Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift 101 (2025), 374–383
p-ISSN 0039-6761 e-ISSN 2003-6248
DOI: 10.51619/stk.v101i4.28529

Practising Critical Responsiveness

A Task for a Global Public Theology

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There are two obvious ways of describing the tasks of a global public theology. On the one hand, one can identify specific topics that arise for theology from the different globalised societies worldwide. From the diversity of these questions, a job profile for the global public theologian can then be derived that will include a wide range of qualifications and interests. On the other hand, one can focus on the question how globalisation shapes the cognitive attitudes of members of one's own local context. Starting from this, it will be possible to work out what it means to pursue the programme of a public theology under the auspices of globalisation.

For the following considerations, I have chosen the second alternative. The starting point is the concept of 'world civilisation'. This term condenses some of the implications of globalisation, so that it can provide information about the way in which globalisation shapes the judgement-forming processes of members of Western societies. Following Paul Ricœur, I will consider which form of intersubjective communication is appropriate to the conditions of globalisation. With William E. Connolly, I will indicate what requirements result from this for the public discourse of democratic societies. On this basis, I will conclude by outlining a professional profile for a global public theologian. My thesis will be that theology has to offer the globalised public a space in which an ironic approach to one's own convictions can be practised in the best sense of the word.

Globalisation and world civilisation

The term 'world civilisation' does not describe an existing reality, but an intellectual possibility. It refers to the possibility that the worldwide network-

ing of people, goods and ideas associated with globalisation will lead to a shared world of ideas. Embedded in this idea is the assumption that one day, as a result of this networking, all people will start from similar presuppositions in questions of science, technology, politics, economics and lifestyle.

Opinions differ as to whether the idea of 'world civilisation' is a *realistic* way of describing the vanishing point of globalisation. Samuel Huntington, for example, whose programme has been the subject of frequent criticism by Ulrich Schmiedel,[1] is famously pessimistic on this issue. "For the relevant future", he summarises his theory on the clash of civilizations, "there will be no universal civilization, but instead a world of different civilizations, each of which will have to learn to coexist with the others".[2] For him, this assumption is the inevitable conclusion of a twofold premise. First, the increase in global interaction between people leads to a "growth of civilisation-consciousness".[3] The more one's own existence is characterised by contact with other life contexts, the more intensely one's belonging to one's own context is perceived. In Huntington's view, this rise in "civilisation-consciousness" is, second, synonymous with the fact that people are increasingly likely to "see an 'us' versus 'them' relation existing between themselves and people of different ethnicity or religion".[4] The stronger one's own affiliation to a civilisation context is perceived, the more pertinent the distinction is made between identity and alterity, between one's own and the foreign.

A counterpoint to Huntington is provided by Paul Ricœur's reflections, written as early as 1974 in his *Universal Civilization and National Cultures*. For him, it is self-evident that "mankind as a whole is on the brink of a single world civilisation".[5] His interest now centres on the question as to which obstacles make the path to such "worldwide awareness" a challenge.[6] In this context, he states:

> When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with

1 See Ulrich Schmiedel, *Terror und Theologie. Der religionstheoretische Diskurs der 9/11-Dekade*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-160795-0, 102–123.

2 Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993), 22–49, https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621.

3 Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", 26.

4 Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", 29.

5 Paul Ricœur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", *History and Truth*, Evanston/Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2007, 271–284, here 271.

6 Ricœur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", 273.

> destruction by our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others.[7]

Unlike Huntington, Ricœur is not primarily interested in the *external* threats lurking in the world of the future. Instead, he focuses on the question of which *internal* conflicts challenge us on the path to a universal civilisation and how we can respond to them appropriately. This means that he looks at the awakening of "civilisation-consciousness" from the perspective of the psychoanalyst behind the couch, so to speak. In this perspective, however, the characteristics of this development are quite different from those of Huntington.

Above all, it becomes apparent that the reflexive thematization of belonging to a certain civilisation (and thus at the same time not belonging to other civilisations) leads at best in a second step to the staging of a frontline position between one's own and the other, between friend and enemy. Primarily, this thematization has a completely different effect: it is experienced as a narcissistic imposition. The realisation "that we ourselves are an 'other' among others" deprives every fantasy of uniqueness of its plausibility. In this sense, Ricoeur makes it clear that the threat felt in the course of the awakening of a civilisation consciousness does not come from the Other or the stranger. Instead, it stems from "our own discovery" and from the disillusionment that accompanies it.

As a psychoanalyst, Ricœur of course knows that you *can* indeed react to a narcissistic insult by dividing the world into good and evil and turning your aggression outwards – but you do not *have to*. The regressive reaction is just one of many possible courses of action. Ricœur names three of the possible alternatives, i.e. three different ways of reacting to the insult associated with globalisation. First, as indicated, one could go into defence mode, making the differences between civilisations absolute and committing oneself to aggressive dogmatism. A second reaction pattern exists in the opposite extreme. It aims to deny any meaning to the differences between civilisations and to advocate a noncommittal syncretism. "All meaning and every goal having disappeared, it becomes possible to wander through civilisations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole mankind becomes a kind of imaginary museum".[8] However, Ricœur considers this form of reacting to the uncertainty associated with civilisation consciousness to be unsustainable. In his opinion it leads to a "scepticism on a world-wide scale".[9]

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7 Ricœur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", 278.
8 Ricœur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", 278.
9 Ricœur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", 278.

From these two one-sided and inadequate patterns of action, Ricœur now distinguishes a third option. It consists in recognising the offence one has experienced without absolutizing it. Ricœur argues that disillusionment over the contingency of one's own way of dealing with reality should be understood as a phase in a dialectical process. The somewhat humiliating realisation that – contrary to my intuition of being the centre of the world – after all I am simply "an 'other' among others" then becomes a temporary moment in the arduous but by no means hopeless process that Ricœur calls "communication".[10]

For Ricœur, communication in this emphatic sense is anything but a mere factual exchange of messages. Rather, it is an existentially demanding process in which the affective bond to one's own culture is affirmed and at the same time exposed to the view from another culture. This "relation in which I affirm myself in my origins and give myself to another's imagination in accordance with his different civilisation" is "dramatic" in the sense that it creates an irreducible tension.[11] On the one hand, there is the impulse to unconditionally identify with one's own normality; on the other hand, there is the experience that this normality is factually conditioned by the multitude of other normalities.

Civilisation Consciousness, Communication and Theology

In the context of globalisation, democratic forms of coexistence rely on their citizens finding a mature way of dealing with social plurality. This ability in turn depends, at least as Ricœur suggests, on democratic citizens navigating the tension between commitment to one's own and relativity in the horizon of the other. In other words, they must be able to communicate in an emphatic sense.

Assuming that this view is correct, what does it mean for a global public theology? My proposal is that theology must create protected spaces within civil society in which people can practise communication as a "dramatic relation" in the dynamic between their own and others' dealings with reality. In other words, the programme of a Global Public Theology is to cultivate those habitual attitudes, argumentative patterns, and intellectual styles that keep open the gap between dogmatism and syncretism.

This proposal seems both abstract and vague. In order to put it a bit more precisely, it helps to juxtapose what has been said so far with some considerations by the political philosopher William E. Connolly. Connolly's work largely revolves around the question of how the democratic obligation to

10 Ricœur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", 282.
11 Ricœur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", 283.

recognise plurality can actually be put into practice. He starts from the critical awareness that both liberal and communitarian models of democracy, in their orientation towards the vanishing point of a social consensus, smooth out differences and divide ways of life into norm and deviation.[12] The tendency to ignore this paradox of democratic procedures and to "freez(e) moral standards of judgement condensed from past political struggles" only allows for a superficial "conventional pluralism".[13]

Starting from this criticism, Connolly develops his programme of "deep pluralism".[14] By this, he means a way of dealing with plurality and alterity that understands the boundary between the self and the other not as a natural given, but as the result of social settings. Difference, in Connolly's credo, does not fall from the heavens, but is a paradoxical by-product of endeavours towards consensus and harmony: "[O]therness (dirt, things out of place, unreason, mystery, eccentricity, instability) is itself produced by the artifices through which we complete ourselves".[15] For him, the crucial factor for the success of a "deep pluralism" is to realise that the normative settings are necessary for action but at the same time can be permanently contested. Conversely, this means that the boundaries that have been drawn can be made the subject of political negotiation again and again and thus utilised in a way that is productive for democracy. Democracy means constantly "to reconsider politically established orientations to these de-formations",[16] i.e. to the mechanisms of demarcation and devaluation, which are caused as the flip side of collective decision-making.

In his reflections on pluralism, Connolly comes across the very question that I, following Ricœur, have identified as a key challenge of globalised (and therefore always necessarily plural) societies. How can the cognitive insight into the *optional* character of every identity be reconciled with the affective desire for a *non-arbitrary* identity? How can the awareness of the *contingency* of one's own world view be brought into a balanced relationship with the intuition of its *necessary* validity?

Connolly summarises his answer to these questions in the concept of "deep contingency" and explains:

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12 See William E. Connolly, "Democracy and Normalization", *Politics and Ambiguity*, Madison/Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987, 3–16.

13 William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, XIV.

14 William E. Connolly, *Identity|Difference. Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Minneapolis 2008, XIV.

15 Connolly, "Democracy and Normalization", 11.

16 Connolly, "Democracy and Normalization", 11.

> To speak of deep contingency is to play up the role of culture in the formation of identity while appreciating the weight of identity as it becomes entrenched in corporeal habits, feelings, and dispositions. It is also to set up the possibility that some of those entrenchments might be recomposed modestly through artfully devised tactics of the self and its collective sibling, micropolitics.[17]

Understanding one's own identity as a moment of deep contingency therefore means, on the one hand, consciously recognising its dependence on a particular cultural framework. At the same time, however, it also involves the unconditional acceptance of the fact that this framework – regardless of its optionality – inscribes itself into one's own habitus with the appearance of necessity. Connolly's concept of *deep contingency* is thus characterised by a dramatic quality similar to Ricœur's concept of *communication*: both involve the acceptance of the desire for a necessary identity while at the same time consenting to its permanent relativity. What is decisive for Connolly is that this double consent presupposes certain "tactics" in dealing with oneself and one's surroundings. More specifically, he calls for an "ethos of critical responsiveness"[18] which, in a nutshell, means a habitualised willingness to acknowledge the other regardless of existing "cultural markings" and irrespective of preconceptions about "what some 'we' already is".[19]

Connolly therefore understands critical responsiveness as a deeply political attitude. This attitude has nothing in common with a "therapeutic response, or paternalism, or pity, or certain types of Christian charity and secular community, where you respond humbly and warmly to the other to prepare it to convert to the universal identity you already represent".[20] On the contrary, unlike such harmony-oriented approaches, critical responsiveness aims to continually interrupt harmonisation processes. Critically responsive citizens of democracy are characterised by the way they constantly reflect on both the visible achievements of a successful community and the invisible processes of exclusion and marginalisation. In doing so, they represent a disruption of order insofar as they publicly visualise the necessary but always excluding (and that means: undemocratic) demarcations that are embedded in the democratic order.

Global Public Theology: Practising Critical Responsiveness

As a preliminary conclusion, I noted above that the programme of a Global

17 Connolly, *Identity|Difference*, XVI.
18 Cf. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, XIV–XXI, 180–188.
19 Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, XVII.
20 Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, XVII-XVIII.

Public Theology includes the task of cultivating such patterns of argumentation and styles of thought that, in Ricœur's sense, maintain the distance between dogmatism and syncretism. With Connolly, I have summarised these mindsets in the attitude of critical responsiveness. My draft of a public theology in the context of globalised societies is therefore aimed at the level of democratic habitus. Theology can and should contribute to creatively dealing with the tension between the permanent necessity and the irreducible contestability of the norms and standardisations established in democratic coexistence. It can and should create intermediary spaces in which people learn to understand difference both as an aspect of living abundance and as a challenge to reflexive criticism.

It is quite obvious that the public character of such a theology does not consist in the visibility of substantive values. It is therefore by no means a matter of challenging democratically established standards with standards vouched for by theology. Instead, the model of public theology outlined here aims at the visibility of performative attitudes which allow the tension between definition and contestation to be permanently endured. Such a concept of public theology in the context of globalisation entails far-reaching preliminary decisions both regarding the concept of God and the theological epistemology. First, as far as the concept of God is concerned, the type of public theology proposed here assumes that divine reality is not limited to the production of cognitive clarity and moral manageability. Instead, it essentially reckons with a God who is the source of diversity and complexity, of abundance and excessive demands, of radical new creation and broken patterns of interpretation. Second, as far as the conditions of theological knowledge are concerned, it rests on a comprehensive doubt about the fundamental recognisability of all reality. At the centre is the paradoxical claim to hold together the existential interest in being able to say something about God with the reflexive insight of never being able to say anything about this God at all.

Once again, Connolly comes into play as inspiration for such a global public theology, whereby I would like to emphasise two aspects of his reflections in particular. First, Connolly remarkably begins his *Reflection on the Politics of Morality*[21] with an analysis of passages from the Book of Job, namely the Lord's speeches from the storm. "Where were you when I planned the earth? Tell me, if you are so wise…" (Job 38:4): For Connolly, the series of "ironic questions" represents a final reckoning with the grandiose notion of an ultimately intelligible reality.[22] It proves that God cannot

21 William E. Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative. A Reflection on the Politics of Morality*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

22 Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative*, 8.

be "the designer of a cosmic womb" who "envelops the little circle of human categories, wishes, fears, and hopes in its care". Rather, from these lines speaks "the instigator of a strange, vast world of internal energies and external forces" that "clash", "collide", and "converge".[23] The devastating questions of this God, according to Connolly, aim to "crush the self-serving, anthropomorphic demand for an intrinsic moral order".[24] In this sense, the concept of a divinely created fullness of reality has the effect of deconstructing the "ontological narcissism" by which people refuse to recognise that reality far exceeds the scope of human categorisation and that their own reality is only one marginal option among many.[25]

On the other hand, when it comes to dealing with this deconstruction or disillusionment, Connolly brings into play the notion of irony. By mentioning an ironic perspective, however, he is not referring to the consistent denial of the legitimacy of our categories as such. Rather, he is concerned with a playful curiosity that allows us to track down moments of contingency in the seemingly unconditional; in which we "detect arbitrary elements within necessary limits" and in this way take account of the ambiguity inherent in all standards of thought.[26] For him, irony is the lens that allows us to recognise the ambiguity of the limitations by means of which we make reality manageable for ourselves. Making use of this perspective requires not only serious reflexivity, but also humour:

> One may live one's own identity in a more ironic, humorous way, laughing occasionally […] at the predisposition to universalize an impulse simply because it is one's own. Laughing because one senses that the drive to moralize difference is invested with the wish to reassure oneself that one is what any normal being should be. […] Such laughter pays homage to fugitive elements in life that exceed the organization of identity, otherness, rationality, and autonomy.[27]

Irony essentially means – as Connolly's remarks suggest – a distancing from reality, but at the same time and above all a distancing from our way of understanding reality. Irony involves the relativisation of our categories and the interruption of our recurring impulse to take our own identity far more seriously than it is as seen from the outside. Connolly's affinity for irony

23 Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative*, 10.
24 Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative*, 8.
25 Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative*, 8.
26 William E. Connolly, "Discipline, Politics, Ambiguity", *Politics and Ambiguity*, 99–115, 110.
27 Connolly, *Identity|Difference*, 180.

understood in this way recalls a comment by Søren Kierkegaard in his book *The Concept of Irony*. In this work, Kierkegaard describes the gesture of irony as, among other things, a sovereign distance from the conditions that surround us. "In irony, the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself-that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything."[28] Irony in this sense is never a permanent state, but a temporary change of perspective that leaves permanent traces in our view of reality. One of these traces, I would assume, is the exit from the narcissistic confusion of contingency and necessity, of unpredictable abundance with infinite plasticity.

Outlook

What is the task of a global public theology? I have suggested with Ricœur that universal civilisation is a realistic possibility of globalisation – and that authentic, dialectical communication is a necessary precondition for the realisation of this possibility. Together with Connolly, I have considered that such communication depends essentially on the reflective use of our capacity for irony. In doing so, we have realised that irony as a tactic of deep contingency and as a guarantor of distance from dogmatism and syncretism is not a static attitude. It is the pivotal point in the constant oscillation between being and appearance, between 'that' and 'as if', between the indicative and the subjunctive. This oscillation requires a little intellectual dexterity, it needs to be practised.

As is known, theology has a range of methods and figures of thought at its disposal to practise the agility demanded by irony. Hermeneutics and negative theology, analogy and apophatic theology, the incidence of opposites and eschatological reservation: in all these approaches, the attitude of critical responsiveness can be tested performatively. The diversity of these methods allows us to practise the skills we need on the path to a universal civilisation – namely dealing with difference and otherness, with the inscrutability of the other and the contingency of our own standards, both honestly and playfully, seriously and non-ideologically.

Kierkegaard described irony in the following image:

> Anyone who does not understand irony at all, who has no ear for its whispering, […] does not know the refreshment and strengthening that come with undressing when the air gets too hot and heavy and

28 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400846924-002, 257.

> diving into the sea of irony, not in order to stay there, of course, but in order to come out healthy, happy, and buoyant and to dress again.[29]

To draw a bath from which people emerge more communicative than when they went in: perhaps that is the task of a Global Public Theology. ▲

SUMMARY

This paper discusses how globalisation shapes the cognitive attitudes of democratic citizens and elaborates against this backdrop what it means to pursue the programme of a public theology in the context of a globalised world. It starts from the idea of a world civilization – a concept suggesting that global interconnectedness might, after all, foster shared values. In accordance with Paul Ricœur, it envisions the awareness of plural cultures as an introspective process, urging us to enter into the dramatic relation of communication, in which the affective bond to one's own culture is affirmed and at the same time exposed to the view from another culture. The task of Global Public Theology, the paper argues accordingly, is to cultivate those intellectual styles that keep open the gap between dogmatism (as the unconditional affirmation of one's own perspective) and syncretism (as the unconditional exposition to the perspectives of others). In terms of political philosopher William E. Connolly, this means that public theology has to provide a social space where the attitude of "critical responsiveness" may be learned. The paper explores the ways in which these key concept thematizes the tension between the desire for a necessary identity and the recognition of its permanent relativity. In doing so, it specifies the task of a Global Public Theology to the effect that it has to advocate for intellectual agility through irony, creating spaces for recognizing difference, enduring relativization and resisting what Connolly calls "ontological narcissism".

29 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 326–327.