THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

Resisting Exclusion

Global Theological Responses to Populism

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LWF Studies 2019/01

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Preface

Martin Junge

Dignity and justice, respect for diversity, as well as inclusion and participation are core values of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF).[1] The global Lutheran communion, together with ecumenical, interreligious and civil society partners, actively engages in reflection and action to overcome manifold forms of injustice and exclusion.

In view of this long-standing commitment, the LWF is deeply concerned by recent developments in public discourse, on national as well as international levels. Public discourse has become significantly more aggressive and divisive, as ethno-nationalist populist movements have gained traction. Political agitation and hate speech have led to hate crimes, especially against vulnerable groups like refugees and migrants. There is a tangible negative impact on the cohesion of societies and the infringement on the rights and freedoms of diverse groups of people.

Exclusionary populism unfolds a negative dynamic, which undermines the very fabric and existence of public and civil society space. It perverts basic norms and values of how we want to live together as society and as international community. Therefore, it is vital to jointly address these challenges by scrutinizing its ideological foundations and denouncing its harmful assumptions. Furthermore, the LWF sees the need to articulate with renewed clarity our vision for just and participatory living together, and live out this calling as churches. [2] We need to give an account of the

[1] The Lutheran World Federation, *With Passion for the Church and for the World. LWF Strategy 2019 – 2024* (Geneva: LWF 2018), 8f.
[2] The Lutheran World Federation, *The Church in the Public Space. A Study Document of the Lutheran World Federation* (Geneva: LWF 2016).

theological perspectives that emerge from the gospel message, which points to God's compassionate and liberating presence in this world.

The international conference "Churches as Agents for Justice and against Populism" held in Berlin (Germany) in May 2018 brought together sixty-five people from twenty-five countries in order to deliberate together on the topical issue of exclusionary populism and provide stimulating theological conversations. It is of vital importance that such reflection is done in a collaborative way, by people coming from different contexts, with diverse backgrounds. We thank all who prepared papers and engaged in discussions. The insights emerging from such intercultural theological conversation are indeed much needed today. We are very grateful to "Bread for the World", Evangelische Akademie zu Berlin and the Church of Sweden for their collaboration with the LWF desk for public theology and interreligious relations in preparing this event. The steering committee members Almut Bretschneider-Felzmann, Eva Harasta, Chad Rimmer, Simone Sinn, and Dietrich Werner have jointly conceptualized and implemented this conference.

With this publication of many of the papers from the conference, the LWF wants to stimulate further theological conversation, encourage joint reflection on what it means for churches to resist exclusion today, to dismantle its ideological foundations, and to engage in creative and effective action to foster respect for diversity and inclusion of all. With this publication of many of the papers from the conference the LWF wants to stimulate further theological conversation, encourage joint reflection on what it means for churches to resist exclusion today, to dismantle its ideological foundations, and to engage in creative and effective action to foster respect for diversity and inclusion of all.

Introduction

Eva Harasta and Simone Sinn

In a wide variety of global contexts, populist political movements pose serious challenges to churches and theology. Churches are called to reflect more deeply on their public role in view of populist exclusionary policies. In a situation where populist movements misappropriate Christian rhetoric to justify their aspirations, churches cannot remain silent, but need to resist exclusionary strategies. The contributions gathered in this volume offer analyses and theological orientations, and invite readers to compare their experiences to thoughts and action in different contexts.

Changeable and fast-moving, populism takes on diverse forms. Furthermore, populist movements often obscure their stances and aims (including their non-democratic agenda), thus making it even more difficult to grasp. This volume aims to clarify the problems inherent to certain forms of "populism", and highlights the current wave of right-wing, anti-establishment, anti-elitist and exclusionary movements. The second chapter—"Analyzing the politics of populism"—further discusses the understanding of populism. This volume views "populism" as one of the causes for a crisis of democracy that can be observed in different parts of the world, be it in emerging democracies or in states with a long democratic tradition or in countries that have recently moved towards establishing democracy.

Churches and civil society at large in different global contexts experience these developments first hand. Their effect can be described metaphorically as a "shrinking" of public space. Obstacles to critical social and political discourse are put into place, and exclusionary tactics hinder meaningful participation of all. Ethno-nationalist populist movements work on depriving parts of the population of their access to public discourses, or even on depriving them of their right to participate. Social and political exclusion undermines core values—dignity, equality, freedom,

justice, and transparent decision-making processes. Yet these values are a core part of the Christian world-view. Thus it is not for the purposes of a political system that the churches are called to public witness, but rather for the sake of their mission as churches itself. The third chapter—"Public theology in context—resisting exclusion"—offers insights into responses to this challenge in different local contexts, while the first chapter—"The churches as agents for justice"—offers approaches from the perspective of church leadership, i.e. responses to this challenge on a regional or even federal/national level.

In spite of their contextual and theological diversity, the contributions of these chapters agree in one important regard: The churches need to be self-aware and self-critical when engaging in public witness. Exclusion, discrimination and even unjust power structures are present in the churches as well. Theology and the churches take part in societal dynamics, and can be influenced by exclusionary politics without realizing it. The fourth chapter—"Responding to Sexism"—focuses on one aspect that has proven especially hard to grapple with both for academic theology and for the churches. The contributions aim to encourage self-critique by showing how faith flourishes in communities that cherish equality and dignity of all.

Democracy needs to be rejuvenated and renegotiated in each generation. The fifth and final chapter—"Populism and truth"—discusses how such renegotiation may look in this current generation. Exclusionary political movements feed on fear and aggression in the face of complexity, ambiguity, and diversity. They offer fictional narratives of uniform cultural, religious, racial or national identity, arguing for the exclusion of "others". The contributions of the last chapter offer theological responses to different aspects of coming to terms with diversity and ambiguity, and work with an understanding of truth that follows the Johannine principle that truth is not a proposition, but a living person, and a promise of liberation.

The churches as agents for justice

In the first section of the book, several church leaders offer perspectives for constructively engaging with challenges in society today. In order to analyze the situation, they describe contemporary developments and dialogue with philosophers and political theorists to more profoundly understand what is at stake. Each in their own way speaks from a place of personal commitment to resisting exclusion.

Antje Jackelén addresses the need to reclaim democracy in the face of polarization, populism, protectionism and post-truth. She reflects on the ambivalent impact of digitalization, especially the emergence of digital

swarms, and passionately pleads for nurturing democracy through education. In her view, the church should engage in public space by keeping the quest for truth alive and fostering a sense of direction. From her experience in Sweden, she points out that the church may face fierce opposition and blatant hatred. In view of this, the church is called to form viable partnerships with diverse stakeholders to strengthen hope, justice and peace.

Reflecting on the role of the churches in Germany as agents for justice and against populism, *Heinrich Bedford-Strohm* proposes focusing on the grand narratives that shape the self-understanding of society. The rise of the right-wing populist party "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD) needs to be addressed on this deeper level as well as on the level of individual political issues. The churches in Germany must speak up decisively against all attempts to make nationalistic ideas acceptable again—yet they should do so without framing this discourse as a *status confessionis*. Instead of discussing whether certain people are Christian or not, the topics at hand need to be discussed soberly and clearly, first and foremost among them immigration and social justice. The churches need to propose their grand narrative of hope against populist narratives of fear, and they need to mediate this high-minded narrative with everyday political discourse and its constant search for compromise.

In approaching contemporary populism in Hungary, *Tamás Fabiny* draws on insights of Hungarian political theorist István Bibó. In 1946, Bibó analysed the destabilized situation of Hungary and other small Central European states after the two World Wars. He argued that these societies were traumatized to the point where they might not be able to build their own identity for the foreseeable future. According to Fabiny, the challenges that Bibó describes continue to haunt Hungary even seven decades later, after forty years of an illiberal communist state and thirty years of post-communist democracy and neoliberal capitalism. Hungarian populism offers easy answers to the deep questions of identity that have been left unresolved by the ideological upheavals of the 20th century. It envisions a homogeneous Hungarian "nation" and strengthens cohesion by openly discriminating against minorities. The Lutheran church positions itself against these political dynamics by advocating for inclusion, diversity and democratic participation.

A sharp analysis of the intersection of populism and racism in the US today is offered by *Linda E. Thomas*. Doing public theology from a womanist perspective, she underlines the importance of looking at the historical depth of these issues. She introduces the cultural knowledges that emerge from black and womanist experience, and shows how these connect with experiences of others e.g. First Nations People. Remembering the past, the abuse suffered, is indispensable. Equally important is unveiling the persistent dynamics of power and privilege. Thomas views racism as structured,

systematic and institutionalized prejudice. In order to counter this, Thomas argues for shared analysis, i.e. those who are in one way or another in a position of power or privilege join the efforts to disrupt racist structures. Another concrete way in which churches can help transform oppressive systems is to accept leadership from historically subordinated people.

In his account of populist politics in India, *Roger Gaikwad* points to three interrelated challenges: religious fundamentalism, communalism and nationalism. Gaikwad speaks of *Hindutva* populism and shows how it creates an intolerant and coercive climate in society. Such climate gives rise to attacks against women, dalits, adivasis, religious minorities and working people. Gaikwad briefly introduces the historical emergence of the ideology of Hindutva in the late nineteenth century. He argues that the politicization of Hindu religious sentiments entails fascist elements. The churches in India have responded critically to these developments in various ways, in public statements as well as by forming civil society coalitions. Such coalitions help to raise awareness in society and activate all available legal mechanisms to protect minorities.

Pascal Bataringaya writes about the Rwandan churches' efforts to contribute to the healing process after the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, when more than one million people were killed in a period of 100 days. The Genocide traumatized the people of Rwanda on the individual level, but it also traumatized society as a whole. Bataringaya stresses that justice is a necessary precondition of reconciliation. This concerns the role of the churches as well. The churches had to come to terms with their complicity in the circumstances that contributed to the Genocide. After so much violence and suffering, justice and reconciliation can seem impossible. For Bataringaya, the heart of the churches' witness for reconciliation consists of the trust that justice as well as reconciliation are graceful gifts from God.

Analyzing the politics of populism

Populism is a contextual phenomenon, it responds to challenges within a particular society. Yet populist movements have become influential in numerous different global contexts, a fact that points to inter-contextual dynamics and parallels. This chapter offers analyses from Hungary and Croatia, from South Africa, from Brazil and the US, concluding with a statement from the perspective of a German development agency. Populism emerges as a form of politics that uses social resentments in order to gain power, and that, once in power, contributes to a crisis of democracy across different global contexts.

In their article "Radical Right-wing Populism and Nationalized Religion in Hungary", *András Bozóki* and *Zoltán Ádám* offer a definition of

populism from the point of view of political science and analyze populism in Hungary and its relation to Christianity. They describe populism as an anti-elitist approach to politics that primarily seeks mass-mobilization and that positions the person of a charismatic leader in the place of political principles. Populism's rise in Hungary originates in recent history. During the three decades after the collapse of communism, countries in Eastern Central Europe have transitioned into democratic structures quickly, but have also faced economic and social challenges. Many citizens have become disillusioned with "the West" and with neoliberal capitalism.

Nico Koopman approaches populism from the perspective of a South African academic public theologian. He focuses on populism as a logic and idea, not as an ideology or a political movement. Thus populism appears as an anti-intellectual flight from complexity. In response, Koopman calls for a theological ethic of intellectuality and catholicity. Embracing intellectuality takes its cue from the conviction that faith includes loving God with one's entire mind, which leads to affirming complexity and ambiguity in society as well as in theory. Embracing catholicity implies that the churches pay attention to God's work outside of the church, both regionally and globally.

Rudolf von Sinner and Marcia Pally both look for the societal hermeneutics of populism. *Rudolf von Sinner* calls for a deeper understanding of the centrality of the people. He writes from within the contemporary Brazilian context and begins with an analysis of former president Lula's popularity in order to decipher the meaning of populism in Latin America. Here, populism is also understood in positive ways. This has been theoretically elaborated by the Argentinian political philosopher Ernesto Laclau. He does not regard populism as manipulation of the masses, but as articulation of the subjectivities of the people. Against false harmony there needs to be legitimate space for political conflict, so that the voices of marginalized be heard. In his own theological approach, von Sinner underlines the need to look more closely as to who and where the people are.

Marcia Pally investigates why neo-nationalist movements are so persuasive to many citizens in the US from the perspective of cultural studies. She defines "populism" as a program of solutions to economic and sense-of-place duress and uses the word as a synonym for "neo-nationalism". Drawing on political and theological interpretations of the covenant by Johannes Althusius, John Winthrop, and Alexis de Tocqueville, Pally delineates models of political participation, liberty and belonging that contribute to the persuasiveness of exclusionary political stances in the US.

Dion A. Forster and Branko Sekulić look into the relation between the church and populist politics and into the use of Christian ideas and rhetoric by populist movements. *Dion A. Forster* offers a theological response to contemporary populism in South Africa, which takes its strength from a

disappointment in the slow pace of transformation, from the re-emergence of identity politics, and from growing concerns of state corruption. Christian rhetoric plays a significant part in current South African populism. Forster points out that there is a blurring of the lines between the political and the religious discourse, and that the churches are in danger of becoming embedded in the actions and intentions of the state. In order to work against this tendency, Forster points to the South African Kairos Document (1985), which calls the church to prophetic witness, and reminds theology and the church of their spiritual responsibility for distance from the state, and their public responsibility for justice.

Branko Sekulić analyses how churches in ex-Yugoslavia are entangled in the promotion of an ethnonational mythology. He underlines that mythology is not to be understood as a distant concept, but as a mindset that has practical consequences and shapes reality. When a church institution supports are certain ethnonational mythology, it is entangled in political struggles which thus acquire a certain sacred characteristic. Furthermore in such mythology, the people are given a special status as chosen people. The historical narration is fixed in such a way to support the mythology. The idea of hostility toward other ethnic, national, confessional or religious groups becomes and intrinsic part of the mythology. This can develop into a precursor to ethnic cleansing and genocide.

At the end of the chapter, *Dietrich Werner* introduces an inter-contextual perspective on populism. He writes as a representative of Bread for the World, the development agency of Protestant churches in Germany. In the past few years, strengthening civil society actors has been one of the primary objectives of Bread for the World as it responds to a disturbing development that can even be addressed as a global crisis in democracy. Nationalist populism contributes to this crisis in many global contexts. Werner stresses that the churches need to remain strong in their witness and service to those in need beyond all cultural, national and ethnic boundaries. Inter-contextual ecumenical exchange is an important tool in this situation.

Public theology in context—resisting exclusion

Wherever Christians live in difficult or oppressive situations they have to find ways to stand their ground. There is a wide range of strategies from confrontation to cooperation by which churches try to live out who they are called to be in this world. Out of such struggles public theologies in context emerge that defy exclusion and work toward recognition of a plural public space.

Sung Kim argues that the current development of public theology in Hong Kong needs to be understood in relation to the religious-political

reality in the People's Republic of China (PRC). While freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed in the basic law in Hong Kong, Christians in Hong Kong fear looming changes in view of Bejing's increasing influence on the "Self Administrative Region". Some theologians in Hong Kong favour the concept of "localism" to allow for some grade of independence. The debate on the impact of "foreign influence" continues, however with different nuances in Hong Kong and in the PRC. Kim points out that in the midst of these political questions, public theology should not loose sight of the growing socio-economic challenges that produce glaring marginalization.

The introduction to the quest for independence and democracy in Myanmar by *Samuel Ngun Ling* provides insights into the different historical stages. He then points out that there are currently two approaches to peace and reconciliation in the country, one through inclusive political dialogue, the other one aims at ending internal conflicts by military force. Neither approach has yet achieved peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, a particular challenge is the fact that government authorities have tried to promote Buddhist religion and culture to form national identity. In view of this hegemonic dynamic the minority ethnic Christians struggle through non-violent means for recognition of diversity, justice, dignity, rights and freedoms. For churches in Myanmar, Jesus showed the way to resistant evil powers and systems and to stand for the disenfranchised.

Jeevaraj Anthony describes how the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India as a minority church responds to the challenges of the Hindutva movement both in theology and advocacy work. Minority communities in India, with Christians among them, currently experience a context of fear and suffering. Anthony calls for a public theology "from below", i.e. a public theology that involves the everyday lives of marginal and minority people. Furthermore, he calls for a dialogical public theology as it is practiced at the Ecumenical Dialogue Centre India (EDCI), because dialogue is the most effective method in responding to exclusionary ideas and practices.

Daniel C. Beros analyzes the term "populism" and focuses on phenomena that are usually attributed to "populism": xenophobia and racism. These phenomena are on the rise in Latin American contexts, where neoliberal authoritarian regimes currently gain ground, often with the help of media monopolies. In his theological response to this situation, Beros draws on the category of idolatry. This concept can help to analyze the use of images in the media and it can help to recognize "false gods", i.e. deceitful claims of justice and peace. However, it needs to be employed self-critically, as it has been a means of oppression historically.

The use of religion by right wing Israeli and Christian Zionist groups is scrutinised by *Munther Isaac*. He describes how biblical and religious language is used in these two movements to legitimise a certain political

agenda. He calls this "imperial theology" and criticizes such theology as resulting in prejudice and fear and leading to dehumanizing Palestinians. Isaac argues for a theology of shared land as the only meaningful way forward.

Almut Bretschneider-Felzmann writes from the perspective of the Church of Sweden's international department, which cooperates with partners in sixteen countries. For more than a decade, the issue of democratic spaces in society and civil society has been of central importance in these global relations. "Democratic space" designates room for civil society discourse between different actors. In many cases, certain groups are denied access to such democratic space. Yet excluded voices need to be heard in the public space so that decision making processes can be truly participatory and beneficial to everyone involved. Living out the public witness of the church needs continual reflection and care. For Act Church of Sweden, the development organization in Church of Sweden, sexual and reproductive health and rights have been focus areas for many years as well as gender justice.

Responding to Sexism

This chapter focuses on exclusion based on gender, i.e. sexism, as a populist strategy in five different contexts: the US, Zambia, the UK, Sweden, and Brazil. Theologians face a dilemma in this respect, as the tradition they are part of has been strongly influenced by patriarchy. Thus, responding to sexism in the public space presupposes a self-critical investigation into the exclusionary structures within theology and the churches.

Constructive theological resources that help to re-evaluate tradition and critique misogyny and sexism are brought forward by *Kirsi Stjerna*. Her aim is to strengthen persistence in the face of multiple expressions of injustice. She remembers women during the Reformation period who have become models of persistence by their theological engagement with the questions of the time. Looking at contemporary challenges she underlines that making the world a safe place for women as exemplified in the #MeToo movement is not only a secular matter, but a Reformation concern. She highlights key insights from the recent statement "Faith, Sexism and Justice. A Lutheran Call to Justice" of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Stjerna is convinced that the way theologians speak about God is of vital importance, and that a fundamental theological reform is needed. In her view, it is worth revisiting Luther' Genesis commentary and use it a resource to include women's experiences.

Mutale M. Kaunda and *Chammah J. Kaunda* focus on the public challenge of sexism, though never losing sight of the interconnection of sexism

and Christianity. They analyze how Zambian Pentecostal women politicians, though successful in gaining political influence, have failed to resist patriarchal structures. This dynamic is particularly apparent when these politicians use the religious discourse of wifely submission in order to exercise power in a male-dominated political context. Patriarchal models of gender relations that claim to be Christian are a part of populist rhetoric in Zambia. Zambia mirrors other global contexts in this respect as well as in the underlying power structure: Women achieve positions of power, but then fail to challenge patriarchal attitudes, instead conforming or even actively strengthening them as long as it helps them to stay in power as individuals.

Esther McIntosh's paper investigates sexism in current public theology, and shows how male-dominated hermeneutics prevent theology from responding effectively to public challenges that are posed by populist sexism. Male-dominated public theology interprets the public sphere based on Jürgen Habermas, David Tracy and other white male theorists, ignoring feminist critiques of the distinction between the public and the private, and remaining deaf to theological witness on public issues by marginalized groups. McIntosh stresses that public theology needs to overcome this bias and needs to start engaging with public theologies of many different backgrounds, e.g. with Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, Mercy Oduyoye, Musa Dube, and Kwok Pui-Lan. This is especially important in a situation of rising misogyny in the public sphere, as sexism proves to be a salient part of populist politics in many different contexts.

Gunilla Hallonsten discusses the role of sexism in nationalist populism in Sweden. Hallonsten points out that sexism—together with racism—is an integral part of nationalist populism in Sweden. Women are seen primarily as mothers, reproduction being seen as woman's first duty for the nation. Nationalist populism stresses the nuclear family as the only legitimate family model and discriminates against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans- and queer people (LGBTQ) community. Hallonsten then draws on the feminist post-colonial thought of Paula de los Reyes and Diana Mulinari, whose criteria for intersectional thinking are useful for critiquing gendered theological spaces, and for developing public spaces that are in accordance with gender justice.

Looking at the pervasive presence of violence against women in Brazil, *Marcia Blasi* argues that such reality is nurtured by a destructive political discourse that is not simply populist, but actually fascist. Blasi describes how in such public discourse there is a binary typology of women, being either "beautiful, modest, and housewife" or angry and dangerous. This discourse could be heard in the fierce debates in relation to Dilma Rousef's presidency. Blasi denounces the involvement of religious leaders in

the misogynous public discourse. She pleads with churches to hear and believe women's stories, and to provide safe and just spaces for women.

Populism and truth

As populist discourse began to either control or demonize certain media outlets and started to attack journalists, questions of fake news and post-truth became a matter of public concern. Communication in public and private spaces seems polarized and distorted. These developments call for a renewed reflection on what truth is, which implies asking what is meant by factual evidence, as well as looking into philosophical and theological perspectives on truth. Furthermore, it urges us to reflect on rationality and the plurality of truth claims.

The scene that surrounds Pilate's question in John 18, "What is truth?" is the starting point for *Chad Rimmer's* reflection on truth. By analysing the socio-political context of the situation, Rimmer shows that the prosecution of Jesus as narrated in this biblical passage can be interpreted as a case study for unveiling populist dynamics. The populist tactic of blurring deliberation is questioned, and truth is invoked to work toward justice. Rimmer argues that Jesus embodies political agency, not least from the cross, where the disintegration and exclusion is exposed. Furthermore, when the church gathers a community of faith of diverse people in the face of exclusionary populism, this is a political act.

Olga Navrátilová discusses the chances and limits of a multi-religious society. She underlines that guaranteeing freedom of conscience of an individual person is a key component in plural societies today as it enables the persons to live according to what they hold as truthful and binding. She demonstrates that the claim to universality of reason as put forward by Enlightenment thinking needs to be critically discussed. She takes up John Rawls' idea of overlapping consensus to make the case for the need of different world views to interact with one another and to create shared space. She argues that the experience of truth shows that truth often comes as question; this, for her, is a strong argument to see that reflection on truth opens space for plurality.

From within the Swedish context, *Michael Nausner* identifies a polarization between secularism and religion on the one hand, and a polarization between religions on the other as problematic developments in public discourse that need to be critically analyzed. He pleads for reconnecting the Abrahamic faiths, and refers to reflections of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and of perspectives from the Muslim writer Navid Kermani for working toward mutual understanding. Theologically, the Noah covenant plays a key role in overcoming diverse polarizations.

According to *Joona Toivanen*, it is important to trace the historical legacy of atheist discourse In order to understand public discourse on religion in Estonia today. He calls this a post-Soviet eclipse of religious consciousness. He diagnoses a vacuum in which people are looking for saviours and solutions, as a sense of purpose and the experience of belonging and being loves is eroding. He sees that people cling to fragments of faith and Christian morals, and questions whether this is based on an authentic relationship to God.

Florian Höhne approaches social media communication from a theological perspective, asking whether social media algorithms may be a factor that fosters populism by confirming biases and fears. After all, Google, Facebook, Yahoo and You Tube filter and personalize the information they offer each user based on previous preferences, thus strengthening those preferences. Populist politicians and movements use digital social media actively and effectively, but by way of the "filter bubble" mechanism, these media further populism implicitly, or latently, simply by doing their job, i.e. accurately diagnosing preferences in order to ascribe advertisements most effectively. Finally, Höhne draws on two of George A. Lindbeck's four types of theories of religion in order to find ways to overcome the filter bubble mechanism.

In view of the negative impact of diverse forms of fundamentalism and radicalism in society, especially for disenfranchised groups, *Elisabetta Ribet* calls on theology to provide critique and analysis of current developments in society. Theology needs to shed light on the relationship between truth and reality, between belief and knowledge in order to empower people to discern complex situations. Based on insights from Jacques Ellul she discusses the power of propaganda in a technological society. Ribet makes the case for Christians to more deeply understand what it means to be a witness. The calling to give witness is starkly different from propaganda. Christians are called to ask questions about meaning in life and about what is sacred in life. This critical reflection can help counter paternalistic populist dynamics, and give space to the truth that will set people free.

These papers were presented at the conference "The Churches as Agents for Justice and against Populism" in May 2018 in Berlin (Germany). The insights emerging from the plenary discussions are captured in the "Summary Findings" of the conference included at the end of this volume.