

# Editorial

## *Public Theology*

JAKOB WIRÉN

This special issue of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*, focuses on public theology and the role of religion in the public sphere. It draws on a conference in Lund which took place on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2024 and includes the inaugural lecture of Ulrich Schmiedel, professor of Global Christianities at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies.

In the present issue, we will delve into the current landscape of public theology, reflecting on the role of religion in the public sphere. We will examine the tools and methods available to understand controversies that arise – or appear to arise – from religious diversity. Three brief examples:

Over the past years, the arguably secular Sweden has found itself engaged in theological discussions surrounding the Qur'an. Leading newspapers and television programs have explored its status as a holy text, while debates have emerged regarding the treatment of physical copies of the Qur'an. These discussions have also led to comparisons between Islamic theologies of the Qur'an and Christian theologies of the Bible. The backdrop to these conversations? Public burnings of the Qur'an, strong anti-Muslim sentiments, Sweden's attempts to become a member of NATO, and the ongoing tension between freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

Over the past two years, Sweden's interreligious infrastructure has experienced significant shifts. Long-standing partnerships between individuals of different faiths have been disrupted, and fundamental dialogue principles of representation and responsibility no longer seem to hold. The catalyst for these changes? The terror attack on Israel on October 7 and the subsequent war in Gaza. Experiences of grief and victimhood have profoundly impacted both public and private relationships, dramatically altering the dynamics of interreligious relations in Sweden.

Even more recently, around the time when this is written, Sweden's largest newspaper – historically known for its critical stance toward religion, particularly Christianity – made a striking proclamation: the return of Christian faith. Its front page featured a powerful image of three teenagers, dressed in white robes, being baptized in a lake. According to the newspaper, young people are increasingly turning to spirituality and faith as a means of coping with the violence and shootings that have become part of everyday life in Swedish society.

These examples, and many others, illustrate the deep entanglement of religion and politics, the interconnectedness of the local and the global, and the polycentric nature of religious traditions. Public theology's task is not merely to identify and describe these complexities but to engage with them theologically. It is the responsibility of public theology to explore how these global and local dynamics – conflict and coexistence, antisemitism and Islamophobia, secularization and the resurgence of religion – affect theological inquiry.

The authors of this special issue will explore these questions through the lenses of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought and theology. Although all of them are based in Europe, they bring with them experience and expertise from both within and beyond the continent.

In “Un-Thinking the West? On African Christianities and the Future of Global Public Theology”, Dion A. Forster critically examines the dominance of Western paradigms in global public theology. Drawing on decolonial and African theological perspectives, Forster critiques the “theme park theology” phenomenon, where Western-centric approaches sanitize and commodify faith, sidelining non-Western voices and realities.

He highlights the resilience of religion in African and migrant contexts, challenging secularization theories and emphasizing the importance of a contextually nuanced Public Theology that considers socio-political and economic dimensions of faith. Forster also addresses concerns that Public Theology has sometimes been perceived as a supercessionist project, overshadowing liberation and contextual theologies such as Black, feminist, and queer theologies.

To move forward, Forster calls for a de-centering of Western hegemony in theological research, the creation of spaces for historically silenced perspectives, and a recognition of the growing global influence of non-Western religiosities. This approach, he argues, is essential for a truly inclusive and impactful Public Theology.

In her article, Annette Langner-Pitschmann explores the vital role of Global Public Theology in navigating the delicate balance between dogma-

tism – the rigid affirmation of one’s own perspective – and syncretism, the uncritical adoption of others’ viewpoints. Drawing on Ricoeur’s philosophy, she argues that Global Public Theology must cultivate intellectual styles that sustain this tension, fostering thoughtful engagement without collapsing into extremes. Lagner-Pitschmann emphasizes the need for intellectual agility, underpinned by irony, as a means of creating spaces that honor difference, embrace the process of relativization, and resist what William Connolly terms “ontological narcissism”. By doing so, Global Public Theology can advocate for more inclusive and nuanced forms of public reasoning, enriching its engagement with diverse perspectives in an interconnected world.

Fatima Tofighi argues that Theology and Religious Studies remain deeply entrenched in biases that marginalize certain perspectives, questions, and themes, often rendering the “religious other” unwelcome within the discipline. She calls for a process of provincializing theology and religious studies in Europe and North America, advocating for greater inclusivity and reflexivity in the field’s infrastructures and methodologies.

Reflecting on her work in Farsi, Tofighi underscores the ethical responsibility of Muslims – and followers of all religions – to engage with those of other faiths. She insists that a truly global and contextual theology cannot isolate itself but must remain accountable to diverse others, acknowledging their presence and perspectives.

Drawing attention to the aftermath of the events of October 7, 2023, Tofighi critiques the insufficiency of current analytic frameworks to address complex realities, including the role of guerrilla movements, the intersection of militant and civilian lives, and the nuanced role of religion – particularly Islam – in these contexts. Even liberation theologies, she notes, fall short, underscoring the urgent need for theological approaches that are more global, dynamic, and responsive to contemporary challenges.

In her compelling contribution, Alana Vincent challenges conventional responses to violence within public theology, arguing that the primary task is to reject appeals to divine agency as legitimate answers to the world’s violence. Such appeals, she suggests, risk deflecting attention from the deeper, systemic issues at play.

Vincent observes that the epistemic violence we critique from a safe distance is often the very foundation of the neutral frameworks we rely on to avoid confronting our complicity in that violence. Rather than retreating into the sacred as something removed or set apart, she calls for an embrace of the profound and unrelenting responsibility to stand accountable to one

another in the face of violence. Public theology, she argues, must prioritize this accountability as its central ethical imperative.

In his inaugural lecture, Ulrich Schmiedel advocates for a coalitional and comparative public theology as a fresh approach to understanding Global Christianity. In dialogue with his predecessors at the chair of *Missionsvetenskap med ekumenik* in Lund, Schmiedel integrates insights from sociology and anthropology to challenge traditional notions of religious identity and interaction.

Drawing on sociologist Lori Beaman's application of Anna Tsing's concept of "contaminated diversity", he highlights the historical and ongoing interplay between religions. In Tsing's work, contamination represents transformative interactions that reshape participants, a metaphor Schmiedel finds particularly relevant for understanding the interwoven histories of Christianity and other religions. Ultimately, there is no Christianity without other religions, nor other religions without Christianity; their histories are inextricably linked, shaped by "contamination" rather than separation. Instead of asking, "Why do people come together across differences?" – a question that assumes purity as the norm – he proposes asking, "Why do people not come together across differences?" This perspective rejects ideals of religious purity and instead embraces the dynamic, evolving nature of religious life, fostering a vision of conviviality rooted in shared transformation and mutual influence.

How do these global entanglements influence our work as scholars? How do local developments shape our research? And how do scholars of religion navigate the tension between neutrality and normativity, a tension that is intrinsic to their engagement in the public sphere? These are critical questions that public theology must confront – and these are questions that are confronted in this thematic issue on global public theology. ▲