
This book, edited by the Swiss theologians Christine Lienemann-Perrin and Wolfgang Lienemann, catches the interest of all those internationally engaged in public theology just by the title: ‘The church and the public sphere in societies of transformation’. Such a title promises fruitful material to learn from in developing the paradigm of public theology. The reader will not be disappointed.

The book contains six case studies which serve as the empirical material for the theoretical conclusions. Three of them (Brazil, South Africa, South Korea) show a successful process of transformation from authoritarian regimes to democracies. The other three (Indonesia, Mozambique and the Philippines) are cases in which the success of the transformation is yet unsure.

As the editors emphasize in their introduction, the possibilities of the churches to influence these processes are high. So are the expectations of the societies. Churches are highly esteemed in the societies that have been analysed in the book, in so far as they do not simply pursue their own institutional interest but get involved to pursue the common good. The editors’ definition of the task of public theology is noteworthy: ‘Public theology critically analyses the roles, functions and possibilities of action of the churches, their presence in society and—above all—the fundamentals of their public involvement in the gospel’ (p. 16). The book honours the special importance of interdisciplinarity in public theology by including analyses of political scientists (Béatrice Lienemann) and legal scholars (Georg Gremmelsbacher and Christoph Spenlé) besides the contributions by theologians, which make up the main part of the book. As the contributions by Wolfgang Lienemann, Frank Mathwig and others show, however, many of the theological contributions are almost a role model for how public theology needs to be done: theological reflection and thorough accounts of important debates in the social sciences go hand-in-hand.

Wolfgang Lienemann’s own contribution on the churches and the public sphere in societies of transformation (pp. 21–50) is a good example of how this can be done. He explores the presuppositions, the theoretical framework and the key questions of the volume. The analysis of historical developments in theological accounts of the public dimension of Christian existence and the way it is integrated in the legal design of modern states in Europe leads to an account of the task of describing more accurately the role of religion in the secular state. Lienemann gives an introduction into recent scholarship in political science on transformation processes. His brief account of the active role that churches have recently played in such transformation processes makes the reader curious for a more in-depth analysis of the interplay between church and society in these processes, as it is given in the various contributions of the book.

In order to provide better analytical tools for theses analyses, Frank Mathwig and Wolfgang Lienemann offer a typology of churches as civil society agents in political
transformation processes (pp. 87–123). In their chapter they accurately describe a strange lack of sufficient accountability of the role of churches in most of the current debates on civil society in the social sciences, explicable only by the enormous influence of a secularization thesis which was never really empirically based. One of the important exceptions they discuss is the work of the American sociologist José Casanova. Moreover, a fundamental contribution of the whole volume to scholarship is that it may render impossible further substantial scholarship on civil society that does not at least discuss the role of the churches.

Mathwig and Lienemann’s typology includes a structural, a normative and a functional level. It connects different aspects of the relationship between the churches and civil society and allows the theoretical inclusion of a functional perspective generated by distant observation as a much as a normative perspective generated by an ecclesiological perspective from inside.

Kathrin Kusmierz’s and James Cochrane’s contribution (pp. 195–226) discusses public church and public theology in South Africa’s political transformation. For all those interested in public theology this article is especially interesting, since there are few countries in which the public theology paradigm is as prominent and developed as in the context of South Africa. The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology in Stellenbosch is one of the leading institutions in the field worldwide. The chapter gives a solid account of the political process of transformation from apartheid to the new democracy and the development of a civil society. The analysis of the role of the churches in this transformation is especially interesting, because it gives insights beyond the South African context into the different role of the church in different historical circumstances. The South African Council of Churches (SACC) and related institutions, like Beyers Naudé’s Christian Institute, understood themselves as ‘confessing church’, taking inspiration from theologians of the German confessing church, such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Kusmierz and Cochrane show the difficult process towards an appropriate public role of the church in the new South Africa; a church which is now facing scepticism because of the close alliance of the apartheid government with the white reformed church in the past. On the other hand prominent representatives of the anti-apartheid struggle of the churches have now taken over government offices. Kusmierz and Cochrane report the SACC response to this situation; it is the notion of ‘critical solidarity’. It ‘means that the SACC will support South Africa’s democratically elected government in the work of reconciliation, nation building, reconstruction and development, but will also criticise the government, if it violates principles of justice and democracy or if it contravenes the Bill of Rights’ (p. 210). Different institutions like the Parliamentary Office of the SACC seek to follow this guideline in their daily work.

In a lucid analysis of the theological developments resulting from the new situation after the end of apartheid, the article shows how theology moved from the language of resistance and opposition to the language of healing and reconciliation and towards social transformation leading to a ‘theology of reconstruction’. Critical counter voices