But also the unholy consequences of colonization and the associated systematic exploitation, exclusion and oppression of the most diverse minorities over centuries are striking in the sense of historically conditioned long-term effects.

What has struck me in my encounters as well as in recent literature on the situation in South Africa is the considerable and almost widespread loss of mutual trust (exemplarily Ndebele 2010). Public spaces, whether they are meeting places in urban centres, squares in smaller towns or rural residential areas, are generally considered dangerous. Public life in South Africa is not the same as in many Western societies. This feeling of loss of confidence and permanent mistrust also seems to apply to the perception of the political and economic system in South Africa. Corruption and nepotism, the exploitation of migrants and a visibly manifesting „survival of the fittest” seem to be the order of the day. And the tensions between members of different faiths are by no means insignificant in ethnic and religious terms either.

In all this, it seems that the Christian churches and communities have not yet really reached a clear self-positioning: how should they articulate themselves in the new circumstances in view of the fact that they themselves have partly supported the apartheid regime for long periods (Hoffmeyr & Millard 2014)? In what ways can and should they assume political responsibility? And what tasks do they have in dealing productively with increasing social and religious diversity, including acute xenophobia?

Over the past decades, many South African theologians have intensively and fascinatingly addressed the question of whether the perspective of public theology can be helpful and orientating for dealing with the questions mentioned - especially in alignment with the Reformed tradition (de Gruchy 2004; Koopman 2007, Smit 2009; Nell 2010; Cilliers 2012; Forster 2014). In this tradition of thought, Simon obviously stands, even if he only indirectly deals with it in his contribution.

2. How to read and understand Simon

Against the background of the current situation in South Africa, Simon develops a fascinating perspective on the challenges and concrete possibilities of churches and religious communities. His reflections can be summarized as follows: Only if a reflected pluralism develops on the part of the Christian churches and the individual believers will the Christian faith be able to contribute significantly to avoiding exclusion and to living together in a plural society. For this it is necessary to consciously recognize others as others in the sense of showing true witness. An interreligious perspective on the coexistence of the most diverse religions is of central importance for this. For Simon, this means first of all to make sure that the existing balance of power and one's own normative prejudices are consciously reflected upon, that the necessary knowledge about different religions and traditions is acquired, values, beliefs and spiritual needs of others are recognized, common projects with others are planned in order to create vigilance and to contribute to a common good, and finally that the human willingness to bear witness as a Christian community with reference to the basic theological idea of the reign of God (*missio Dei*) are strengthened. For Simon, the worship is the striking centre, insofar as human thought and action can be experienced and lived in its theological meaning here. To this end, he consciously adopts a theological position on religion, from which the plurality capacity of lived religion is founded and developed by the deeper meaning of the word of God.

3. Context transfer

If one considers the above-mentioned highly precarious conditions within South Africa's diverse society, Simon's considerations can hardly be overestimated. Now one could leave it at that, to attach relevance to his practical-theological considerations exclusively for the South African context and thus not to consider their possible meaning for a very different European context. However, this would be as short-circuiting as wrong. Even if the overall situation in South Africa is undoubtedly very specific, the challenges and analyses identified by Simon are by no means only of limited regional importance.

As already indicated, I find his reflections highly inspiring for the sharpening of the tasks of a public theology and public church (Schlag 2012). Especially in the current political situation in which the most diverse narratives lead to new forms of exploding identity politics, his almost reconciliation-theological approach is of utmost importance. Thus, radical,

transformative forces and processes are necessary in view of the increasingly threatening division of current societies in order to alleviate these fatal dynamics at least to some extent.

In fact, phenomena of exclusionary identity policies and deliberately anti-minority narratives can also be observed in completely different political contexts. In many European countries an extremely massive populism has recently taken hold, which often deliberately also works with supposedly clear norms (Priester 2012; Müller 2016; Stegemann 2017). It is then talked about the christian „Abendland” (Occident) or an allegedly indisputable „Leitkultur” (leading culture) of individual national societies. The superiority of the supposedly ethnically, culturally and religiously clearly identifiable identity of the so-called majority society is then emphasized. A certain populist attitude in the sense of criticism of certain liberal elites is now certainly also spread by intellectual voices and made respectable in literary terms (Murray 2017; Zilonka 2018). But it is also disturbing and depressing when the symbol of the cross is supported at right-wing populist demonstrations in order to endow political radicalization with an inviolable claim to truth (Schmiedel & Smith 2018). In the sense of Simon's argument for a remembrance culture, it is therefore scandalous and unjustifiable that only recently an important representative of the right-wing AfD said: „Hitler and the Nazis are only a flyshit in over 1,000 years of successful German history“.

It is equally irritating, however, when committed persons from the churches and religious communities are accused of blind naivety or pure „Gutmenschentum” (good humanity), for example in the case of concrete refugee aid. Others are fundamentally sceptical of the churches' political commitment and demand that they focus on their alleged core mission - and this is then primarily understood to mean worship and pastoral care. It should also be noted, however, that individual evangelical voices and communities also appear publicly with a special claim to a majority in view of their own truth of faith. Thus, with regard to the perception of Muslim religion and its members, they position themselves just as clearly as representatives of the – allegedly – only credible truth. In this respect, the churches, at least in Central European societies, have recently fallen between the front lines of the most diverse religious and political views and interests.

Now some political and religious-cultural demarcation tendencies may well reflect the complex and delicate situation of the current integration challenges in Europe. And at this point it cannot be denied that, especially in view of the cultural diversity of the various immigration groups, Central European societies have considerable integration tasks ahead of them. The fact that certain cultural standards, especially in the area of Muslim self-image, raise considerable questions should not be denied at this point (e.g. Keller-Messahli 2017; Manea 2018; Abdel-Samad 2018).

4. Challenges and tasks for a public practical theology

But precisely for this reason, practical theology, which sees itself as a publicly relevant science, raises the urgent question of which maxims and on the basis of which standards a Christian-motivated recognition of social diversity can succeed. In a systematic sense, it

should be discussed in what way the plurality-capacity of religious communities can be founded precisely on their own understanding of faith.

I am very much in agreement with the fact that Simon presents and develops his reflections here in a decidedly theological manner. His argument makes it clear that the relevance and legitimacy of the Christian faith has to prove itself more and more about the fact that faith itself in its positive potentials for living together is emphasized and quite practically developed in plural societies. From there, the close connection between social and missionary work established by Simon following D. Bosch is also particularly connectable for the European context. In fact, it would be theologically and practically short-circuited to set these two modes of action against each other or even to present these Christian options for action as irreconcilable poles. In this respect, his contextual design shows that public theology as a conceptual program is of orienting importance both for the individual life of faith and for the practice of the churches and religious communities.

Public theology actually represents a plural and context-sensitive concept of various forms of articulation of the Christian faith as lived religion. In the classical distinction of David Tracy, the public relevance of theology manifests itself in places as diverse as university, society and the church (Tracy 1981; Storrar and Morton 2004; Kim and Day 2017). At the same time, theology is not simply an academic discipline of a few specialists. But is an unconditional source of inspiration and power of articulation of every reflected and responsible Christian self-understanding. In this context, it should also be clarified whether the starting point of a public practical theology can really lie in an understanding of theology as „knowledge of God“ (Ward 2017). To me a self-image of theology seems much more appropriate, especially for public theology, which Duncan Forrester expresses as follows: „Theology and theological ethics are more like improvisation than acting according to a set and predetermined script“. (Forrester 2005, 1). In any case, it would be highly fatal if the biblical narratives and images became „codes to be cracked and the translated into a new academic jargon which is the domestic language of the elite and excludes others.“ (Forrester 2005, 149.)

The fact that Simon is making the worship service the centre of interreligious dialogue still seems relatively abstract for the time being. One would wish that, right down to the proposals for preaching or liturgical practice, it had been concretised how one can actually imagine such a capacity for plurality and dialogue in detail. Is the act of worship really the most suitable possibility to perceive the other person as other and to enter into a mutual exchange with him and her? Does the articulation of religious claims not threaten mutual understanding? Could the formulation of certain religious norms and dogmas not lead to the immediate exclusion of those who listen? Some sermons, by the way, have indeed such a problematic effect. In this respect, especially in worship services, it is important to raise the wise and theologically well-founded „word of God“ with all the necessary professionalism and taking into account the factual political complexities (Keller 2017).

5. Transformational practice

Thus, I believe that an interreligious culture of encounter and integration must and can be established in very different public places. To give a hint at this point: Successful interreligious education at the place of the school lives by its pedagogical and theological standards exactly from such an attitude and readiness for mutual perception, the conscious recognition of the other, the peaceful exchange about different claims to truth as well as from a practice of tolerance towards different, highly disparate religious ideas (Schweitzer 2015; Mansour 2017; Schlag & Suhner 2018).

Simon's strong concept of transformation is of considerable relevance here: For the content profile of the concept of transformation actually comprises a cognitive, affective and also effective dimension in pedagogical and theological terms (Koller 2018). Behind this lies an understanding of education that goes far beyond the acquisition of certain knowledge contents and must not be reduced to training in certain learning techniques. Rather, it corresponds precisely to the hermeneutic character of all religious interreligious education when teaching processes are planned and carried out precisely in this transformative – and perhaps also transcendental – horizon (Biesta 2017). Against the background of Simon's comments in R. Wuthnow's recording, it is particularly helpful to take a much closer look at the concept of heterogeneity from a programmatic point of view in addition to the debate on plurality and diversity. If it itself is understood in its critical function, this makes it possible to take a context-sensitive and systematic view of the complexity of difference and equality, of particularity and universality. From there it is the task of all pedagogy and also religious pedagogy to help the individual subjects in the heterogeneous worlds of life to acquire the ability to perceive, speak, decide and act (Grümme 2017, 359).

Simon's insight into the South African situation and the associated challenges for the churches and each individual believer is much more than just a contextual impression of limited reach. Rather, his theological argument opens up the broad horizon of civil society responsibility to which the religious communities of today are called. At the same time this also challenges academic practical theology in its global reference to creative reflection and to a common, cross-border practice of intellectual understanding and true practice (Forrester 2000) in the perspective of the „renewal of the mind“.

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