

Interfaith Consultation

Religious Life and Public Space in Asia

3-7 September 2015
Hong Kong

Concept Paper

Objective

Strengthening participation and dialogue of LWF member churches in the public space together with partners from other denominations and faiths through a deepened understanding of “public space and citizenship” by facilitating theological reflection, joint analysis with academic scholars and shared engagement with religious communities and other civil society actors.

Background

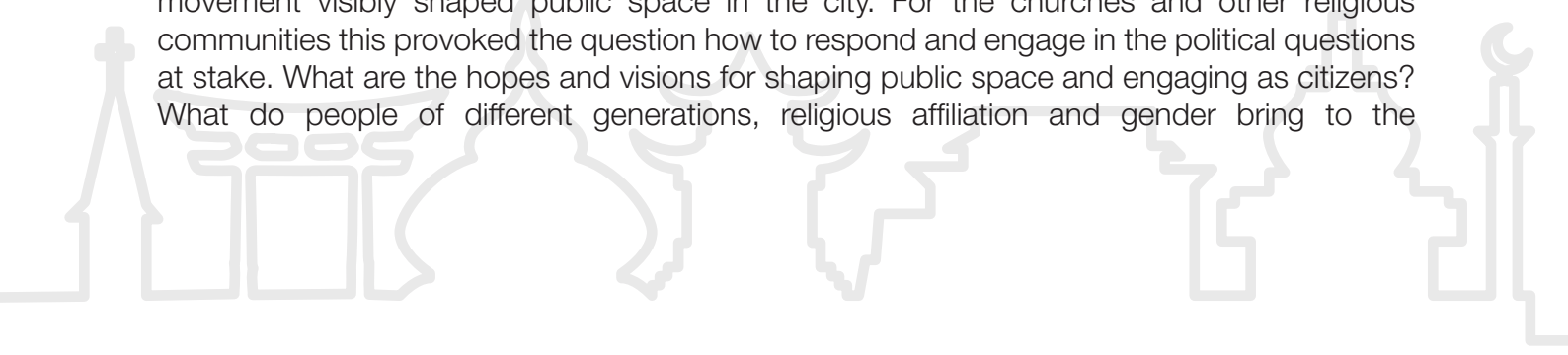
LWF member churches live in religiously plural societies with different configurations. There are a variety of ways in which churches relate to the state, to other religious communities and to other actors in society. These configurations are shaped by constitutional and legal frameworks on the one hand, public discourse and living encounter on the other. In the midst of all varieties, there are some global trends for how the relationship between the spiritual and the worldly realms is conceived of. The discussions seem to get more polarized, at the international and at the local levels. Whereas some praise the important role of religions in society and the leadership they provide, others warn against a dangerous “resurgence of religion”. Some strongly call for a clear-cut disentanglement of religion and politics, others see it as naturally intertwined. Within these debates there are strongly divergent understandings of politics and of religion. In the midst of this contested terrain it is important for churches to give account of the reasons for why they engage in what kind of way with others in the public space. Providing theological reflection on their engagement is a core dimension of the churches’ public witness. It gives clarity and credibility to the churches’ advocacy work, diaconal engagement and public relations.

Asia

Cultural and religious plurality as well as ethnic diversity have long been a hallmark of many Asian societies. An amazing overall plurality exists side by side a tangible and dangerous fragility. Colonialism has left its traces on the region as well as authoritarian political regimes and ideologies. Each country has a distinct historical trajectory that is nonetheless connected to neighboring trajectories. Religious and non-religious worldviews have had political influence. In numerous countries, asymmetries between religious groups have gained increasing political or cultural significance, and the dominance of one religious tradition has become burdensome on others, such as the rise of Hinduism’s political significance in India, Islam in Malaysia, or of Buddhism in Myanmar for instance. Another characteristic of Asia is its vibrant economic life with increasing differences between realities in urban centers and rural areas. Next to changing patterns of work life and political life transformations in gender relations take place. All these development trigger a renewed understanding of the public and the private spheres in life.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is one of the main economic hubs in the region with a very diverse population, among others with migrant workers from all walks of life from Asia and beyond. Its distinct political configuration has been in the focus of attention in autumn 2014 when the umbrella movement visibly shaped public space in the city. For the churches and other religious communities this provoked the question how to respond and engage in the political questions at stake. What are the hopes and visions for shaping public space and engaging as citizens? What do people of different generations, religious affiliation and gender bring to the



conversation? How can shared agendas be developed in order to work together for justice and peace?

Lutheran

Lutheran theology clearly distinguishes, but does not advocate for an antagonistic divide, between the worldly and the spiritual realm. It provides a strong rationale for commitment for the common good and a public sphere that gives space for different communities to interact peacefully. Traditionally, Lutheran theology has focused on the state as actor and guarantor for justice and peace. It also emphasizes the government's responsibility for providing education so that people are enabled to become mature citizens.

In democratic societies today, the focus on the citizens as actors has become even stronger and the need for empowerment more urgent. "Citizenship" has become a key concept in plural societies. It enables to establish a public space where people of different religious, ethnic, gender and other identities can interact as different yet equal persons. The concept of citizenship helps to critique discourses of majority vs. minority groups, it enables to name injustice and oppression and to develop visions of a just society jointly. In order to constructively engage with plurality, a dialogical attitude and dialogical methodologies have become an important dimension of how we engage and walk ways together with others.

There are important resources and experiences in LWF member churches and theological institutions where cooperation with people of other faiths as well as theological reflection on the relationship between faith and public space takes place. As a faith-based organization that works with people of different faiths, the LWF is in a unique position to provide a grounded approach. This approach is grounded in the deep Lutheran commitment to the neighbor and therefore takes as its main reference point the real life experiences of people. This grounded approach is able to, on the one hand, offer an alternative to those who predict the "clash of civilizations" (Huntington) where conflict and rivalry has become the main narrative. On the other hand, it provides a more substantial perspective than those who promote a too easy harmony narrative. The LWF addresses questions of power and hegemony and aims at mutual respect and recognition and concrete collaboration as neighbors.

In 2014, two consultations have taken place, one in Europe and one in Africa:

- January 2014: "Creating Public Space. International Christian-Muslim Consultation on the Role of Faith in the Public Sphere" at the Centre for Islamic Theology at the University of Münster, Germany
- May 2014: Interfaith Dialogue on Peace-Building, Democracy and Development: A Call for Active Citizenship in Sub-Saharan Africa in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

One book has been published:

Simone Sinn, Mouhanad Khorchide, Dina El Omari (eds.), *Religious Plurality and the Public Space. Joint Christian-Muslim Theological Reflections* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015).



Organizer

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a global communion of churches established in 1947, is committed to strengthening interreligious collaboration, especially in the areas of humanitarian cooperation and joint academic reflection. It partners with religious scholars and leaders of different faiths, academic scholars of different disciplines and civil society organizations in order jointly to analyze and promote active citizenship, interreligious dialogue and peace building.

Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre (TFSCC) was founded in 1930 by the Norwegian missionary Karl Ludvig Reichelt. We serve as a bridge between East and West, between Church communities and multi-religious traditions. TFSCC fosters Chinese Christian spirituality and promotes Chinese Christian art culture by facilitating expressions of Christian faith in local art forms. TFSCC's vision is to foster and develop contextual Christian spirituality, art, and liturgy, and encourage interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange.

Areopagos was founded by the Norwegian Missionary Karl Ludvig Reichelt, and since its beginning be characterized by creating meeting places of mutual respect. Today, Areopagos is an NGO that works with religious dialogue, studies, Christian spirituality, and faith practice - and show compassion through aid projects. Areopagos works in Norway, Denmark, Hong Kong and Mainland China.

Consultation

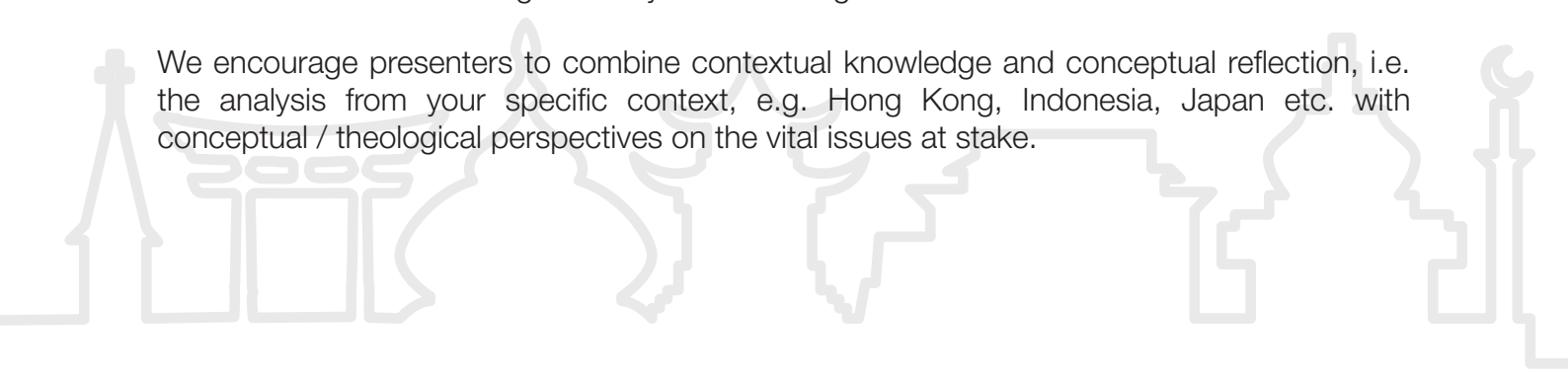
The consultation facilitates a space to:

- study concepts of public space / shared space in society from the perspectives of different religious traditions (Christian, Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, Muslim etc.) and different contexts/countries
- analyze practices of engaging in public space from diverse religious communities and contexts
- provide theological discernment to explore the distinction and relationship between the spiritual and the political spheres in society, as well as the private and the public spheres
- envision and practice inter-religious engagement for creating public space together
- enter into inter-generational conversation on faith and citizenship

Theme

- Perspectives of religious traditions on interreligious relations
- Lutheran/ Christian theology and interreligious relations
- Relations between religious communities, the state and society
- Faith/ religious commitment and citizenship
- Transformations in gender relations
- Practices of working for justice and peace (political engagement and/ or resistance)
- Practices of building solidarity between religious communities

We encourage presenters to combine contextual knowledge and conceptual reflection, i.e. the analysis from your specific context, e.g. Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan etc. with conceptual / theological perspectives on the vital issues at stake.



Participant

In order to reach the above objectives, the expertise of different people is needed:

- Senior scholars (theologians, scholars of religious studies) with academic rigor and creative scholarship
- Junior theologians (up to the age of 30 years, with academic interest and commitment)
- Representatives of different religious communities (including excursion to different communities)

We expect around 30 participants, of which 18 are from outside Hong Kong.

Schedule

Thursday, 3 September 2015	Arrival and Welcome dinner
Friday, 4 September 2015	Opening, Keynote Lecture at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Panel Presentations and conversations
Saturday, 5 September 2015	Panel Presentations and conversations
Sunday, 6 September 2015	Excursion to religious communities
Monday, 7 September 2015	Panel Presentations and conversations, Concluding Plenary

Presentation

We invite participants to present an academic, engaging paper that addresses the overall topic and relates to one of the thematic issues that has been indicated.

Length:	4000 to 8000 words
Deadline:	Paper Title: 1 June 2015
	Paper Abstract: 1 July 2015
	Full paper: 1 August 2015

All papers will be photocopied and shared with participants. As most of the participants are non-native English speakers it has proven helpful for all to have the text in writing. We have a contract for publishing papers from this consultation with Evangelische Verlagsanstalt Leipzig, Germany. Further information on this will be given during the consultation.



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