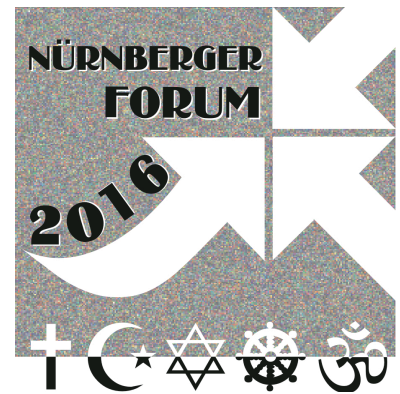


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**Public Theology and Education: explorations of a multi-dimensional relationship**



**ABSTRACT**

Accounts of secularization, decline and marginalization in relation to the public position of religion in Western society have failed to account for the continued vitality and relevance of religion in the global public square – even in Europe, which is often held to be the secular exception to an otherwise religiously pluralist and dynamic world.

However, it is important to challenge simplistic accounts dwelling on the polarization of ‘the West and the rest’ or narratives of ‘desecularization’ in the face of ‘secularization’. It may be more useful to think of the new visibility of religion (not least in Europe) in terms of complexity and multi-dimensionality. There are a number of aspects to this. Firstly, there is the way in which religious organizations, perhaps uniquely, possess the ability to mobilize networks of activism and association that are simultaneously local, national and international. Secondly, there is the capacity of faith-based activism to combine the material resources of social, economic and human capital with the metaphysical visions and values of their own traditions: a merging of the ‘what’ (practical campaigning and activism) with the ‘why’ of beliefs, ethics and attitudes. Thirdly, we are confronted by the often paradoxical and agonistic dimensions of the post-secular age, in which the renewed visibility and currency of faith-based social action continues to be challenged by secularist voices that question the very legitimacy of religious interventions in the public square.

Amidst these multi-dimensional complexities lie further challenges and opportunities for public theology. The realms of local, national and international – concepts of community, the nation-state and trans-national economic and political unions – are shifting like tectonic plates under the seismic forces of global recession and belligerent nationalism. Political and legislative procedures founder under the contradictory forces of identity politics and secularist rhetoric. The post-secular gulf between religious minorities and the growing proportion of those professing ‘no religion’ is increasing – with the danger that they inhabit parallel or separate worlds.

This paper will examine some of these complex and multi-faceted aspects of public life today, and ask how traditions of education and formation – religious and secular – might contribute constructively in repairing our fractured body politic and promoting new models of citizenship and civic engagement around visions of the common good. Education for religious literacy, the schooling of the virtues, notions of preferential solidarity and a spirit of internationalism will all be examined as elements of a new vocabulary of hope and obligation for our fragmented times.

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