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Global Citizenship: The Role of Faith Communities in the Public Space

Rev. Martin Junge

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Introduction

In many different public arenas the role of religion is subject of vivid debate. Politicians and sociologists discuss it, philosophers and media experts deliberate about it and civil society and religious communities reflect on it. There is a general feeling that one has to handle religion with great care—either because it is so powerful and dynamic that it might easily become dangerous and one has to control it like a wildfire; or, because it is so vulnerable and fragile so that one has to protect and safeguard it rather like an endangered species. Whichever way one looks at it, religion needs a lot of attention and is to be handled with great care.

At first sight, religious communities appreciate this fact since they enjoy the fact of having that larger public attention. Nonetheless, I question this type of dynamic since it leads faith communities in the wrong direction. In my reflection today I shall propose a shift in perspective. The question I shall pursue is not whether the public acknowledges the weight and importance of religion but, rather, whether faith communities recognize the significance of shared public space and understand their role within that space as global citizens. In other words, the primary question is not how much attention and care faith communities actually get, or should get, but what care and attention faith communities actually offer. The concept that is key to understanding this shift is the notion of global citizenship which I shall explore in more detail at later.

The current debate: dealing with religious diversity

First and foremost we need to understand the dynamics in the current debates on religion. Based on quantitative and qualitative empirical research, scholars analyze the significance of religion, what faith means for people, and how belief systems and religious practices shape their lives. From what I understand, in your country, Canada, sociologists have registered an increase in religious diversity. While small communities are growing, the face of Christianity in Canada is changing, not least because religious diversity intersects with ethnic and cultural diversity. Some see this as an opportunity for renewed religious vitality while others perceive the trends of secularization in the different spheres of life as threatening. Whenever these realities are discussed, normative judgments come into the picture—should religion play a public role and, if so, what kind of public role would that be?

Your country is known for officially promoting multiculturalism. As with all concepts, the crucial question here is, what does this imply for people's daily lives? What is the role of faith communities in this? What does this mean for our understanding of public space?

At a global level we witness how the political discourse is being decisively shaped, if not taken over, by the security discourse, which has immediate effects on how faith communities are perceived. In many countries, managing religious diversity is interpreted as the task of state institutions, and is primarily carried out by various attempts to control, if not domesticate religious life. Is this a sustainable way to enable the peaceful coexistence of diverse religious communities? There is an urgent need to disentangle the religious from the political sphere. There is still a learning process ahead of many state institutions, but also ahead of us, as faith communities in view of this disentanglement. At a time in which faith and religion are manipulated and hijacked for purposes of death and violence, faith communities have to realize,

claim and express time and again that faith is a source of healing and life, life in abundance. Faith is not meant to be a stumbling block among people and communities seeking to live in dignity, justice and peace, but a building block, a resource enabling people and communities to reach that goal.

Martin Luther: hunger and thirst for life in abundance for all

Martin Luther was someone who had a deep hunger and thirst for life in abundance, not just for himself but for all. The nailing of the Ninety-five Theses on 31 October 1517 on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg shows the energy and the clarity with which Luther pursued this. Within a few days his Ninety-five Theses transcended the originally intended boundaries of a theological academic debate. Ordinary people took ownership of them – read them, debated and distributed them and even further developed his ideas. Luther’s theological reflections had irrupted into the public space and his Ninety-five Theses became what today is known as “public theology.” A theology in the public space that addresses the questions and dilemmas of the human family, offering insights based on what it knows and holds to be true because of faith.

An exhaustive analysis of the reasons that led to this remarkable public reception would take too long. However, there is one specific reason that I would like to mention. According to my interpretation, the ability of the Ninety-five Theses to connect with people and the social debate at the time was related to Luther’s profound pastoral motivation, his diaconal concern – a concern for the suffering neighbor – which inspired him to offer the theses for disputation.

Luther had already much earlier set forth the theological insights of the Ninety-five Theses. Therefore, for those who had listened to him before there was nothing really new in what he was writing. Yet, the almost revolutionary newness of what he had to say, and how these thoughts resonated with people on the streets and in the villages, only surfaced and became so dramatically relevant when these theological insights associated themselves with a deep and passionate care for the neighbor. The Ninety-five Theses were written out of concern, care and pain: Luther had observed that people relied on false securities for which they spent money that they did not actually have. Because of what he saw, he felt compelled to write, to argue, to challenge and to propose alternatives. The message of justification by faith alone, which he offered with the Ninety-five Theses, was a quasi-dormant insight, until it was associated with the loving care for those suffering spiritually and materially, which enticed this message out into the public.

Moving out into the public: The concern for the suffering neighbor

I recognize a feature here that I have seen replicated in many churches and faith communities around the world: their ability to position themselves in the public space goes hand in hand with their loving engagement with the world and the people. The relevance of their message is tested in their ability to listen, to see, to touch, to accompany and to discern and then to offer their own insights out of the rich and deep treasures of faith. It is the love for the neighbor that ushers theological insights and treasures into the public, sometimes by gently kissing awake these insights and treasures from a peaceful, sometimes even complacent, sleep.

This overall dynamic that moves the church’s theology and praxis out into the public space captures a fundamental dimension of the Christian faith. This is so because this movement toward the world follows the movement that God initiated by choosing the incarnation in Jesus Christ as the way in which to reveal to humanity and the entire creation who God is all about. God offered that first step, moving out of the realm of “untouchability,” out of the space of “apartheid,” and entering with profound compassion into the joys and sufferings, the hopes and pains of this world. In Jesus Christ God celebrated the joy of a wedding in Cana, ensuring that there would be enough wine for all. In Jesus Christ God went through the torture and the humiliating death on the cross, thus making sure that every dimension of human life, even the most cruel and painful experience, would carry the promise of God’s presence.

Despite this clear message that comes from God's revelation in Jesus Christ, I perceive that something seems to have happened to the common understanding about God, often putting God so distant, often picturing God as motionless, often assuming such numbness in God. God's radical movement toward creation and compassionate approach to human beings as shown in Jesus Christ speak quite a different language. If God so compassionately faced the world—can churches afford to turn their back on it? If God became so daringly involved in all dimensions of life—can churches afford to stay away and lean back? Certainly not. Because of their faith, churches are caught in that divine tide that moves them into the world. The public space, therefore, is the only natural place for the church to be.

Experiences from Chile: from marginalization to claiming citizenship

I see the notion of the "citizenship", which I use in the title of my essay, as originating in this theological perspective. I owe the concept of citizenship to the Chilean Pentecostal theologian, Juan Sepúlveda, who describes the transition of evangelical Christians in my home country, Chile, from being a politically, socially and religiously marginalized people to becoming full citizens with all rights and duties in the social and political fabric of the country. *From Pilgrims to Citizens*¹ is the revealing title of his book. It traces in a wonderful way the process of political transformation that needed to happen so that churches could claim their citizenship.

But the book also describes the process of the theological transformation that the churches themselves had to undergo regarding their self-understanding, so that they would actually want to step out from the margins and claim their citizenship. The church's citizenship is first and foremost a matter of its theological identity and self-understanding. As the church understands itself as being part of God's eternal and permanent movement towards creation and all human beings, thus it is sent into the public and acquires citizenship. Herein lies the root of its citizenship—regardless of the ways in which this is later expressed in legislation, or the relationship of a given church to the state, or the size or age of a church. Regardless also of its *gravitas* in a given society.

As a Lutheran Christian from an insignificant, small church I was blessed to have been brought up in a church that understood its citizenship during very difficult times. This was not due to its size, nor its social and political weight, or consensus around the difficult questions of human rights violations, but out of its sense of being called into God's compassionate movement into the world. I was blessed enough to have grown up in a church that took the suffering and pain in my country as an occasion for renewed scrutiny of God's call to the church in its own context.

A church does not have to be in a majority situation in order to undertake such scrutiny. Nor does it have to look back at centuries of existence, or enjoy a privileged relationship with the state. This was true for my church, back in Chile, and this is true for congregations, parishes and churches around the world. Their citizenship is based on the fundamental question at the core of every church, What does God want the church to be? How does it continue to participate in God's deep compassion for human beings and God's zeal for justice? How does it carry and express the message of God's love to every single human being in word and deed, today and here? The presence of the church and of any faith community in the public space is not a matter of size, age, weight or cultural alignment; ultimately it is a question of its self-understanding.

Faith-based perspectives on current crises

The distinctiveness of what a faith community can offer in the public space is rooted in the fact that its voice and witness are based on faith. This implies a deep relationship of trust in God, the original source of all that is. The Christian perspective and witness is based on faith in the Triune God. No church should shy away from that identity. Martin Luther's core theological insight was that God's favor can be neither achieved nor bought; it is a free gift out of God's love (justification by faith alone). This insight is in itself not novel but, rather, a dormant treasure.

The church should offer it with joy and humility to the shared public space, where indeed other voices with different insights and perspectives will also be heard. It requires an effort, though, so that these insights, rooted in faith and put into words through theological reflection, are adequately communicated. These remain two distinct categories: the preaching on Sunday morning, and the participation in the public discourse.

This faith-based perspective is very much sought after today as communities, nations and the human family at large deal with current trends, challenges and even major threats. It is an acknowledgement that such current challenges as climate change and the financial crisis require an interdisciplinary approach in order to be addressed appropriately. The financial crisis, for instance, has for quite some time been an expression of a disturbance that goes far beyond the technicalities of borrowing and lending. It is an expression of the limits of an ideology, neoliberal thinking and its underlying value system, a deeply disturbing approach to relationships with the neighbor and with the entire creation and an understanding of freedom that no longer seems to be accountable. Is it a surprise then that the question of regulation remains the biggest stumbling block to any change in the financial industry? It is evident: regulation would imply accountability. Regulation would imply coming to term with the concept of freedom and how freedom is actually understood – and used! I will speak more to this aspect later in my presentation.

The financial and ecological crises are two sides of the same coin since they are an expression of the same fundamental problem: the human family intends to live on resources that do not exist. Financially and ecologically, the current lifestyles—at least of an important section of societies in this world – are unsustainable.

Current attempts to address these global issues have been somewhat disappointing. It is becoming evident that national interests prevail, and that the fate of the global human family sometimes becomes hostage to election campaigns in particular sovereign states. The shared interests of the global human family are subjected to the national interests of some powerful countries. For me, the most pressing challenge today is the absence of both a mindset and the structures for a global citizenship and the requisite structures to address global issues in their global dimension.

Moving towards global citizenship

Earlier I have shared with you how Juan Sepúlveda describes the transformation of his faith community in Chile from marginalization to becoming active citizens in their country. The challenges that I have just talked about require from us to go a step further, and to move towards global citizenship. This dynamic towards global citizenship is at the heart of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) as a global communion of churches. In 1947, different Lutheran churches came together and decided to exert their global responsibility and for this purpose founded the LWF. At the time, the major call to these churches came from the plight of millions of refugees and displaced persons in Europe—a challenge that could not be addressed at the national level but required a different and global approach. Churches gathered in the LWF to give their citizenship an adequate structure in order to respond to the dramatic situation of refugees. But there was more that motivated them to do so: at the time, Lutheran churches felt compelled to become part of the immense task of reconciliation between peoples, nations and even churches that were experiencing fragmentation, deep suspicion and even hostility as a consequence of the devastating Second World War.

This architecture that our forefathers and foremothers designed in order to express the responsible citizenship of churches at a global level is neither obsolete nor outdated. On the contrary, the ability of churches to connect globally is required with the same urgency. Our current times are paradoxical: never before in history has there been a time of such wealth of resources and means to communicate with people, communities, nations and churches across the globe. Yet, these enhanced means of communication do not appear to have improved communication per se. On the contrary, the easy availability of means of communication

sometimes even seems to have triggered helplessness, if not fragmentation, in communication. Whether one looks at societies, nations, cultures, religions or churches, there appears to be an overall mood of withdrawal into safe comfort zones, reflecting a refusal to deal with the complexity of alternative identities and the challenging reality of overwhelming diversity. Or even worse: wanting to ban or eradicate, sometimes even violently, what is different.

I believe that today the citizenship of faith communities in this world calls for resistance against this mood and to develop “counter-cyclical” attitudes to this tendency of withdrawal and fragmentation, both locally and globally. Faith communities are called today into the public space as bridge builders, as both local and global actors, and as strong advocates for peace with justice.

Welcoming refugees: Joint action of secular and faith-based organizations

One concrete example of this are joint partnerships in caring for refugees. In recent time we have witnessed unprecedented suffering of refugees in all parts of the world. According to the UNHCR we have reached the level of more than 50 Million people seeking refuge in the world today, a number as high as after the World War II. In Europe, thousands of people have lost their lives at sea as they tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In Asia, Rohingya people flee from Myanmar and try to find refuge in Indonesia and Malaysia. In North America, faith communities have intensified their assistance and protection to children migrating from Central America. Moreover, the biggest refugee camps are in Africa and in the Middle East. The LWF currently assists about 2 million refugees globally and works in nine countries together with the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugees. Protecting refugees needs both: the mindset of local communities to welcome the stranger – where LWF and its member churches do have a significant contribution to make, and cooperation and partnerships between different actors, where LWF and its member churches have as well a significant contribution to make.

In 2014, the LWF signed two important Memoranda of Understanding. One with the UNHCR, and one with Islamic Relief Worldwide. At the signing of the MoU with the UNHCR, the Assistant High Commissioner said: “We are witnessing record levels of forced displacement globally, and this makes it all the more important that we and faith-based organizations work together for the sake of the world’s refugees and internally displaced.”² Different to what previous versions of that agreement stated, the current MoU is very explicit in view of the expectation of the UNHCR for the LWF to help them to establish the link between Faith and Protection. And more importantly, to help UNHCR to understand that although people seeking refuge may have lost almost everything, they would still come with their faith. How does faith become a source of resilience, how does it frame the interaction between humanitarian agencies and refugees?

The other MoU was signed with Islamic Relief Worldwide to collaborate on humanitarian work, marking the first official cooperation between a global Christian communion and a worldwide Islamic non-governmental organization.³ Our two organizations have been working together with Syrian refugees and host communities in Al Mafraq in Jordan, and plan a project in the Kenyan refugee camp in Dadaab. Most recently, LWF and IRW have started to work together to assist earthquake victims in Nepal. When disaster strikes, communities have to pull together to help the most vulnerable.

To me, this MoU is of extraordinary importance, a real breakthrough. Not only because it allows us to respond much better to the dramatic situation of refugees and displaced people. It also offers a powerful message – almost a counterproposal – to what the public perception seems to be gathering from news as they relate to faith and religion. It claims the space of religious narrative and public profile, which in the last few decades has been hijacked by voices and actions of politicized religious extremism. It constitutes an attempt to jointly reset the coordinates of the shared value system of faith communities to where this system actually has always been: it is about life, about dignity, a shared humanity. It is about compassionate service to life, particularly where it is threatened. It is about life, never about dead; it is about serving,

never about killing.

Advocating for climate justice: Joint action from the local to the global

In the final part of my presentation, I shall refer to the ecological crisis. How do faith communities come in here? Is the discussion not too specific, too complex? Are even members of parliament not often helpless as they have to deal, sometimes overnight, with highly complicated matters? Do they not already acknowledge that they increasingly feel dependent on experts and lobbies in order to exert their duties? I believe that what is required today are interdisciplinary discussions and that faith communities should be part of these discussions, bringing their own distinctive voice into the conversation while being ready to understand what other disciplines know and have developed.

Since a number of years, climate justice has become a key concern and advocacy issue from the local to the global level. This year is especially crucial as the UN Climate Conference of Parties 21 in Paris urgently needs to come to binding agreements in November this year. In preparation for that, the LWF Council issued a statement at its meeting last year which says: "As leaders of the Lutheran World Federation, we commit to join the global Christian community, and people of all faiths and persuasions, on the journey for climate justice. This task is one that we can only achieve when we unite in a common cause, living out our joint destiny on this fragile, beautiful world which we all share."⁴ In an amazing way of demonstrating global citizenship as people of faith, the young LWF delegates have initiated the "Fast for the Climate" campaign at the COP 19 in Warsaw in 2013.

Religious communities need to be part of the conversation on climate justice, as well as on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Whereas the Millennium Development Goals focused primarily on developing countries, the new framework is a global enterprise. Faith communities owe their own, distinct contribution to such conversations. It is one that largely transcends the realm of the economy, and touches on the very question of how the human family intends and agrees to live together in this one world that we all share. It is a conversation about how the human family intends to express its agreement that every human being has inalienable rights that cannot and must not be violated, even in exceptionally challenging situations. It is a conversation about whether there is still consensus that vulnerable populations, although and because living at the margins, should be at the center of all concern.

Another way to talk about the ecological crisis is to recount a brief story or telling observation from daily life: the way in which indigenous people in Latin America catch monkeys. Monkeys are fast and smart. They normally keep a safe distance from human beings and stay out of reach of their weapons. Hence it is not an easy task to catch them. But monkeys, too, have their weak points. In order to catch monkeys, indigenous people take a coconut and make little holes in it, just big enough so that monkeys can get their hands into the coconut. Then they put the most fragrant fruits into the coconut, the type of fruits that indigenous people know too well monkeys cannot resist. They attach the coconuts with ropes to the ground, and then wait. The monkeys will come down from the trees, attracted by the alluring fragrance of the fruits in the coconut, and will try by all means to get at the fruits. They carefully introduce their little hands into the coconut and grasp the fruits. Once they have the fruits in their grip, a reflex, an anxiety, kicks in, and they will keep their grip on the fruit, regardless of what happens. Yes, they will not loosen their grip when they try to get the fruit out of the coconut. Yet, the hole in the coconut only allows for an open hand to get in, but a fist hand will not come out. Their grip thus becomes a deadly trap for the poor monkeys that do not let go of the fruits, even when the indigenous people approach to catch them.

This is how monkeys are caught in Latin America. How can they be so stupid?, one might be tempted to ask. But for most of us this is probably just an initial reaction because soon we realize not only the tragic situation, but also the painful analogy to the trap in which humanity finds itself today: the fist hand. It is our ongoing attempt to secure survival, life and freedom, by grabbing, not realizing that we are at the juncture of history in which all of this—survival, life

and freedom—can only be secured by opening the hand, by letting go.

The magnitude of the challenge requires enormous expertise so that it can be adequately challenged. Indeed, the ongoing development of technologies and alternatives that emit less CO₂ will be crucial. The ability to adapt of communities living in the fault lines of climate change will be vital. Yet, all of this does not make the urgency of the question regarding lifestyles that more readily correspond to the available ecological resources any less urgent. This is a conversation that must go beyond the aspect of innovative technologies and address the very fundamental question about the way in which we understand ourselves in this world, and about human beings' relationships with the ecological fabric into which we are carefully woven. Similar to the "stupid" monkeys, we have to ask ourselves today whether we see space to move beyond the reflex of grabbing, and are able consciously to let go, thus realizing new dimensions of what it means to enjoy freedom.

Global citizenship, freedom and accountability

I believe that faith communities have a treasure to share in this discussion. According to the Lutheran understanding, freedom is never to be understood as an absolute freedom. It is a freedom that finds its boundaries in the neighbor, particularly in the suffering and vulnerable neighbor. Thus, the gift of freedom, to be enjoyed by everybody, is framed by that accountability to the neighbor. It is therefore a freedom that does not understand the individual as an isolated being, but as placed in relationship to others. Can churches be a voice, helping the human family to realize that the time has come to move beyond a concept of freedom that knows no limits and is not accountable? Should churches today not go beyond the traditional theological understanding of freedom as bound to the neighbor, and introduce a much stronger ecological perspective into its discourse: a freedom not only accountable to the neighbor, but also to God's good creation, in our own language, or to the ecological system, or nature, in the language of others.

The participation of faith communities in the public space should never be understood as a one-way street, in which they generously share with others from its deep treasures of faith. It is a two-way street, in which they also receive and learn, and need to be humble enough to do so, and are challenged and questioned, as they join those local and global conversations. For churches, is the participation in the public space under the sign of the cross. Never engaging with hegemonic pretensions, avoiding all theocratic tendencies, aware of the own ambivalence of both believers and the churches, yet joyfully bringing those treasures to the table, which we recognize because of our faith in the Triune God.

Endnotes

¹ Juan Sepúlveda, *De peregrinos a ciudadanos. Breve historia del cristianismo evangélico en Chile* (Chile: Fundación Konrad Adenauer, 1999).

² <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwf-and-unhcr-sign-memorandum-understanding-humanitarian-cooperation>

³ <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwf-and-islamic-relief-sign-memorandum-understanding>

⁴ https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Council2014-PublicStatement_ClimateJustice.pdf