

Article

Public Theology as Cultural Witness: Christological Contours for “Times That Are A’Changin’”

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Abstract: Churches in Europe are being faced with a transformation that can be described as a seismic shift. In order to face the challenge of cultural witness in this context, this contribution proposes a Christologically contoured public theology. This will be spelt out in four consecutive steps. After a brief introduction on the paradigm of public theology, the second part tackles the question of addressees. Is the witness of public theology directed at the church or at the world? Making use of the insights of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this contribution argues for going beyond the binary and understanding the one Christ-reality as the frame of reference for public theology and cultural witness. The third part seeks to uncover the transformative power of Christology for public witness by making use of the traditional dogmatic figure of the *munus triplex* for the task of witnessing to the “public Christ” (Michael Welker). In the final part, three theses sketch out the implications of public witness in “times that are a-changin’.” (1) Public witness needs religious literacy and bilinguality. (2) For public witness, diaspora existence and missional existence are sisters. (3) Public witness is ecumenical, practical, and spiritual.

Keywords: public theology; cultural witness; religion; church; secularization; religious literacy; bilinguality; ecumenism; spirituality; mission



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1. Introduction: The Times They Are A-Changin’

“I think the change we’re seeing around us might one day be viewed on the same level as what happened to the church after Constantine’s conversion or after the invention of the printing press. Whatever the change looks like when it’s done, it will register as a seismic shift from what we’ve known”, says Carey Nieuwhof in view of the immense transformation on nearly all levels of church life (Nieuwhof n.d.). We all know the trends and numbers in terms of membership of the institutionalized churches in Western Europe and North America, and these figures seem to know only one direction: downwards. Fifty percent of so-called millennials, i.e., the generation born between 1984 and 2002, are post-Christian. At the same time, however, there is another trend visible. This trend takes place on a global level. In 2022, 85% of the people living on this planet professed adherence to a faith tradition, making faith communities the largest transnational civil society actors (World Population Review 2022), and here, the numbers are pointing upwards. “The 21st century will be religious”, concludes an extensive empirical study by Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center 2015). All major faith traditions, with the exception of Buddhism, will grow significantly in the course of this century.

At first glance, the findings of the Pew Research Center seem to fly in the face of those busy preparing the burial service for the churches in Europe. Yet, there is some indication that both trends actually interact, even in Western Europe and North America. Although here the past century was strongly influenced by a secular stew consisting of Max Weber’s postulation of a “disenchantment of the world,” the post-Enlightenment relegation of religion to the private sphere and the so-called secularization thesis predicting

that the functions of religion would be more and more taken over by other societal actors, recent years have seen a “renewed interest in the role of religion in the making of modern societies” (Freeman 2012, p. 1).¹ This trend is accompanied by a growing awareness on the side of academics, policy makers, and practitioners alike of the importance of religious literacy, i.e., the competence to adequately understand, analyze, and interpret the religious factor in a given context.² Although religion is ever ambivalent (Appleby 2000), negative sides associated with religion more often than not dominate media portrayal and public perception, for example, in view of the instrumentalization of religion in the name of hatred and violence. Yet, this is only one side of religion. (Any) religion also contains potent resources for peace, reconciliation, justice, and equality, in short, for a better world. Our world today, breathless still from the COVID-19 pandemic, shocked by the outbreak of a war at Europe’s very borders, and threatened by the apocalypse of an impending “climate hell” (Guterres 2022), needs this hope. Rather than a theology of crisis, we need a new theology of hope. We need witnesses of the Good News into our cultures, setting “trust against fear” (CPCE 2021, p. 10).

Coming from a Christian perspective herself, the author will seek to sketch out what this task means for Christian theology. Here, a Christologically contoured public theology can be very helpful for the task of cultural witness, i.e., witnessing of the Christ-hope in cultures of continuing crisis. Yet, not only is the existing paradigm of public theology helpful for the task of the new paradigm of cultural witness, but the same holds true the other way around. Public theology is only public theology if it is cultural witness at the same time. As such, public theology is not only a specific mode of doing theology, but it comes with a clear, Christological profile directed at bearing witness in the midst of our individual cultures. The emerging paradigm of cultural witness is therefore also helpful in giving profile to public theology. It does so through its three major aims, namely a renewal of the public understanding of Christian faith, for instance, by providing both fresh and intellectually sound “Christian perspectives on just about everything” through a major news website (www.seenandunseen.com, accessed on 2 April 2023), by strengthening and deepening the church’s voice in public, such as through developing a new apologetics, and by harnessing the wisdom of the Christian academy for the public witness of the church. Although the concept of public witness is still in the process of being developed—among others, evidenced by the contributions of this Special Issue—it seems that there is significant overlap with a Christologically contoured public theology, even to the degree that it seems warranted to speak of public witness as a way of integrating both.

This will be spelt out in four consecutive steps. After a brief introduction of the paradigm of public theology, a second part tackles the question of addressees. Is the witness of public theology directed at the church or at the world? Making use of the insights of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this contribution argues for going beyond the binary and for understanding the one Christ-reality as the frame of reference for public theology and cultural witness. A third part seeks to uncover the transformative power of Christology for public witness by making use of the traditional dogmatic figure of the *munus triplex*—the threefold office of Christ as king, prophet, and priest—for the task of witnessing the “public Christ” (Welker 2013, p. 286). In the final part, three theses sketch out implications for public witness in “times that are a-changin’” (Dylan 1964).

2. What Exactly Is Public Theology?

The short answer to this question is that “there is no short answer that would define once and for all what public theology is” (Höhne 2015, p. 11).³ Rather, there is a certain “elasticity of meaning” (Benne 1995, p. 3) connected to this term. Nevertheless, there are certain guard rails and characteristics that help to explicate the concept of public theology that is employed here. First of all, public theology holds on to the relevance of theology for public issues, while also holding on to the relevance of public issues for theology. Public theology, according to Wolfgang Huber, the doyen of public theology in the German-speaking world, seeks “to interpret the questions of life together and its

institutional formations in their theological relevance and to identify the contribution of the Christian faith to the responsible shaping of our lifeworld" (Huber 1996, p. 14). Rather than merely describing the effects of Christianity on our cultures, public theology wants to be an active part of these effects. Based on a wide understanding of "public," public theology goes beyond the duo of church and state, but rather encompasses the areas of state, economics, civil society, and cultural communication (Huber 1994). In this sense then, public theology goes beyond political theology. Though public theology takes up the concerns of political theology, it transcends political theology's focus on church–state relationships by also addressing other public spheres beyond the political.

To further describe public theology, the following five criteria are helpful (Bedford-Strohm 2009, p. 53). Firstly, public theology is engaged in questions of public relevance. These are often of an ethical nature. Secondly, public theology is bilingual, i.e., it speaks both in its own theological language and in a language accessible to the non-religious or differently religious others. This will be discussed in more detail below. Thirdly, it is interdisciplinary. In its specific combination of being rooted in a particular context, yet of embracing a global perspective, public theology is, fourthly, "glocal." Finally, it takes up public concerns into its own theological reflection.

These characteristics of public theology, however, can also easily pertain to other faith traditions besides Christianity, and in fact, they do. Public theology is not a monopoly of the Christian religion, but there are numerous representatives of other religions acting as public theologians and exploring the resources of their faith traditions in current public challenges (see also the interreligious book series "Religion Matters," Schliesser et al. 2021ff). I would therefore like to add a sixth criterion to the above, namely Christocentrism. Public theology, in its Christian variation, is firmly rooted in Christology. This will also be discussed in more detail below. Yet, who are the actors of Christian public theology? Who are the public theologians? Actors of public theology are each and every individual Christian, the church as well as academic theology. In this way, public theology seems somewhat broader in its approach compared to the focus of cultural witness on the church, and public theology is a multifaceted phenomenon. This holds true for both the German-speaking and the international context. The term "public theology" therefore always includes the plurality of "public theologies" taking on different shapes and tackling different challenges according to each particular context (De Gruchy 2004, pp. 45–62).

3. Witness to the Church or the World? Going beyond the Binary

We have not yet discussed the question of who actually the addressees of public theology and cultural witness are. For this discussion, I will draw on the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), a German pastor and theologian killed by the Nazis for his involvement in a conspiracy against the Nazi regime. In the German-speaking context, Bonhoeffer has become almost the godfather of public theology (Schliesser 2018). His theological heritage is immensely fruitful even today as we wrestle with the challenges mentioned above. This heritage is not uncontested, however. For, as Johannes Fischer (2016) argued, "His [Bonhoeffer's] theology is not directed at the world or at society in the public sphere, but rather towards the church as the community of believers" (p. 44). So is the theology of Bonhoeffer meant for the church then and not for the world? Fischer is right in that every theology is connected first of all with the church, the *communio sanctorum*. Yet, Fischer's alternative between church and world as possible addressees of theology points to a deeper problem, a problem that Bonhoeffer himself dealt with intensely. For in not only differentiating between church and world, but actually separating both spheres into a harsh "either–or," we see what Bonhoeffer, himself Lutheran, had named "pseudo-Lutheranism" and passionately fought against it. By setting the "worldly kingdom" against the "spiritual kingdom," Martin Luther's so-called "Two-Realms Doctrine" had become perverted—with disastrous consequences, as Bonhoeffer observed.⁴ For eventually, this misunderstanding led to the irrelevance of the Christian faith in the marketplace and the invisibility of Christian existence in the public sphere. Privately, Bonhoeffer observed, quite

a number of his fellow Christians would disagree with Hitler's regime, also on Christian grounds. Yet this private, Christian conviction would not find its way into the public. Against the attempt to save one's private virtuousness by trying to evade public issues, Bonhoeffer (2010) finds clear words:

In flight from public discussion and examination, this or that person may well attain the sanctuary of private virtuousness. But he must close his eyes and mouth to the injustice around him. He can remain undefiled by the consequences of responsible action only by deceiving himself. In everything he does, that which he fails to do will leave him no peace. He will either perish from that restlessness or turn into a hypocritical, self-righteous, small-minded human being. (p. 40)

Against this separation of private impeccability and public engagement that results from a misperceived understanding of two realms, Bonhoeffer set the image of the one Christ-reality, emphasizing the unity of reality. "Hence, there are not two realms, but only the one realm of the Christ-reality [Christuswirklichkeit], in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united" (Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 58). The foundation for this understanding of reality is found in Bonhoeffer's theology of reconciliation. "In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ" (ibid., p. 55).

Bonhoeffer's understanding of reality corresponds to the wide understanding of "the public" in public theology. This understanding of reality and the public also has ecclesiological consequences. "When one therefore wants to speak of the space of the church, one must be aware that this space has already been broken through, abolished, and overcome in every moment by the witness of the church to Jesus Christ. Thus all false thinking in terms of realms is ruled out as endangering the understanding of the church" (ibid., p. 64). We therefore need to scrutinize our perceptions of the nature, self-understanding, and tasks of the church in terms of a problematic "realms framework." Just as there is no such thing as a purely personal and private Christian faith, there is no such thing as a private church, either. With Bonhoeffer, we emphasize instead: theology and the church are in their nature always public. This holds true for Christian witness as well. "By its very nature, Christian witness is public not private" (De Gruchy 2007, p. 40).

Against this background, the alternative "church vs. world" as possible addressees of public witness is misleading. Because, "Just as the reality of God has entered the reality of the world in Christ, what is Christian cannot be had otherwise than in what is worldly" (Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 59). Beware, this quote has radical consequences! It also guards Bonhoeffer's theology towards different sides from misunderstandings, such as a pietistic or evangelical misreading that aims solely at personal piety, a cultural Protestantism whose Christian profile becomes invisible in the public sphere or a Christian-motivated actionism that seems to be able to act without being rooted in spirituality. The Christian without the worldly would be devoid of its aim, the worldly without the Christian devoid of its content. Public witness, in word or deed, transcends the binary "church" vs. "world," because the whole of reality has been reconciled in Christ.⁵

4. Transformative Christology: Witnessing to the "Public Christ"

Christology is the heartbeat of public theology.⁶ In the midst of public theology's multiple shapes and contexts, it is Christology that gives to public theology contour towards the outside and cohesion towards the inside. To unfold this, I will make use of the traditional dogmatic figure of the *munus triplex*, the three-fold office of Christ, which constitutes a unique ecumenical phenomenon in that it is accepted in the different confessional traditions (Schlink 1983, p. 414). Though the differentiation between Christ's kingly, prophetic, and priestly office can already be found in the works of the Church

Fathers, it was Calvin who developed it systematically in his *Institutes*, book 2, chapter 15 (Calvin 1960, pp. 494–503). “To know the purpose for which Christ was sent by the Father, and what he conferred upon us, we must look above all at three things in Him, the prophetic office, kingship and priesthood.” Using the lens of the *munus triplex* can help us to discover “the public Christ in different domains of life, and it allows us to differentiate and to relate Christ’s presence in ecclesial, political and moral-diaconical contexts,” in short: in public contexts (Welker 2013, p. 286).

When asked about the task of art, the Swiss artist Paul Klee is said to have responded that art does not depict the visible, but art renders visible. In a similar way, public theology does not seek to depict Christ, but to render Christ visible in public contexts. In other words: the task of public theology is witnessing to the public Christ. In order to be able to do so, one crucial aspect needs to be kept in mind, though. As Calvin (1960) pointed out, “We see that he [Christ] was anointed by the spirit . . . not only for himself that he might carry on the office of teaching, but for the whole body that the power of the spirit might be present in the continuing preaching of the Gospel” (p. 496). The Spirit of God rests on Jesus Christ not only for his own sake, but Jesus Christ pours out the Spirit to his body, the church, “to live in his witnesses and to allow his witnesses to live in him” (Welker 2013, p. 286).

Yet how exactly is the *munus triplex* helpful to public witness? As we look at each of the offices of Christ in more detail, we will connect the three offices to his pre-Easterly life, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. Through linking the kingly office of Christ with his earthly life, light is shed on dimensions of the historical Jesus that have remained underexplored for most of church history. Even our creeds quickly proceed from Jesus’ birth to his death, as if everything that lies in between had no further relevance.⁷ Yet, the contrary is the case; Jesus’ earthly life reveals a radical transformation of the concept of kingship. This king did not come to be served, to rule and to oppress, but rather to serve, to heal, and to help. Jesus’ kingship is characterized by his love and forgiveness, by his inclusion of the outcasts, and by his attention to those marginalized and forgotten by society. “This king, who is also a brother and friend, even a poor person and an outcast, shapes the constant movement towards radical democracy characterized by love and care, mutual acceptance, recognition and respect. . . . What a great orientation for any public theology!” (ibid., p. 287).

The prophetic office of Christ can be connected to the cross. The cross first of all points to the powerlessness of God. It is thus the death also of all false images of God. God’s power proves itself in powerlessness. The son of God, tortured to death, shows God’s compassion with all victims of power and abuse. The biblical preferential option for the poor and the weak reveals itself precisely here, at the cross. In the countless victims of human rights violations today, we encounter the Man of Sorrow. At the same time, the cry of agony in solidarity with the suffering merges with the cry of the prophets against injustice and oppression. The judicial murder of 2000 years ago not only directs our attention towards the limits of any legal system, but also towards the functioning of power. “The paradox of the law” (Auga 2008, p. 365), including liberal law, is revealed by the fact that the marginalized, i.e., the ones whose rights are being violated, usually have no access to the rights discourse. Furthermore, the cross points towards human failure and sin. Failure and vulnerabilities are being taken seriously here, yet at the same time constructive ways of overcoming them are being revealed. Grace, forgiveness, and a new beginning emerge as powerful resources for perpetrators and victims alike as social reconciliation processes after historical trauma in contexts as Rwanda and South Africa show. “Again, what a great challenge and task for a global public theology!” (Welker 2013, p. 289).

Here, the ray of the resurrection already shines through, which can be connected with the priestly office of Christ. Though this office has often been viewed primarily through the lens of atonement and sacrifice, it is set into a wider horizon when seen in the light of the resurrection. The early church witnessed to the resurrection in particular by means of symbolic actions. For example, the breaking of the bread and the celebration of Holy Communion reveals God’s continuing loving mercy and acceptance. As such, the table of

fellowship becomes a powerful demonstration of mutual acceptance, care, and equality. The priestly office speaks in particular to the witness of the church as the social body of Christ. “The main task of the priestly office and the priestly shape of the reign is to witness in proclamation, liturgy, teaching and mission to the sustaining, saving and ennobling God” (ibid., p. 290). Again, what a great task for public theology!

In the interplay of all three offices of Christ as king, prophet, and priest, the distinct yet connected tasks of public witness come into view as the public Christ is rendered visible in the different domains of public life. Rooted in the particular reality of a specific context, public witness is nonetheless beyond confinement. Its global and ecumenical dimensions need to be accounted for also in its theology, therefore. “Global public theology has to rise to the challenge to understand itself as an ecumenical and eschatological public theology—without losing its moral, political and global responsibilities and virtues” (ibid., p. 290). This calls for a number of concrete implications for the task of cultural witness and public theology. In the following, three of these implications will be presented in the hope of stirring up further discussion.

5. Now What? Three Implications for Public Witness in Contemporary Europe

5.1. Thesis 1: Public Witness Needs Religious Literacy and Bilinguality

On 16 September 2022, Mahsa Amini died in police custody in Iran. The young Iranian woman had been arrested by the morality police, who accused her of wearing her head covering improperly. Two weeks later, German Minister of Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock stated the following in the German Parliament in view of the ensuing protests in Iran against the Mullah regime: The terror of the Iranian moral guardians “has nothing, but nothing at all, to do with religion or culture” (Baerbock 2022). This is not only a dangerous factual error, but it also shows an alarming lack of religious literacy.

Western thinking has for so long been dominated by the assumption of a post-religious world that religious literacy has continued to decline. Religion in the public sphere—be it politics, education, or media—often evokes uneasiness coupled with helplessness. Religion is deemed too complex on the one hand and too problematic on the other hand, both resulting in ignorance and neglect. This has disastrous consequences. If religion and its influences on individual and social processes are not adequately understood, prejudices and misunderstandings abound, leading ultimately to hostility, discrimination, and violence. Diane L. Moore (2016, p. 27) from Harvard’s Religious Literacy Project argued, “Understanding these complex religious influences is a critical dimension of understanding modern human affairs across the full spectrum of endeavours in local, national and global arenas. An important dimension of diminishing religious illiteracy is to provide resources for how to recognise, understand, and analyse religious influences in contemporary life”. This is exactly where public theology comes in. Addressing this void in many Western cultures, public witness shows how religion—in our particular case, the Christian faith tradition—contributes to human flourishing, thereby also helping to reduce stereotypes and prejudices and building mutual understanding, tolerance, and trust.

Religious literacy from the perspective of public witness has two dimensions, one directed inwards and one directed outwards. Although both are intrinsically connected, they follow a consecutive order. I want to argue that we first need to acquire religious literacy in terms of understanding our own faith tradition. In her discussion of translating religious convictions in political discourses, Christiane Tietz pointed to the importance of first understanding immanent plausibilities within one’s faith tradition. She argued for the necessity of transforming mere thetic statements such as “This happens to be the will of God” into convictions like “The meaning of this commandment of God is that . . . ” (Tietz 2012, p. 95). Although Tietz focused primarily on ethical discourses in terms of certain norms and commandments, we need to also include dogmatic figures. We need fresh thinking on what we actually mean when we speak, for instance, of the Trinity, of the Almighty God, of faith or of sin.⁸ The first requirement of religious literacy is therefore learning to speak our own mother tongue again. Not in the sense of repeating formulas,

but in the sense of creatively and critically engaging with our theological traditions and to feel at home within them. “The greatest challenge of the present times is: To access the language of faith again, to learn again to speak it and to use it” (Thomas 2021, p. 351).

In a second step then it is necessary to help people who do not play the same or any religious language game to still be able to understand it. As South African public theologian John De Gruchy (2007) put it, “[G]ood public theological praxis requires the development of a language that is accessible to people outside the Christian tradition” (p. 39). Nota bene: the aim is not convincing the communication partner of the truth of the Christian faith (as if this even were in anyone’s power), but to create the prerequisites for the possibility of understanding. Here, public witness needs to develop the competency of bilinguality or—more precisely—multilinguality (Tietz 2012, p. 98f). Ever since Jürgen Habermas prominently called for a translation of religious content into secular accessible language in public discourse in 2001, this discussion has gained traction. Yet though translation is the prerequisite of bilinguality, it is not identical with it. Mere translation will only lead us halfway, so to speak. For the danger of translation is that the translated product results in another monolinguality. In this case, the theological origins and religious identity of certain concepts become invisible in public discourse. Instead, public witness needs to be present in public discourse by speaking in both languages simultaneously, i.e., in its own theological language and in its publicly accessible version. This ensures that neither language retreats behind the other, resulting in either the invisibility of Christian identity or the incomprehensibility of Christian content. Bilinguality, i.e., the permanent and visible presence of both languages together, is thus the communicative consequence of the one Christ-reality. To spell this out in terms of a new apologetics will be the task of public witness.

The metaphor of bilinguality also provokes criticism, however. As Thomas (2021) rightly pointed out, not everything is translatable lest it becomes simplistic (p. 351). The existence of God, for example, cannot be translated nor can potent religious imagery. And: As translation scientists point out, every translation process is one of transformation and representation (Pirner 2015, p. 452). Content is inevitably transformed in this process rather than simply mirrored. This means that there is likely to remain a surplus of meaning in any translation process. Not least in view of these challenges connected with the concept of bilinguality, Thomas rejected this notion altogether, arguing in favor of explication (Erläutern) instead. “Explication is like monolingual foreign language teaching” (Thomas 2021, p. 355). Yet just as in foreign language teaching, I propose a pragmatic approach. Although monolingual teaching can be quite efficient, there are likely to be occasions where its limits become apparent and where it would be helpful to resort to other means as well. Public witness therefore makes creative use of any means of communication available. One particular strong resource, for example, is storytelling. Literary scholars such as Jonathan Gottschall (2013) point us to the identity and community constituting dimensions of storytelling. According to Gottschall, it is stories that shape us, our self-understanding, our meaning making of the world. It is what makes us human. The Jesus story makes for an amazing story, indeed! Yet, words are not all there is. Here, the Reformation denominations with their strong word orientation can benefit from other traditions, including the Catholic and the Orthodox with their attention to other dimensions such as the experiential, the haptic, the emotional. “The story of God’s dramatic world adventure is also explicated in that people can observe the real use of this language. They understand the story when they see how people live with it” (Thomas 2021, p. 358). Bilingual or multilingual public witness therefore also takes the shape of experience, of rituals, of encounters—of life itself.

5.2. Thesis 2: For Public Witness, Diaspora Existence and Missional Existence Are Sisters

The year 2022 marks a change in the times in many respects. In Germany, 2022 is also the year in which the majority of people no longer belonged to one of the two major churches, i.e., either to the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant church. “It is a historical caesura, since, seen as a whole, it is the first time in centuries that it is no longer

‘normal’ in Germany to be a church member”, said social scientist Carsten Frerk (quoted in [Der Spiegel 2022](#)). For the country of the Reformation, these are remarkable developments, indeed. Yet, the trend in itself is not so remarkable at all, but rather representative of a number of (Western) European countries. It seems that the future of many Christian churches in Europe will be characterized by a diaspora situation.⁹ Although the term *diaspora* has been used (and misused) differently throughout the centuries, the New Testament employs this term for Christians or Christian churches who live in a minority situation. Public witness in such a context therefore requires a “theology of diaspora.” In their study of the same title, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) argues for a wide understanding of diaspora, beyond its numerical dimension. Diaspora is understood “as shaping fullness of relations in a spirit of Christian discipleship. . . . While the concept of minority church or minority situation reduces this wealth of relations to a numerical ratio, and tends to imply a deficiency, the strength of a relationally focused concept of diaspora is that it highlights the polyphony of relations in diaspora congregations and understands this as an essential part of creative organisation” (CPCE 2018, p. 5). This relational concept of diaspora is characterized by its Christological roots. Pointing to John 17:16, the church of Jesus Christ is understood as being in this world, but not of this world. As the body of Christ—or, in Bonhoeffer’s words, as “Christ existing as community”—the diasporic church partakes in God’s own mission. “The Church interspersed in the world participates in the mission of God, the *missio Dei*, so that diaspora existence and mission orientation of Christian existence are two sides of the same coin” (Körtner 2020, p. 9). Rather than retreating from society, the contrary is the case for the diasporic church.

This in turn calls for a “theology for a missionary church,” as the [Church of England \(2004, p. 84\)](#) pointed out. In the context of churches in Europe, the Church of England is an interesting case. In many respects, the Church of England seems about one generation ahead of the other churches, at least in the German-speaking context. Much of the experience of churches here, such as the shock about the loss of one’s majority position in society, decrease in membership, scarcity of finances, sale of church buildings, etc., have already become a reality there. Over here, shock rigidity is followed by resignation and calls for orderly withdrawal on the one hand and frantic actionism on the other, which seeks its salvation above all in structural adjustments. The insight that “the question of the future perspective is a spiritual one” (EKD 2020, p. 1) is so far still rather the exception than the rule; yet, it points in the right direction. The question of the future of the church is a spiritual one, indeed, and—as one needs to add—a theological one. It is therefore only consistent when the Church of England developed already at the turn of the millennium a “theology for a missionary church.” It identifies five marks of mission that are intended as a framework either for an existing local church or for developing, growing, or planting a church or a fresh expression of church ([Church of England 2004, p. 81f](#)). (1) A missionary church is focused on God the Trinity. It worships and serves a missionary God and understands itself as sharing in the *missio Dei*. (2) A missionary church is incarnational. This means that it shapes itself in relation to the culture in which it is located by being responsive to the activity of the Holy Spirit in its community. (3) A missionary church is transformational. Understanding itself as a servant and sign of God’s kingdom, it serves the community it is located in. (4) A missionary church makes disciples. It is active in calling people to faith in Jesus Christ and in developing a consistent Christian lifestyle that engages with culture, yet is also countercultural. (5) A missionary church is relational in that it understands itself as a community of faith. It values hospitality and relationships with other Christian churches and communities. As the Church of England pointed out, “These five marks are not ‘pass’ or ‘fail’ criteria, but may be a helpful way of highlighting or identifying a church’s missionary purpose and qualities” (ibid., p. 82). It is up to the churches in Europe to find out in what ways these marks can be helpful for them and the challenge of public witness, for a missional existence is the sister of the diaspora existence.

5.3. Thesis 3: Public Witness Is Ecumenical, Practical and Spiritual

European churches face the challenge of cultural witness together. This challenge presents new opportunities also for ecumenism. It is time to rethink the status of theological differences between different Christian denominations for ecumenical dialogue—and even more so, for ecumenical diapraxis. In this process, academic disputes about theological points of contention and an “ecumenism of profiles” (Wolfgang Huber)¹⁰ are increasingly being supplemented by what could be called an “ecumenism of practice.” What I see emerging as “public ecumenism” is committed to working together to solve concrete challenges, not least in a public global context. In the common struggle for answers to climate change or to an unjust economic order, for example, denominational differences are increasingly losing their significance. One example of this joint work for a more sustainable, just economic order is the “Economia di Francesco” initiative¹¹ launched in 2019, in reference to Francis of Assisi. This movement is aimed at young (U35) economists and entrepreneurs who want to rethink the economy and globalization. Inspired by the Catholic tradition, this initiative unites several thousand young people from different Christian and non-Christian faiths. In this spirit, the Roman Catholic economist and theologian Luigino Bruni is calling on Pope Francis to convene a Vatican III dedicated to the global challenges of a sustainable economy and ecology. “A new ecumenical Council could not remain just a matter of bishops but should also seriously involve the laity; it should not be only men’s business but also that of women; not just a matter of adults but also young people; nor just a matter of Catholics but it should involve the other churches, other religions and atheists of good will” (Bruni 2021). Christian public witness thereby demonstrates its own specific resources for the common good, while working together not only with different Christian denominations but with other and non-religious actors as well.

At the same time, public witness in ecumenical and interreligious diapraxis depends on its spiritual roots. De Gruchy (2007) pointed to the importance of spirituality, not least in the context of a global, ecumenical public theology: “Good public theological praxis requires a spirituality which enables a lived experience of God, with people and with creation” (p. 40). The internationally renowned Taizé community is an example of how a young ecumenical community celebrates the resources of faith in a shared spirituality, both locally in Taizé and beyond.¹² Public ecumenical witness therefore connects head, hand, and heart. This means that alongside ecumenical dialogue and common theological struggle, and alongside ecumenical diapraxis in common commitment to a more just world, there is experienced spirituality as a common connection of hearts in God. This is accompanied by a spirit of humility, which is also prepared to acknowledge one’s own failings with regard to the Christian community and to ask for forgiveness. Orthodox theologian Peter Bouteneff (2021) called this an “ecumenism of repentance.” From this spiritual attitude then grows a wide heart for the neighbor. “This ‘ecumenism of repentance’ is at the same time always also an ecumenism of generosity, because the more I recognise my own share of guilt in the divisions, the more generous my heart must and will become. And this ecumenism must also be an ecumenism of curiosity—curiosity in the sense of being willing to really listen to each other and learn from each other” (ibid., p. 172).

6. Conclusions

For facing the challenge of culture witness in contemporary Europe, a Christologically contoured public theology has emerged from the discussion as a promising paradigm. Inspired by Bonhoeffer’s one Christ-reality, cultural witness as public witness transcends the binary of “church” vs. “world.” Witnessing to hope in cultures characterized by continuing crises means witnessing to the public Christ in the whole of reality. This was spelled out more concretely by using the dogmatic figure of the *munus triplex*. Churches in Europe witness to Christ the king, the prophet, and the priest by being actively engaged for peace, justice, and hope as servants and sign of the kingdom of God. The discussion yielded three implications. (1) In order for public witness to be effective, a two-dimensional religious literacy is needed. In a first step, we need to learn again our own faith language,

to understand it and to speak it. In a second step, public witness becomes bilingual, simultaneously speaking its own faith language and a language that is accessible for non-Christians, by making creative use of all means of verbal and non-verbal communication. (2) The future of churches in Europe is likely to be one of diaspora existence. A theology of a diaspora church is inseparably linked with a theology of a missionary church. Here, the experiences of the Church of England can give helpful impulses. (3) In the challenge of public witness, churches in Europe are bound together. This means that public witness will be characterized not only by ecumenical dialogue, but even more so by ecumenical diapraxis, united in manifold expressions of spirituality and lived experiences with God.

From the seismic shift currently taking place for the churches in Europe arises the challenge of cultural witness to the public Christ. This challenge requires fresh thinking. This contribution is meant to provoke exactly this.

Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'. (Dylan 1964)

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Notes

- ¹ The renewed interest in the role of religion on the side of academics, policy makers, and practitioners is clearly visible, for instance, in the field of international development. The exclusion and/or side-lining of the religious factor in achieving major global challenges such as the ones spelt out in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 and the ensuing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2015 is slowly giving way to acknowledging and including faith actors in international development. Cf. Schliesser et al. (2021ff).
- ² One example is Harvard University's Religious Literary Initiative, which provides training to professionals in the public, private, and non-profit sectors to advance the public understanding of religion (Harvard Divinity School. Religion and Public Life 2023). The initiative can be viewed at: <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/programs/religious-literacy-professions> (accessed on 2 April 2023).
- ³ Translation by the author, if not indicated otherwise.
- ⁴ Cf. Torbjörn Johansson's (2015) helpful critique of the "Two Kingdoms."
- ⁵ At the same time, this does not mean that the concepts of "the church" and "the world" simply implode into each other and become identical. While the whole of reality is reconciled in Christ, it is still important to differentiate between reconciliation and redemption. Both, church and world, are located in the not yet redeemed but already reconciled world. This also calls for differentiated strategies for public witness, depending on whether it is directed towards the church or the world. Cf. the article by Ralph Kunz in this Special Issue and his use of Günter Thomas' critique of the "two-realms" concept.
- ⁶ This statement, I hasten to add, is not to be read in a descriptive manner as if it was meant to provide a description of the current global landscape of public theology. This is certainly not the case as there are many public theologies that do not center on Christology but rather employ different approaches, such as the Catholic natural law tradition or more strongly Trinitarian or pneumatically oriented public theologies. While I would like to argue for the plausibility of a Christocentric approach also in a global context, for instance, by utilizing the ecumenically productive *munus triplex*, I readily concede that this Christocentric focus is more at home in particular Protestant traditions. I thank one of the reviewers for pointing me to the importance of this clarification.
- ⁷ The creed of the Council of Nicaea (325) says about Jesus Christ "... and was incarnate and was made man, he suffered, and the third day he rose again ...". In a similar way, the creed of the Council of Constantinople (381) reads: "... and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again ...".
- ⁸ Seeking to address the increasing need for religious literacy, Fribourg University developed the CAS course "Foundational questions in Christian existence," tackling precisely these questions. <https://www.unifr.ch/glaubeundgesellschaft/de/weiterbildung/cas.html> (accessed on 2 April 2023). Many more such courses are needed.

- ⁹ Cf. The contribution of Ulrich H.J. Körtner in this Special Issue.
- ¹⁰ According to Wolfgang Huber, an “ecumenism of profiles” does not deny or ignore the differences between Protestantism and Roman Catholics, yet still emphasizes the far greater commonalities. “We differ in some fundamental questions, but we do not lose sight of the much greater common ground that is given to us and opened up in faith. That is why an ecumenism of profiles is valid: Protestant for a good reason and Roman Catholic for a good reason and therefore Christian together for a good reason.” Huber (2006).
- ¹¹ The initiative can be viewed at: <https://francescoeconomy.org/> (accessed on 2 April 2023).
- ¹² The Taizé Community is an international ecumenical order of men in Taizé, France. The community is best known for its ecumenical youth meetings, which attract around 100,000 visitors of many nationalities and denominations each year. <https://www.taize.fr/en> (accessed on 2 April 2023).

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