Religion and Democracy
Studies in Public Theology
ethikundgesellschaft

edited by
Professor Dr. Michelle Becka,
Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg
Professor Dr. Bernhard Emunds,
Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Sankt Georgen
Frankfurt
Professor Dr. Johannes Eurich,
Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
Professor Dr. Gisela Kubon-Gilke,
Evangelische Hochschule Darmstadt
Professor Dr. Torsten Meireis,
Humboldt-Universität Berlin
Professor Dr. Matthias Möhring-Hesse,
Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

Volume 3
Religion and Democracy

Studies in Public Theology
Preface

This book is the product of a collective effort. We thank all the members of the newly founded Berlin Institute for Public Theology who agreed to contribute even before the official opening, who did so in a very cooperative spirit, never grumbling over extremely short deadlines and a strict editorial regime. We also thank Bettina Schön who did a tremendous job of layouting and editing, Mitch Cohen and Dr. Volker Manz who provided translation and English lecturing services, Beate Bernstein and Sonja Schmitt of the Nomos publishing house who took good care of our enterprise, the editors of Ethik und Gesellschaft who agreed to publish our book in their series and the EKD who supported this publication with a generous subsidy.

Torsten Meireis                                      Rolf Schieder
# Table of Contents

*Torsten Meireis, Rolf Schieder*

**Introduction:**
Democracy, Religion and Public Theology 9

## Religion and Democracy: Challenges and Resources

*Torsten Meireis*

Public Theology in a Post-democratic Age?
Perspectives from a European Context 19

*Rolf Schieder*

Blasphemy – a Civil-Religious Crime 37

## Religion and Democracy: Frameworks

*Andreas Feldtkeller*

Social Formations of Religion and Their Relevance
for Public Theology Worldwide 55

*Marcia Pally*

More than a Resource:
Covenant as a Basis for Societal Organization 71

*Mouez Khalfaoui*

Public Theology and Democracy:
A Muslim Perspective 89

*Matthias Möhring-Hesse*

How does the Christian Faith Enter Politics –
and What Does it Do There?
“Faith-based politics” after the Separation between
Politics and Religion 101
## Table of Contents

**Religion and Democracy: Tasks**

*Florian Höhne*

Who Is Responsible for What I Do on Facebook to Democracy?  
A Public-theological Reflection on the “Responsibility” of Media-users for Democratic Culture 121

*Clemens Wustmans*

Plain Language as Empowerment beyond a Faithful Middle-class Public:  
Contributions of Public Theology to the Capability Approach of Social Justice 143

*Christine Schliesser*

Theology and Public Democratic Institutions:  
Public Theology in the Context of the German and Swiss National Ethics Councils 155

*Eva Harasta*

The Public Role of the Church in the Democratic Society:  
The Lutheran World Federation’s document “The Church in the Public Space” as an Inspiration for Public Theology 171

*Authors* 181
Introduction:
Democracy, Religion and Public Theology

“Democracy isn’t dead, it just smells funny.” A variation of a quip by Frank Zappa on jazz (1974) sums up current experience with democracy. Even though a majority of countries in the world professes to some sort of democratic government (Campbell 2008), change is underfoot (EIU 2016). In Europe, democratically elected governments in Hungary and Poland are seriously limiting civil rights, in France, the Netherlands, in Sweden and Germany right-wing extremist political groups are gaining support. In Turkey, formerly seen as one of the most stable democracies in the Muslim world, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is effecting a change towards a more authoritarian system, and in the USA, the president himself is deemed a ‘threat to democracy’ (Levitsky/Ziblatt 2016), in South Africa, a corrupt government is causing turmoil, in the Philippines, an elected ruler openly voices contempt for human rights – the list of signs for a deterioration could be extended (Foa/Mounk 2016, 2017). Provided that liberal democracy, understood as a regime that combines free and fair elections, the citizens’ participation in politics, the protection of human rights of all inhabitants and a rule of Law (Diamond 1999, 1-19) qualifies as a highly desirable form of government, it seems worthwhile to look for ways of reviving and strengthening democracy.

Doubtlessly, religion is of some importance in that regard. This holds especially true if we take a historical perspective. While some types of reformed Protestantism were actually supportive of the emergence of democratic structures, other denominations, such as Lutherans or Roman Catholic Christians had a harder time accepting democracy (Graf 2014), and some, like Russian Orthodoxy, do so still. Similar findings can be presented for other religions (Diamond/Plattner 2005). And even though empirical evidence seems to suggest a special affinity of Christianity and democracy (Werkner/Liedhegener 2009), it’s hard to say whether this is due to historical circumstance or to an intrinsic necessity. In political theory, the question whether a democratic state needs to draw on religious resources is debated (Böckenförde 1991, Stein 2007, Anselm 2015). However, in the face of a decline of public support of democracy, the question in what way religion may support democratic government doesn’t seem too far-fetched.

This holds especially true in a public theological perspective. Public theology may be defined as an effort to explore and critically reflect on the public impact of a polyphonic religious discourse and the religious dimension of public discourse, while thus furthering the debates connected to
such discourse. As public theology presupposes a public sphere where civil liberties hold and open debate is possible, it is therefore strongly connected to democratic forms of government. Public theology seeks to serve democratic societies which are pluralistic in world-view, providing research and expertise concerning the relationship of religious and secular world-views to the public sphere. As public theology denotes an effort of reflection, it is varied in itself – which also applies to its origins, as public theology sprang up in many different contexts. In the USA, it emerged as a historical label to characterize the impact of important Christian intellectuals like Reinhold Niebuhr (Marty 1974a, b) and quickly grew into a category to describe the public expressions of religious communities (Thiemann 1991), or the contribution of theology in regard to academy, religious community and society (Tracy 1975). Other approaches have tried to understand it as synonymous to political theology (Stackhouse 2000-2007) or connect its origins to civil religion (Breitenberg 2003). In South African discourse, the term was taken up when the dictatorial apartheid regime was supplanted by democratic government. Public theology then was introduced as successor concept for liberation theology which was directed against an oppressive regime, even though this is still contested (de Villiers 2013, Smit 2013, Maluleke 2011). In a pluralist and democratic society, liberation from economic or cultural distress may still be an issue, but cannot be effected through action against one identifiable agency of domination. In Germany, the concept cropped up as an alternative label for the efforts to understand theology as a critical instrument against social inequality and political domination which Johann Baptist Metz or Dorothee Sölle had called ‘political theology’, as that term had already been taken by Carl Schmitt’s decisionist political thinking paving the way to Nazism and had roots in antiquity, where it signified a theology legitimizing the rulers in power (Maier 1970). It then developed into a term to signify social and societal critique (Huber 1999). Currently, the term ‘public theology’ describes a form of discourse rather than one theological position and unites theologians from different contexts in a global network designed to serve international exchange on the public impact of a polyphonic religious discourse and the significance of religious topics for public discourse.

As public theology carries a strong affinity to democracy, a critical analysis of how religions may beware of hindering and succeed in furthering democratic forms of government seems appropriate.

This book then tries just that in presenting essays from different public theological perspectives. It aims at an interdisciplinary, ecumenical and in-
terreligious assessment of how religion may further democracy. All texts have been contributed by members of the newly founded Berlin Institute for Public Theology who consent to the necessity of a public theological effort, especially in regard to the question of democracy, but debate on what this effort needs to consist in. Of course, it’s only the start of a discussion that needs to be continued.

The book consists of three sections: A first section tries to identify challenges and resources in the relationship of religion and democracy. A second part reflects on the frameworks of that relationship, and a third section tries to identify examples of tasks that need to be shouldered.

A first chapter is concerned with present-day challenges to democracy and resources in a public-theological view, looking especially at the role of religion. Torsten Meireis explores current developments in Europe and the US that may be understood as post-democratic: the rise of nationalist and xenophobic movements that claim popular support but aim at severely cutting into those civil rights usually associated with democratic government. From a Protestant Christian theological perspective, he then outlines the ambivalent picture in Protestantism. He names doctrinal and empirical problems concerning religion and democracy and maps resources for a sustainment of democracy Protestantism has to offer.

Rolf Schieder tackles the challenge presented by accusations of blasphemy to the central democratic right to freedom of expression. After characterizing blasphemy theologically as a relationship between the faithful and the deity, he argues politically for a freedom of religion that implies an abolition of legislation on blasphemy. In a survey of current French and German developments he shows that in modern nation-states, anti-blasphemy laws are used to preserve a civil-religious national consensus rather than to defend a deity or its worshippers. In a Christian perspective, he then contends that a God who gave himself over to public shaming on the cross won’t be interested in a preservation of divine honor.

In a second section, we’ll take a step back to explore the frameworks in the relationship of religions and democracy from different angles. Andreas Feldkeller takes a religious studies-perspective: in discerning a historically informed typology of social formations of religion, he asserts that there is no typical political or social expression of religion as such. Rather, a specific religion’s political impact results from the combination of doctrines and social formations in a given societal frame. Therefore, public theology needs to be aware of the fact that any political religious statement will be understood in the “context of the community’s social body-language”. A public theology trying to strengthen a human rights ap-
proach, for instance, in relying on a Christian concept of universal neighborly love constantly has to reflect critically on how doctrinal aspects of faith are embodied in the respective community’s social formations and actions and the ‘civil religion’ legitimizing current structures of power. From a cultural studies point of view, Marcia Pally expounds on an anthropological thesis. Humans are characterized, she asserts, by a structure of distinction-amid-relation best expressed by the biblical covenantal tradition, discernible in all abrahamic religions, but explored in depth by Christian reformed thinkers. As that idea has been formative for the emergence of democracy in the United States of America, Pally claims that it also holds promise for present politics, as a covenantal worldview and mindset takes into account the respective opponents’ view as a respectable one. In an overview of the debates on democracy in the Muslim world, Mouez Khalfaoui brings an Islamic theological view to the fore. After a description of the reception of democratic ideas in 19th century Islamic theology, he goes on to show how democracy became an exclusive issue for Western-trained elites and only in recent times shifted towards a public recognition. Using the example of the Iranian revolution Khalfaoui then argues that – the later development of the theocratic regime notwithstanding – democracy started to become a threat to authoritarian governments in the Islamic world, especially in the Arab spring of 2011, where Muslim groups were among the promoters of democracy. Regarding the relationship of Muslim faith and democracy in the western world, Khalfaoui then proposes to focus on everyday Muslim life rather than relying on the doctrinal claims of ultraconservative minority groups to grasp Muslim perspectives on democracy. In an ethical perspective, Roman Catholic theologian Matthias Möhring-Hesse explores the relationship of religion and politics in regard to democratic deliberation. As modernity brought about a separation of politics and faith systems during which the latter became ‘religion’, ‘ultimate’ questions were removed from the area of politics, which is – in a democratic system – based on common deliberations. For the faithful, politics will probably be seen as one field of many where they practice their faith. For others, however, their faith is neither necessarily visible nor of argumentative value in the course of political deliberation, since religious arguments are by nature only valid in the community that shares them. For that reason, religious citizens need to make themselves understood in a political process, where a common normative language usually needs to be found: that may involve the use of religious language, but necessarily also the expression in arguments that citizens who do not share those views may understand. As believers theologically take up and
Introduction

interpret issues that they find in their everyday world, secular meaning precedes religious interpretation.

A third section then looks at different tasks necessary to strengthen democracy in a public theological perspective that range from a critical look at the responsibility discourse to problems of empowerment and institutional questions.

In a Christian theological perspective interested in strengthening the position of the least privileged, Florian Höhne scrutinizes the responsibility discourse stressing the individual's democratic responsibility in media-related public communication. After presenting media-ethical positions that attribute a high responsibility to the public – understood as consisting of individual ‘prosumers’ – he points to the ambivalence of responsibility-talk that doesn't take capability into the account and thus holding the relatively powerless to the same responsibility as the comparatively powerful. Concluding, he suggests to sharpen the media responsibility discourse by discerning who responsibility may be attributed to in which regard, by furthering public discourse about the appropriate attribution of responsibility and by remembering the democratic roots of the responsibility talk, i.e. to hold the powerful responsible. On a corresponding note, Clemens Wustmans takes a critical look at the exclusive nature of theological language, measuring public theology at its claims to further general participation. He then goes on to expound the concept of plain language as part of the capabilities approach that needs to be implemented in public theological debates, too – even though tensions remain, as reduction in complexity cannot be avoided when using the plain language concept.

The concluding texts look at institutional contributions of public theology to democracy. In that vein, Christine Schliesser argues for a strengthening of theological arguments in institutionalized public discourse, whereas Eva Harasta pleads for a stronger awareness of the public sphere in church organizations. Schliesser looks into the ongoing political practice of ethics councils to clarify the role and possible contribution of public theology to democratic institutions. Based on empirical research, she describes the setting of ethics councils of Germany and Switzerland, then explores the role of theology in those institutions by comparing member statements. As the results reveal a certain vagueness regarding the theological background of normative arguments, Schliesser goes on to suggest a Christian theological interpretation of public theology based on the doctrine of the munus triplex of Christ to heighten the sensibility for theological argumentation in democratic contexts and its accountability. Harasta, subscribing to Bedford-Strohm’s characterization of public theology as
liberation theology for democratic societies, presents the current debate in the Lutheran World Federation as a case-study for the entanglement of public theological reflection between academia, religious community's superstructure and the nation state, advocating a stronger awareness of the public sphere in such religious institutions.

As public theology stands for a self-critical look at religion, but also the research in what religion has to offer in regard to democratic society, this book tries to contribute to a critical albeit constructive inside perspective on religion and democracy. As such, we at the Berlin Institute for Public Theology understand it as an invitation to further critical discourse.

Berlin, Spring 2017

Torsten Meireis
Rolf Schieder

References


Religion and Democracy: Challenges and Resources