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Interactive Pluralism in Asia

Religious Life and Public Space

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LWF Studies 2016/1

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Bibliographic information published by the German National Library

The **Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the **Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;** detailed bibliographic data are available on the internet at dnd.dnd.de

Printed in Germany

This book was printed on FSC-certified paper

Cover: Wong Chi-pang

Editorial assistance: LWF Department for Theology and Public Witness
Typesetting and inside layout: LWF Communications/Department for Theology and Public Witness
Design: LWF Communications/EVA
Printing and Binding: Druckhaus Köthen GmbH & Co. KG

Published by Evangelische Verlangsanstalt GmbH, Leipzig, Germany, under the auspices of

The Lutheran World Federation
150, rte de Ferney, PO Box 2100
CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

ISBN 978-3-374-04537-2

www.eva-leipzig.de

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Preface

Martin Junge

In times when fragmentation, segregation and withdrawal seem to be the order of the day, to see people of faith constructively engaging in the public sphere on issues of common concern is a sign of hope. It takes courage and determination not to stay within the comfort zone of one's church or one's familiar academic terrain, but to go out and interact with others who are considerably different. Asia provides many opportunities for the encounter between people of different ethnicities, nationalities, religions, caste and class, but do people of faith actually grasp these opportunities?

This book proposes interactive pluralism as a meaningful and promising way forward for Asian communities and countries. The reflections and analyses pave the way toward such interaction and collaboration. The authors engage in theological conversation with tradition in a way that opens the future as well as with complex and antagonistic dynamics in society in a way that brings people together and creates a sense of belonging and solidarity. This is daring and prophetic; as people of faith, it is precisely this that is our calling. With open hearts and minds and with outstretched hands we engage together with others.

Setting out on the path toward interactive pluralism is clearly an ecumenical endeavor. In this volume, Lutheran voices join those of theologians from other Christian denominations and I appreciate the depth of the theological reflections and the detailed analyses of social and political processes. It has been my experience that we cannot shy away from complexities in our work toward sustainable transformation.

Deeply moved by the transformative power of the gospel, Martin Luther called Christians to a new sense of maturity. The priesthood of believers is a notion that empowered all those who are baptized not only to take responsibility within the church, but also in worldly affairs. As we reconnect

with the insights of the Reformation today, the vision of maturity—both in matters of faith and in worldly issues—speaks right into our time and age. Reformation theology emphasizes that mature Christians actively engage as citizens in their community. Today, it is vital that we understand citizenship as a calling and actively contribute to our societies by joining hands with other citizens in the public space in order to overcome injustice and to promote peace.

This book is based on lively encounter and interaction at a consultation of the Lutheran World Federation's (LWF) program for public theology and interreligious relations, organized together with Tao Fong Shan Christian Center (TFSCC) in Hong Kong. I thank TFSCC and Aeropagos for their friendly collaboration.

I commend this publication to all those interested in public affairs and interreligious relations in Asia, and to all who seek to deepen their theological engagement with complex societal realities. The theologians who have contributed to this book provide concrete examples of what it means to be theologically accountable to our traditions as well as our neighbors.

Introduction

Simone Sinn

In Asia's culturally, religiously and ethnically diverse societies, an amazing overall plurality exists side by side a tangible and dangerous fragility. Authoritarian political regimes, ideologies and colonialism have left their traces and religious and non-religious worldviews significantly influence cultural life. In many countries, asymmetries between religious groups have increasingly gained political and cultural importance, and the predominance of certain religious traditions has become burdensome on the others. Significant differences between the realities in urban centers and rural areas, changing patterns of work as well as transformations in gender relations have led to a renewed understanding of the public and private spheres.

Hong Kong is one of the main economic hubs in the region. Its diverse population and distinct political configuration were the focus of attention in autumn 2014, when the Umbrella Movement visibly shaped the city's public space. For the churches and other religious communities this movement raised the question of how to respond to and engage with the political issues at stake. What are the hopes and visions for shaping and engaging in the public space? What do people of different generations, religious affiliations and gender bring to the conversation? How can shared agendas be developed in order together to work for justice and peace?

Religious communities relate to the state, other religious communities and actors in society in various ways. These are shaped by constitutional and legal frameworks, public discourse and living encounter as well as certain global trends regarding how the relationship between the spiritual and the worldly realms is conceived of. Discussions at the international and local levels appear to have become more polarized. Whereas some praise the crucial role of religions in society and the leadership they provide, others

warn against a dangerous "resurgence of religion" and advocate for a clear-cut separation of religion and politics. In light of this contested terrain, it is vital that religious communities account for why and how they engage with others in the public space and thereby give clarity and credibility to the communities' advocacy work, social engagement and public relations.

Lutheran theology clearly distinguishes but does not advocate for an antagonistic divide between the worldly and the spiritual realms. It provides a strong rationale for the commitment to the common good and a public sphere that gives space for the different communities to interact peacefully. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of providing education in order to enable people to become mature citizens. "Citizenship" has become a key concept in plural societies and enables the creation of a public space in which people of different religious, ethnic, gender and other identities can interact as different yet equal partners. The concept of citizenship helps to critique discourses of majority vs. minority groups, allows for the naming of injustice and oppression and the joint development of visions of a just society. In order constructively to engage with plurality, dialogical methodologies have become important.

The notion of interactive pluralism captures the idea that communities cannot withdraw into ghettos but need to be actively involved with one another to create a shared public space, where different convictions and perspectives have their place and common commitments and values can emerge.

The first section of the book provides an in-depth engagement with theological questions that emerge from current realities in Asia and relates them to classic theological fields such as Trinitarian theology, soteriology and pneumatology. Anselm K. Min introduces the concept of the public space as a space that is constituted through the dialectic socio-political negotiating in society. Min questions traditional ways of setting the spiritual apart from the political and calls on Asia's rich spiritual resources to help people connect more deeply with their daily realities. He underlines the importance of a theologically sustained understanding of human dignity and solidarity. In light of globalization, a pluralist sensitivity to the other and a unifying sense of solidarity are needed in order to live together in the common space of one country, one region and one world. Min encourages faith communities in Asia to mobilize their profound spirituality to help communities transcend perceptions of identity based on gender, ethnicity, religion, ideology and culture.

Joas Adiprasetya argues for linking the public space to the Trinitarian space. He maintains that unless both theological-Trinitarian and social-public understandings of an open space are creatively intertwined one is unable to construct a robust theological reflection on religious diversity.

He critiques theological attempts that separate the two, either by basing religious diversity on the more metaphysical argument through the Trinitarian lens, without any social implication, or finding sociological explanation for religious diversity, without any metaphysical imagination. Adiprasetya's proposal is centered on the idea of perichoresis that engages with the problem of diversity through the classical idea of participation of all creation in the Trinitarian communion.

Lai Pan-chiu outlines how, in contemporary China, many Chinese intellectuals regard salvation and enlightenment as key for the modernization of Chinese culture. Based on a review of the Chinese Christian discourses on salvation, especially how they address issues related to religious diversity and public issues in China today, he proposes a Christian understanding of salvation that may enhance the dialogue with other religions and their cooperation on public issues, especially the development of civil society in China.

Reexamining the theological separation between creation and salvation, Notto R. Thelle underlines that the crisis during the sixteenth century has left its traces on Lutheran theology. Discussing Lutheran perspectives on other faiths, he pleads for exploring more deeply the Trinitarian structure of God's engagement with this world. Thelle suggests that the isolation of creation and salvation as two separate aspects of God's ongoing creative presence in the world constitutes a potential problem. In the final part, he invites the reader to imagine a Christian mandala of "God in Christ," thus imagining the deep relationality between Christ and the entire cosmos and creating an openness to the wisdom and experiences of other religions.

Kristin Johnston Largen proposes a robust and dynamic understanding of the Holy Spirit as a lens through which Christians can engage with contemporary understandings of "spirituality." Spirituality, often used broadly to indicate some level of religious commitment or awareness, at the same time establishes a distance from any organized religion, particularly any specific church. In addition, many cultures around the world have a vibrant understanding of "spirits." Johnston Largen emphasizes that a Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit is necessarily Trinitarian, informed by the criterion that Christ came so that all may have life, life abundant. Taking the Trinitarian character of the Holy Spirit seriously implies discovering that the Holy Spirit can be troubling, unsettle cherished assumptions and lead to tangible experiences of love.

The second section of the book focuses on contemporary realities in Hong Kong. Kung Lap-yan discusses the identity and self-understanding of the people in Hong Kong after the experience of the Umbrella Movement. During the 2014 protests, the people of Hong Kong expressed relatively strong political consciousness and will. Kung underlines that the people

of Hong Kong recognize that a democratic government is necessary for a fair and just society, stresses the new sense of belonging in Hong Kong and highlights the significance of "localism" with its distinct dimensions in this context. In the final part, Kung focuses on Christian identity in Hong Kong and advocates for linking two core aspects of ecumenism: universality and particularity.

Tracing the demographic expansion of South Asian Muslim ethnic minorities and socio-political transformations, Ho Wai-yip discusses the spatial politics of building new mosques and the development of Madrasah for the Muslim community in post-colonial Hong Kong. He explores the challenges faced by Muslim students and Hong Kong educators and analyzes how ethnic Muslim students and their parents perceive the importance of Madrasah education in terms of Islamic piety, moral education and family honor.

Mok Kie Man Bryan argues that since Hong Kong is surrounded by a handful of nuclear plants in southern Guangdong, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan should be a convincing argument for discussing the implications of the use of nuclear power and the underlying anthropological assumptions. The accident in Japan uncovered the fallibility and fragility of the human technological order. In the light of Gordon Kaufman's Christology, which regards the story of Jesus as the norm of human creativity, Mok argues that Jesus Christ is the most powerful symbol for Christians to dispel the perilous myth that human beings are capable of domesticating the unpredictability involved in the nuclear industry. Human creativity must be qualified and transvalued by this symbol in order to help create a more humane world.

The third section of the book engages with religious plurality in India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia and Myanmar. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar examines the shape Christian engagement in the public space should take in the current Indian context of aggressive religious nationalism pursued by fundamentalist groups such as the Hindutva. Deriving impetus from subaltern studies he argues that an authentic and appropriate method would be one that grants epistemological privilege to the perceptions and perspectives of the margins. The contentious issue of conversions in India, in particular of such marginalized communities as the Dalits and Adivasis, is used as a case study. Rajkumar advocates for the reshaping of Christian engagement "from the ground up" through an epistemological shift, which embraces the agendas and agency of the margins and takes on an ek-centric shape (or an other-centered shape). Thus, the Christian engagement in the public space can be reinvented as an engagement of and for life and can recover the promise of promoting peace, fostering freedom and upholding human dignity and integrity in India today.

Fernando Sihotang provides insights into Indonesia's long-standing experience with religious plurality and underscores the importance of a stable constitutional framework for embracing religious diversity. He shows how the concept of Pancasila helped to envisage and build an independent Indonesia. The socio-political changes following the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 provided new opportunities for realizing freedom in the country, but also brought challenges to democracy. Sihotang points to problematic sharia-based local regulations and refers to examples of strong interreligious solidarity. He proposes that the understanding of communion that strengthens relationship-building and trust across communities be deepened.

Arata Miyamoto describes the contemporary religious landscape in Japan and identifies changes in religious practice in recent decades. This includes religiously motivated public activities in disaster relief and volunteer activities in the social and environmental fields. Considering the complex context of religious life in Japan, Miyamoto discusses the Lutheran legacy and develops an ecumenical understanding of missio Dei and underlines the importance of moving beyond a closed denominational mind. In exploring the relational character of mission, he suggests embracing an understanding of cohabitation that reinforces relationships within this shared world.

Sivin Kit reviews the events and the public discourses around the "Allah" controversy from 2007–2015 in Malaysia, where people struggle to reclaim the public space as they challenge divisive ethno-religious centric discourses. Kit reflects on the implications of the public debate for interreligious relations and points out that the public discourses critical of the government appeal to the principle of justice and solidarity not only for Christians but for all Malaysian citizens. In addition to reaffirming constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, Christian leaders and like-minded Muslim voices point to the significance of reimagining solidarity in a religiously diverse society.

Saw Hlaing Bwa describes the role of religion in the public space in Myanmar, emphasizing that Buddhism plays a crucial role in the public life of the country and its political establishment. At the same time, Myanmar is a pluralistic country in which also other religions like Christianity, Hinduism and Islam coexist. While officially relations among religious communities are referred to as being harmonious, conflicts of interest exist. Recently, religiously motivated conflicts have escalated and Bwa provides insights into the Christian and Buddhist tradition to demonstrate how resources from within these communities can help to transform conflict and develop a constructive relationship between religious communities through interfaith dialogue.

Theological Reflections

The Role of Religions in the Dialectic of Public Space in Asia

Anselm K. Min

There are three things I would like to cover in this essay: the historical and social constitution of public space; central features of the tensions and conflicts inherent in the public space of a pluralist society; and the multiplicity of challenges facing different religions in Asia. I shall briefly outline the first two since these merely constitute the background for the third part on which I would like to focus.

The constitution of public space

What do we mean by "public" space, and how does it come into being? We distinguish between "public" and "private" space, between "public" and "private" interest. What makes some things a matter of the public sphere and some things a matter of the private sphere? If two people simply exchange letters as friends, the content of the letters should remain private. However, if those two friends happen to be conspiring either to throw bombs at people gathered in an Olympic stadium or to bribe an official in order to garner special government favors, the content of their letters is a matter of public interest. Today's public is not the same as the public two hundred years ago; their common interest and consciousness of that common interest would be rather different. What constitutes the public and what constitutes the private have been central concerns of political thought since ancient times, and remain highly controversial because our deepest social interests are at stake.

In my following remarks on the historical constitution of public space I shall rely on what may be called a "dialectical" theory of society devel-

oped by such thinkers as Hegel, Marx and Dewey. Human beings are not only thinkers and believers; they are above all agents or those who have to act. We are because we act, not primarily because we think. When we act, however, our actions have consequences, some of which affect only those directly involved in the transaction and others that affect those beyond the immediate agents. Among the latter are some whose scope and extent are so extensive and lasting so as to need control or management by promotion or prohibition. This is the birth of the public, which "consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for."[1] We call "officials" those who are set apart to represent, protect and promote this interest of the public or public interest. The republic or *res publica* refers to the totality of things that belong to the public such as public buildings, public funds, the various offices authorized to act for the public and the very authority to make and enforce laws. When the public is "organized by means of officials and material agencies to care for the extensive and enduring indirect consequences of transactions between persons,"[2] we call them the "people." Through this organization the public becomes a political state. In the following, I shall present the dialectical-ontological origin of the state, not its historical or empirical origin, which, however, presupposes the ontological.

All the components of the public and its organization into a state are thoroughly historical in the sense that they are always changing through different times and places. How extensive and lasting the consequences of human action will be depends on the historical circumstances of action, the state of technology, economic development, the self-consciousness of a people and the degree of social interdependence. Fighting a personal enemy with one's fists in an agrarian society is one thing; doing the same with machine guns in a modern city is quite another. The failure of a country bank in the nineteenth century is one thing; the failure of Lehman Brothers in the early twenty-first century altogether something else. Likewise, the birth of a public is thoroughly historical because it depends on the common recognition by a significant number of members of society that certain practices—slavery, the unlimited private funding of elections

[1] See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985 reprint; originally published by Henry Holt and Company in 1927), 15–16. I highly recommend this book as a good model of a critical, dialectical and progressive theory of the public and the state against many theories of the state that reify it in the interest of a particular ideology. Many contemporary theories, including those of John Rawls and Juergen Habermas, tend to reify the state in its constitution and dialectic.
[2] Ibid., 16.

and the abuse of the state's power to enhance one's family interests, for instance—have extensive and lasting consequences that need prohibition and control by means of new policies, laws and structures, and on whether a significant number of citizens are willing to organize themselves into an active political group. This, in turn, depends on the level of education and self-consciousness of the people, the degree of solidarity they feel with one another and the chances of success should they get organized for social change, usually against resistance of the old public with vested interests in existing political conditions and structures. All these are historically variable. The same historicity applies to the kind of officials to be selected, the nature of new laws and structures to be instituted and the very form of government such as monarchy, parliamentary democracy, presidential system, that needs to be established in order to serve the genuine public interest of the nation and not private, partisan interests.

There is no "best" structure or state in the abstract apart from the consideration of actual historical conditions. As Dewey says,

> the only statement which can be made is a purely formal one: the state is the organization of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members. But what the public may be, what the officials are, how adequately they perform their functions, are things we have to go to history to discover.[3]

The formation of the state and public space is a thoroughly historical, experimental process involving trial and error, discovery and making and remaking, always in need of vigilant scrutiny and careful investigation. What matters is how to make the process less blind, less accidental and more intelligent, precisely in the service of the ever-changing demand of the genuine public interest or the common good of society.

What we have to avoid is to reify and absolutize a particular ideology—whether capitalism or socialism—without considering the changing demands of history. Such reification of an ideology is precisely the tactic of particular interests to justify their hold on power under the pretense of ensuring the general good of the people. A shared critique of ideologies will be an essential part of progressive social change. The question should not be whether an institution is capitalist or socialist or in line with some other ideology but whether that institution really serves the pressing needs of the public under changing circumstances. This also requires an ongoing social analysis of the consequences of so many individual and group agents acting in the common space—especially in an increasingly

[3] Ibid., 33.