Christian Ethics, Public Debate, and Pluralistic Society

Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen
Associate Professor, Systematic Theology and Missiology
MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, Oslo, Norway
jeppe.b.nikolajsen@mf.no

Abstract: In all its diversity, Lutheran ethics places a pronounced emphasis on the universal aspects of theological ethics. This article argues that due to the increasing pluralization of many societies in recent decades, however, it is becoming more and more relevant to develop the particular aspects of theological ethics in the Lutheran tradition. Holding together both the universal and particular aspects of theological ethics constitutes a position of relevance for a pluralistic societal situation. Such a position enables the Christian church to maintain its distinctiveness and, at the same time, to be engaged in dialogue with other positions. In this way, the church will at once stand for a tradition-determined distinctiveness and be engaged in a tradition-transcending dialogue. Consequently, this position is characterized by both distinctiveness and openness.

Keywords: Martin Luther – Lutheran ethics – Christian ethics – public debate – pluralistic society.

Introduction

For several decades a discussion on ethical issues in a pluralistic society has been taking place. Empirical surveys can demonstrate an ethical pluralization in many societies. They also show the reasons why an evident diversity of ethical viewpoints exists and imbues current ethical arguments.[1] Consequently, ethical councils have been established in several countries with the purpose of facilitating ethical conversations and dealing with the complexities of many ethical issues in this situation. These councils contribute to stabilizing situations in the face of increased plurality. In the discussion concerning ethical issues in a pluralistic society, two main positions are visible.

The first position acknowledges the diversity in many of today's societies but emphasizes the significance of stability and social cohesion within them, together with common solutions for pressing societal problems. This position is asserted by many neo-Kantian social theorists, for example, the American political philosopher John Rawls.

Even though Rawls is not preoccupied principally with discussions on ethical issues in modern society, his notion of public debate has clear implications in this regard. Although Rawls' thinking shows a certain development, he consistently promotes a political liberalism, which argues that a society has 'no greater collective goal than the realization of the principles of justice, which enables individuals to pursue their private plans and be

---

1. Some years ago, the religions and ethics of populations in Europe were examined in a major survey called *Religious and Moral Pluralism* (RAMP). In the late 1990s, as part of the survey, the Nordic countries were investigated. The survey made it clear that Nordic societies had undergone a pluralization of ethics in recent decades. See Lars Østnor (ed.), *Etisk pluralisme i Norden* (Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget, 2010). See also, Stefano Allievi, Giuseppe Bove, Fanny Stefania Cappello, Roberto Cipriani, Italo De Sandre, Franco Garelli, Giancarlo Gasperoni and Gustavo Guizzardi, *Religious and Moral Pluralism in Italy* (Padova: CLEUP, 2001).

involved in various associations with the larger framework established by a just constitutional order.'[2] Thus, in a pluralistic society, citizens will hold different moral and religious positions, which prompts Rawls to ask how a just and stable society—in which citizens disagree on, for example, ethics, and religion—can exist.[3] Consequently, Rawls suggests that it is important for citizens to compromise and demonstrate tolerance towards each other. A public debate must take place in which, with the help of shared, public political reason, a common understanding can be found as to what a just society implies. In times past, religion often constituted the professed basis of society, but religion has now been replaced with the principles of constitutional government. Now the ambition is to achieve a political conception of justice, which is supported by a so-called overlapping consensus.[4] Thus, Rawls believes that it is possible to achieve a public conception of justice in spite of disagreements and differences.

This main position is also asserted by another neo-Kantian social theorist, the German political philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Even though Habermas' primary interest is in public debate in a fundamental sense, his understanding of public debate, especially debate centered on ethical issues in modern society, plays a rather dominant role in his writings. He believes that the normative foundation for public debate about pressing societal problems is to be found in the communicative actions (*Handeln*) of humans. Those actions can lead to a constitutional order, where, for example, courts of law constitute a powerful institutionalization of adopted legislation, and by which common decisions concerning ethical problems can be achieved.[5] Inspired by Immanuel Kant, Habermas develops a deontological ethics and puts forward a dialogical principle of universalization. Here moral norms are considered to be valid 'just in case the foreseeable consequences and side-effects of its general observance for the interests and value-orientations of *each individual* could be *jointly* accepted by *all* concerned without coercion.'[6] Thus, his viewpoint is that there must exist a dialogical and public procedure in modern society whereby citizens reach agreements, which protect the interests of all involved participants.

The second main position acknowledges the need for stability and social cohesion in society, while mainly emphasizing the significance of specific traditions and communities within society. This position is asserted by a number of philosophers and theologians who often downplay the universal foundation of ethics and instead emphasize its particular character with a focus on *tradition* and *community*. The British-American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is often mentioned as one of the most important exponents of philosophical communitarianism, even though he himself has reservations about this designation.[7]

---

2. Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 35.

3. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 4.

4. Ibid., p. 10.

5. However, Habermas leaves no room for a so-called *Naturrecht*: '[Das System der Rechte] als positives Recht in Erscheinung treten muß und keine der Willensbildung der Bürger vorgeordnete moralische oder naturrechtliche Geltung für sich reklamieren darf'. See Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), p. 185.

6. Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. by Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), p. 42.

7. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, third edn. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 15.

MacIntyre is critical of the possibility of reaching ethical agreement in many modern societies. He believes that the Enlightenment led to an individualism which resulted in a thorough fragmentation. He believes that the Western world has lost a common point of reference and finds itself in a chaotic situation that is nothing less than a new Dark Age. In this situation, he argues that it is important to recapture an understanding of the significance of what he terms *tradition* with an embedded rationality, where participants exercise certain practices, occupy specific roles and foster certain virtues. Such a tradition can facilitate constructive dialogue, pass on accumulated wisdom, and demonstrate superiority over rival traditions. MacIntyre hopes that the current unfavourable situation will be only temporary, a cultural renewal will take place, and an Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition will help to further common ethical conclusions in modern society.

The American theologian Stanley Hauerwas is an example of a theologian whose thinking has developed into a position with a clear communitarian character. Hauerwas emphasizes the decisive significance of the context of the church for Christian ethics. He views the church as a community of Christians who are called to follow Christ and who allow themselves to be shaped by the biblical narratives and, in this way, embody Christian ethics. He stresses that Christian ethics is ecclesial by its very nature and cannot be applied to society. Loosened from the context of the church, it becomes something else. Thus, it is not the task of the church to contribute to the development of society or to Christianize society; rather, the church must invite humans into the community of the church, where Christian formation takes place.

From its very beginning, the Lutheran tradition has had antinomistic tendencies. Many Lutheran theologians regard these tendencies as a problem, and, consequently, they have contributed to finding ways to overcome this problem. For example, the American theologian Reinhard Hütter argued (before he converted to the Roman Catholic Church) that the early Protestant reformers were not antinomistic, just as he has helped to establish an understanding of the law that can guide Christians in their way of living.[8] Similarly, the American theologian David Yeago argues that the reformers were well aware that the gospel was not just about freedom from condemnation, while criticizing Lutheran theologians who undermine the ethical guidance of Christians.[9]

Lutheran ethics has placed a pronounced emphasis on the universal aspects of theological ethics.[10] Some would even argue that Luther himself did not operate with a specifically Christian form of ethics. For example, the American theologian Thomas D. Pearson believes that he did not.[11] However, in recent years several others have found the strong emphasis on the universal aspects of theological ethics problematic and have therefore contributed to developing the particular aspects of Lutheran ethics. For example, the

---

8. For example, see Reinhard Hütter, 'The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics: Christian Freedom and God's Commandments', in Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme, eds, *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 31-54.

9. For example, see David Yeago, 'The Promise of God and the Desires of our Hearts: Prolegomena to a Lutheran Retrieval of Classical Spiritual Theology', *Lutheran Forum* 30:2 (1996), pp. 25-26.

10. In this article, I understand Christian ethics as reflections on the ethical implications of believing in the Christian faith, whereas the expression the universal aspect of Christian ethics refers to what these ethical implications have in common with other ethical systems. The expression the particular aspect of Christian *ethics* refers to what distinguishes these ethical implications from other ethical systems. Lastly, *theological ethics* refers to general reflections on the ethical implications of Christianity.

11. Thomas D. Pearson, 'Luther's Pragmatic Appropriation of the Natural Law Tradition' in Roland Cap Ehlke, ed, *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), pp. 39–64 at p. 63.

German Lutheran theologian Bernd Wannenwetsch has presented important ethical considerations which are largely ecclesial in nature. The ecclesial nature of Christian ethics should be understood in a specific way. Wannenwetsch states that Christian ethics cannot take its point of departure in the church as an abstract phenomenon; because the church is constituted by practices according to *Confessio Augustana*, Christian ethics must accordingly be developed with these practices as the point of departure. Wannenwetsch's position is that Christian ethics grows out of the liturgical life of the church, as well as out of the way in which the church lives with the biblical scriptures. Christian ethics is manifested in an interplay between church, canon, and worship. In this way, the church is constituted and manifested as a public entity that will unavoidably be confronted with other complex public entities, necessarily creating tensions between different truth claims.[12]

Similarly, in this article it is being suggested that it is problematic to ignore the particular character and aspects of theological ethics. I believe this due to several reasons. First, I find it difficult to reconcile this denial of its particular character with some fundamental aspects of the ethics of the New Testament scriptures. Second, I think this denial is in conflict with some important emphases in the theology of Luther. Third, in my opinion this denial is challenged by the pluralization in many societies, because the distinctiveness of Christian ethics appears to be clearer when it is confronted with other ethical positions. It is not the intention to expand these arguments here. Rather, this article will constructively suggest the potential of developing Lutheran theology by enhancing possible communitarian aspects of the ecclesiology and ethics in this tradition.

The English theologian Nigel Biggar believes that much newer Christian ethics present a false alternative between a theological thick position with a weak public engagement and a theological thin position with a strong public engagement. Biggar wishes to find a third way forward.[13] Similarly, I see a false alternative between a position that emphasizes the universal aspects of Christian ethics on the one hand, and another position that emphasizes the particular aspects of Christian ethics on the other. Therefore, a position whereby the universal aspect of Lutheran ethics is maintained will be presented in this article, while its particular aspects will be developed at the same time. This course will be taken with the purpose of exhibiting the relevance of such a contemporary position for a pluralistic societal situation.

Luther's Theology as a Resource for Lutheran Ethics
Theological emphases in the Lutheran tradition are dependent on historical and cultural circumstances. The Lutheran tradition appears differently throughout history and in various cultural contexts. It is a dynamic tradition which, contains the resources to renew

---

12. See Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Gottesdienst als Lebensform: Ethik für Christenbürger* (Stuttgart and Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1997).

13. Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), p. xvii, see also pp. 107–112. A similar point of view can be found in the introduction to Bernd Wannenwetsch's book *Gottesdienst als Lebensform* (1997). There are two main positions within theological ethics. The first position emphasizes the universal aspects of theological ethics, while the second position emphasizes the particular aspects of theological ethics. The first position represents a strong emphasis on creational theology, while the second position often presents a strong focus on Christology and ecclesiology. Theologians who repudiate or downplay the particular aspects of theological ethics can often be placed within the first position, whereas theologians who reject the natural law can typically be placed within the second position. In previous years, several theologians have queried the false alternative between these two positions. However, just how the integration of these positions is to take place is still being debated.

itself. Thus, Lutheran theologians must draw and reflect on the original intentions, confessional writings, and historical developments of this theological tradition, given that it is confronted with new challenges.[14] When doing this, it is reasonable to take Luther's own writings into consideration in order to root one's endeavors.[15] It is also important, however, for Lutheran theologians to deal critically with their own theological tradition.

A significant challenge confronting the Lutheran tradition is that it evolved in what was to a great extent a religiously monolithic society, whereas many societies today are religiously pluralistic. For example, when the Lutheran Reformation spread to the Northern European countries, many of these quickly became confessional kingdoms, and all citizens (with a few exceptions) were forced to belong to the new Lutheran state churches. With the granting of (in some cases, limited) freedom of religion in the nineteenth century—and with the pluralization of these societies in the past five decades—the Christian church no longer consists of *everybody* in these societies, but only of *somebody*. This transition means that the church is now a distinct group of people within each of these societies. Therefore, an understanding of the church as a distinct social entity in society is much more evident now than at the time of Luther. Nevertheless, even though Luther himself lived within (to a great extent) a religiously monolithic society, his understanding of the church resonates surprisingly well with the understanding of the church as a distinct group of people.

Luther's treatise *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen* is important when seeking to understand his ecclesiology. Here Luther presents some fundamental aspects of his understanding of the church. On several occasions, the text makes clear that, for Luther, the most basic understanding of the church is that it is a people and—in a more specific sense—a holy Christian people.[16] Therefore, Luther can write that there exist 'many people in the world, but Christians are a people with a special call. They are not just named *ecclesia*, church or people, but they are a *sancta*, *catholica*, *christiana*, which means a holy Christian people, who believe in Christ and are therefore called a Christian people.'[17] Such a holy people can also be regarded as a community of believers, a *communio sanctorum*. Luther writes:

---

14. Cf. Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, 'Kirke, øvrighed og pluralistisk samfund', in Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, ed., *Kirke og øvrighed i et pluralistisk samfund* (Fredericia: Kolon, 2017), 117–120.

15. This somewhat reflects an ethical methodology and resembles the considerations of the Lutheran American theologian James Gustafson about how theological ethics evolves to some degree. Gustafson believes that a theological ethics must draw on various sources, which can be contradictory at times. Thus, it is important to consider which sources one would like to draw upon, what significance should be attached to these sources, and how the relevance of these sources should be assessed; for example, see his *Theology and Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 62–68, pp. 251–279; see also *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), chapter five. This can also be described as a form of constructive methodology. For additional helpful resources on theological retrieval, see Darren Sarisky, ed, *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal* (London: T&T Clark, 2017); see also Simeon Zahl, 'Tradition and Its 'Use': The Ethics of Theological Retrieval', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71:4 (2018). Thus, in this article, I am not defending Luther's own position, but I am proposing a contemporary Lutheran position by utilizing a constructive methodology.

16. WA 50,624 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*).

17. WA 50,624 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): 'Nu sind in der welt mancherley Voelcker, Aber die Christen sind ein besonder beruffen Volck und heissen nicht schlecht Ecclesia, Kirchen oder Volck, sondern sancta Catholica Christiana, das ist ein Christlich heilig Volck, das da gleubt an Christum, darumb es ein Christlich Volck heist' (my own translation above; italics added).

> Even though it is possible to find numerous writings and discussions about the word *church*, we will stick to our childhood belief this time, which says: I believe in the holy Christian church and in the communion of the believers. This clearly explains what the church is, namely a communion of believers. In other words, it is a group or a gathering of people who are Christians and holy.[18]

This conviction is also reflected in the Lutheran confession *Confessio Augustana*, in which the church is described as a *congregatio sanctorum*: 'The church is the congregation of the saints, in which the pure gospel is taught and the sacraments are properly administered.'[19] What is often observed in this important statement about the church is the significance of the gospel being rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered. It is noteworthy that practices which demand social interaction constitute the church. The first part of the statement—that the church is a community of believers—is frequently ignored, however. This aspect of the church is fundamental to Luther's ecclesiology, as explained above. This aspect places communitarianism at the center of his ecclesiology.

Von den Konziliis und Kirchen contains a presentation of the seven marks of the church. Luther states that the church has some distinct marks and, as such, can be identified in the world. He points out that the church can be known by the preaching of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, the confession of sins, the inauguration of people in offices of the church, the saying of prayers, and the persecution of the church. When these signs are present, one can accept that a Christian church is present.[20] Thus, the church is a people; Luther also sometimes refers to the church as a group of people; namely, Christians. These Christians meet to pray, confess their sins, perform baptisms, celebrate communion, and preach the gospel. All Christians have been given gifts with which to serve others, and all are called to a priestly ministry, according to Luther; for practical reasons, some specific individuals are chosen to administer the sacraments and preach the gospel, however.

It is striking how Luther holds together church and ethics in his writing *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*. For instance, this connection is evident in his definition of the church as a holy Christian people. Luther believes that the Holy Spirit will bring about a sanctification of the church:

> [The holy Christian people have] the Holy Spirit, who daily sanctifies them, not by the forgiveness of sin alone, which Christ has acquired them … but also

---

18. WA 50,624 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): 'Wolan, hindan gesetzt mancherley schrifften und teilung des worts Kirche, Wollen wir dismal einfeltiglich bey dem Kinderglauben bleiben, der da sagt: Jch gleube eine heilige Christliche Kirche, Gemeinschafft der heiligen, Da deutet der glaube klerlich, was die Kirche sey, nemlich eine gemeinschafft der Heiligen, das ist, ein hauffe oder samlung solcher Leute, die Christen und heilig sind' (my own translation above).

19. CA art. 7 (*Confessio Augustana*): 'Item docent, quod una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit. Est autem ecclesia congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta', (my own translation above); published in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, Vol. I (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930), pp. 59–60.

20. Luther believed that the true church is a hidden church, whereas the church mentioned above is a visible church. I am critical of this differentiation for various reasons. However, I do not believe that it serves the purpose of this article to discuss this important problem here.

by the abrogating of, the sweeping aside, and the killing of sin, by which they are called a holy people.[21]

Luther argues that as a person comes to faith, they receive the Holy Spirit and begin to do good works accordingly. For example, he writes: 'Christian holiness or common holiness is when the Holy Spirit creates faith in Christ in humans, thereby sanctifying them.'[22] This emphasizes that the Christian faith is the premise for, and source of, Christian life, according to Luther.[23] It is possible to argue that, for Luther, Christian ethics is a *Glaubensethik* and thus intended for Christians.[24] Therefore, on several occasions, Luther points out that the Sermon on the Mount is only intended to be an ethical instruction for Christians and to function as such for the Christian church, rather than as ethical guidance for the whole of society.[25] In *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen* Luther gives numerous concrete examples of what it means to live a Christian life. For example, he implies that Christians should not be drunk, stubborn, revengeful, mendacious, materialistic, or proud; instead, they should be friendly, gentle, humble, loving, patient, and peaceful.[26] Nevertheless, it is possible to find many instances of pagans who act in the same way as Christians, as well as pagans who appear even more holy than Christians, according to Luther.[27] With special reference to *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*, I have highlighted aspects of Luther's theology which can help to further an understanding of the Christian church as a distinct people, with distinct marks, and comprising a *locus* for Christian ethics. Luther's understanding of the church as a holy Christian people also support an ecclesiology and ethics with a communitarian character.

This interpretation also resonates with statements in *Von weltlicher Oberkeit*, in which Luther conceives of the church as a group of people who are called to embody Christian ethics. Thus, he writes: 'All humans can be divided into two groups: One group which belongs to the kingdom of God and one group which belongs to the kingdom of the world. The first group is all who have a real faith and are in and under Christ.'[28] Consequently, the other group consists of all of those who do not belong to Christ. In the same writing Luther also states that there are two groups of humans: 'the one in the Kingdom of God under Christ, and the other in the kingdom of the world under the worldly government.'[29] He states that each group has a law and that one must therefore operate with 'two kinds

---

21. WA 50,624 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): '[darumb es ein Christlich Volck heist, und] hat den Heiligen Geist, der sie teglich heiligt, nicht allein durch die vergebung der sunden, so Christus jnen erworben hat (wie die Antinomer nerren), sondern auch durch abthun, ausfegen und toedten der sunden, davon sie heissen ein heilig Volck' (my own translation above).

22. WA 50,626 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): 'Denn Christliche heiligkeit oder gemeiner Christenheit heiligkeit ist die, Wenn der heilige Geist den Leuten glauben gibt an Christo und sie dadurch heiliget', (my own translation above).

23. Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luther* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1975), pp. 11–23.

24. To be clear, Luther never uses the term *Glaubensethik*.

25. For example, see WA 11,252 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*): '[Eigentlich sagt ers nur] seinen lieben Christen. Die nehmens auch alleine an und tun auch also … Wenn nun alle Welt Christen wäre, so gingen sie alle diese Wort an und sie tät also. Nun sie aber Unchristen ist, gehen sie die Wort nichts an, und sie tut auch nicht also.'

26. WA 50,194.223 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*).

27. WA 50,223 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*).

28. WA 11,249 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*): 'Hie muessen wyr alle menschen teylen ynn zwey teyll: die ersten zum reych Gottis, die andern zum reych der welt. Die zum reych Gottis gehoeren, das sind alle recht glewbigen ynn Christo unnd unter Christo" (my own translation above).

29. WA 11,262 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*): 'der eyns ynn Gottis reych unter Christo, das ander ynn der welt reych unter der uberkeyt ist' (my own translation above).

of laws, because each kingdom needs to have its own law, because without a law no kingdom or any form of governance will endure'.[30] This means that there are two forms of governance, each with its own law in the world. The one governance is Christian, concerns Christians, and is designed to create pious Christians and regulate their life in the world. The other governance is worldly, concerns all people, and is designed to create peace, order, and justice in the world. Thus, both forms of governance are necessary in the world, but they are also different because each has its own nature and purpose.[31] These aspects of Luther's theology also support an ecclesiology and ethics with a communitarian character.

It is central to Luther's theology, however, that he not only operates with an ethics founded on the biblical scriptures, passed on in the Christian tradition, and embodied by the Christian church: he also clearly operates with an ethical foundation which is given with the creation of the world and open to all. For example, Luther writes:

> Since all nations share these common elements of knowledge [of the principles of justice] ... I know in my heart that I certainly owe this to God, not because the Decalogue was written and handed down to us, but because we knew and took these laws with us when we entered the world.[32]

Moreover, Luther writes that a natural law exists that is 'inscribed and engraved in the minds of all humans from the foundation of the world.'[33] It is open to human reason and conscience. Luther has great confidence in the human ability of ethical discernment. For example, he writes that humans can find and feel the natural law within themselves.[34] Luther's great confidence in the human capacity for ethical discernment does not correspond very well with the experience of achieving ethical agreement today. It is also possible, however, to find examples where Luther expresses the view that sin limits the recognition of the natural law:

> For although all humans have a certain natural knowledge implanted in their souls, by which they naturally know that what they want to have done to themselves should be done to others (this sentiment and others like it, which we call the law of nature, are the foundation of human law and of all good works), nevertheless, *human reason is so corrupt and blind through the devil's wickedness that it does not understand the knowledge with which it is born.*[35]

---

30. WA 11,262 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*): 'zweyerley gesetz haben. Denn eyn iglich reych muß seyne gesetz unnd rechte haben, unnd on gesetz keyn reych noch regiment bestehen kan' (my own translation above).

31. Nikolajsen, 'Kirke, øvrighed og pluralistisk samfund', 130.

32. WA 39I,540 (*Die dritte Disputation gegen die Antinomer*): '[Q]uia hae notitiae communes erant omnibus gentibus … sentio in corde, me certe hoc debere Deo, non quia traditus et scriptus decalogus sit nobis, sed quod scimus vel leges has nobiscum in mundum attulimus' (my own translation above).

33. WA 39I,478 (*Die dritte Disputation gegen die Antinomer*): 'inscriptus et insculptus mentibus omnium hominum a condito mundo' (my own translation above).

34. WA 32,494; see also 495–496 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5*–7); see also WA 16,363–375 (*Predigten über Ex 19*).

35. WA 40II,66 (*Galatas commentarius*): 'Tametsi enim omnes homines notitiam quandam naturalem habeant, animus ipsorum insitam, qua naturaliter sentiunt alteri faciendum esse, quod quis velit sibi fieri (quae sententia et similes, quas iegem naturae vocamus, sunt fundamentum humani juris et omnium bonorum operum), *tamen adeo corrupta et caeca est vitio diaboli humana ratio, ut illam cognitionem secum natam non intelligat*' (my own translation above; italics added); see also WA 16,447 (*Predigten über Ex*

It is noteworthy that Luther envisages dramatic consequences of the reality of sin for his soteriology, while this is not always the case when it comes to his ethics. Luther should more consistently have depicted the clear consequences of his strong hamartiology for his understanding of ethical discernment.[36] Doing so would have further clarified the notion that, because of the reality of sin, natural law is not fully accessible to humans. This inaccessibility could then be used to explain why it is often so difficult to find common ethical ground concerning the pressing issues of today. It also makes the reason for operating with a Christian ethics obvious, as this ethics is informed not just by experience, reason, and conscience, but also by biblical scriptures and Christian tradition, and is embodied by the Christian church.

The position outlined above unites the universal and particular aspects of theological ethics. On the one hand, it contains an understanding of theological ethics as being accessible through, for example, human conscience, dialogue, and reason. On the other hand, it commands that theological ethics is rooted in the biblical scriptures, passed on in the Christian tradition, and embodied by the Christian church. Holding these two aspects together has great significance for the possibilities of dialogue between Christian ethics and other ethical positions in a pluralistic society. What might be some of the consequences of the outlined position for the engagement of the church in public debate concerning ethical issues in a pluralistic society?

Lutheran Ethics, Public Debate, and Pluralistic Society
It is an empirical fact that the church forms a distinct social entity in a (religiously) pluralistic society. It has also been stated that resources within the Lutheran tradition exist that can contribute to the development of an ecclesiology with a communitarian character, without presupposing a form of society that no longer exists. In this way, the church is understood as a distinct people, a people living among other people. It is a community of believers who are united by their faith in Christ. Such a distinct people can be identified by some distinct marks. It can be known by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. This people will always be a persecuted people.

For Luther, the church is not only a Christian people, but also a holy Christian people. Accordingly, a holy Christian life cannot exist without Christian faith. This means that the Christian faith is a precondition for, and source of, a Christian life. The Holy Spirit is given to the church in order to sanctify this people. According to Luther, a holy Christian life cannot happen without the Holy Spirit. The church is a community of people who are called to follow Christ and allow themselves to be shaped by the biblical scriptures, thus embodying Christian ethics. Emphasizing the communitarian aspects of ecclesiology and ethics should not be understood as overlooking human beings as individuals; rather, it

---

20); 17II,91.102 (*Am Vierden sontag nach Ephiphanie*); 18,80-81 (*Wider die himmlischen Propheten*); 40II,66-67.71 (*Galatas commentaries*); therefore, Luther also believes that the Decalogue was given to reawake the natural law.

36. Even though Philipp Melanchthon can portray himself as rather optimistic about the capacity for human ethical discernment, he also shows a clear understanding of sin's negative significance for ethical discernment. For example, he believes that, ideally, it should be possible to arrange society in accordance with the natural law with the help of human reason; but, as he has never seen examples of this in practice, he does not know if this is possible, since human reason is so blinded by sin; see CR 21,116. He further states that human reason is both weakened and darkened; therefore, he believes that the natural law is distorted and constantly misunderstood; see CR 24,21.400–401; Melanchthon also believes that sin darkens the natural knowledge about the will of God; see CR 21,399.401; 22,254.257-258.

expresses a recognition of the fact that human lives are woven into each other and that individuals are part of social contexts, and an important context of this kind for Christians is the church. It is difficult to see how one can develop a coherent ecclesiology whilst excluding communitarian perspectives in one way or another. In the New Testament scriptures, ecclesiology and ethics clearly have a communitarian character.[37]

Both the social and the historical aspects of the life of the church exist in the world. It is inevitable to operate with the notion of tradition if one is to understand the aforementioned aspect. The American Lutheran theologian Ronald F. Thiemann thus writes:

> The Christian tradition is comprised of those voices of the past and present that debate the true nature of the Christian faith. Theology is not intended to be the arbiter among such voices, but the vehicle by which the arguments are voiced. Theologians carry on the conversation, not from a privileged position above tradition, but from within the polyphony of voices that constitute the Christian community.[38]

Likewise, MacIntyre is preoccupied with understanding traditions as accommodating rational dialogue. Therefore, his definition of the concept of tradition is:

> A living tradition then is a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part.[39]

Here individuals are understood as part of, and influenced by, traditions, where a dialogue on ethics is taking place. Within such traditions, there is a common framework for dialogue. This means that (decisive) agreement can be achieved. This agreement is often reached only by internal and external conflicts, however, which also explains why a larger tradition can split up into smaller traditions. MacIntyre describes this situation as follows:

---

37. Concerning communitarian ecclesiology, see: community with Christ (1 Cor. 1:9); community with the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16); community with the Spirit (2 Cor. 9:13); community with the gospel (Phil. 1:5); community of sharing the suffering of Christ (Phil. 3:10); community with others in the local congregations (1 John 1:3.6–7); community with other congregations (2 Cor. 8:4); community implying mutual love (Jn 13:34–35); a sharing of joy and sorrow (1 Cor. 12:26); and a sharing of financial resources (Rom. 15:26). Concerning communitarian ethics, see: Love each other (Jn 13:34–35); live in peace with each other (Mk 9:50; 1 Thess. 5:13); do not judge each other (Rom. 14:13); guide each other (Rom. 15:14); wait on each other (1 Cor 11:33); take care of each other (1 Cor. 12:25); serve each other (Gal. 5:13); do not envy each other (Gal. 5:26); bear with one another (Eph. 4:2); speak the truth with each other (Eph. 4:25); be good to each other (Eph. 4:32; 1 Thess. 5:15); be subordinate to each other (Eph. 5:21); do not lie to each other (Col. 3:9); forgive each other (Col. 3:13); teach each other (Kol 3:16); comfort each other (1 Thess. 4:18; 5:11); do not speak ill of each other (James 4:11); confess our sins to each other (James 5:16); be hospitable towards each other (1 Pet. 4:9); be humble towards each other (1 Pet. 5:5); and have community with each other in the light (1 Joh 1:7). It is important to note that the communitarianism indicated in this article is a theological communitarianism, which differs—often in rather profound ways—from philosophical and political versions of communitarianism.

38. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 135.

39. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 222.

A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress tradition is constituted. Such internal debates may on occasion destroy what had been the basis of common fundamental agreement, so that either a tradition divides into two or more warring components, whose adherents are transformed into external critics of each other's positions, or else the tradition loses all coherence and fails to survive.[40]

It is significant that MacIntyre never relates this understanding of the concept of tradition to the Christian church as the embodiment of the Christian tradition in an exhaustive way, even though this would be highly natural. In the Christian tradition, a rational conversation about this tradition's nature, limits, implications, and continued development is taking place. Moreover, hymns, prayers, sermons, rituals, and so forth express an understanding of the good life within this tradition. Christians are thus part of a tradition wherein they interact with others in coordinated, common activities. Further, Christians engage in interpretative processes, employ specific conceptual categories, and reflect on the ethical implications of their faith. Thus, there are numerous ethical ideas imbedded in the Christian tradition, and these ideas affect the determination of the current configuration of Christian ethics. Therefore, discussions concerning Christian ethics are determined by the Christian tradition, even though they may also be impacted by many other factors. Moreover, by being part of such a tradition, individual Christians can overcome their own blind spots and limited knowledge.

The Christian tradition should not be understood simply as a reservoir of sources which can add meaning to human existence, however. As is evident from Luther's writings concerning the two regiments, the Christian tradition constitutes a meaningful understanding of the whole of reality, where the church is not primarily understood on societal premises, but where society and government are understood on theological premises and from a theological perspective. When the church allows its distinctiveness to constitute the basis for its engagement in, and openness to, society, it can contribute distinctively to a pluralistic society, for example, with a distinct all-encompassing understanding of reality. It has a tradition-determined distinctiveness to offer, which is rooted in the biblical scriptures and passed on in the Christian tradition. Thus, it is difficult to accuse the Christian church of having nothing else to say beyond what atheists could just as well say, as the American philosopher Jeffrey Stout has done.[41]

The position indicated in this article holds that the church should not only stand for a tradition-determined distinctiveness; it should also take part in a tradition-transcending dialogue. This strategy is due to humans, in all their diversity, being created by God and live in world created by God. Therefore, one must maintain faith in the possibility of constructive dialogue in the midst of difference and diversity. Thus, this diversity cannot be so profound that dialogue must be given up. Because Christians believe that humans are created by God and live in a world created by God, Christians also believe that there

---

40. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 12.
41. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1990), p. 164, see also p. 124.

exists a general foundation for public debate through human conscience, dialogue, and reason. Thus, within human existence there are some fundamental premises for ethical reflections, even though some fixed conclusions about these ethical reflections may be absent. When citizens take part in public debate about pressing societal problems in modern democratic societies, it can be claimed that there is a common foundation for public debate consisting of elements such as dialogue, conscience, experience, language, and reason. This means that there are possibilities for conversations across different traditions and positions. By the use of common language, common experience, and with the presentation of reasonable arguments there can be dialogue between different viewpoints concerning ethical issues in a pluralistic society.[42] This position is strong because it can transcend itself by referring to humans as being created by God and living in world created by God and, in turn, prevent the Christian tradition from becoming a closed replica of itself.

This position maintains, on the one hand, the notion of a Christian tradition in which accumulated wisdom is passed on. On the other hand, it does not give up on the notion of a natural law and maintains the possibility of a common foundation for public debate. When both the universal and particular aspects of theological ethics are held together in this way, the Christian tradition can accommodate a distinctiveness and, at the same time, engage in a dialogue across traditions and positions in a pluralistic society. Thus, the position maintains both distinctiveness and openness, leading to a situation in which the church is woven into society, sometimes playing an important role in society, while at the same time appearing as an embodiment of the Christian tradition, which cannot stand for anything. In a pluralistic society, the church will be different from society in various ways. When the church allows its distinctiveness to constitute the basis for its engagement in, its openness towards, and its responsibility for society, it will create significant potential for itself to contribute distinctively to society.[43] In this way, the church will be characterized by both tradition-determined distinctiveness and tradition-transcending dialogue.

When the church manifests the former, it will inevitably face resistance. Nevertheless, Stout emphasizes the value of the church making its viewpoints known to society, for example, in the contribution made by religious people to public debate. He writes:

> If they are discouraged from speaking up in this way, we will remain ignorant of the real reasons that many of our fellow citizens have for reaching some of the ethical and political conclusions they do. We will also deprive them of the central democratic good of expressing themselves to the rest of us on matters about which they care deeply. If they do not have this opportunity, we will lose the chance to learn from, and to critically examine, what they say.[44]

Stout refers to speeches made by religious people such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, which are often considered as remarkable contributions to public political culture and as nothing less than paradigms of discursive excellence.[45] Even though Stout is not religious himself, he nevertheless insists that people who are religious—among them Christians—should make the public familiar with their arguments and viewpoints. He writes: 'Democracy would not have been better served, it seems to me, if these reasons

---

42. Nikolajsen, 'Kirke, øvrighed og pluralistisk samfund', 133.
43. Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, *Kirkens rolle i et pluralistisk samfund* (Fredericia: Kolon, 2017), 26.
44. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 64.
45. Ibid., p. 70.

had been circulated only behind the closed doors of churches and religiously affiliated schools, where they would be somewhat less likely to face skeptical objections.'[46] Stout's appreciation of the contribution of religious people to society must be valued, just as it makes good sense when Stout states that religious people must also be allowed to be heard in a democratic society. This concession must not be the primary incentive for the Christian church when making its viewpoint heard in society, however. If the distinctiveness of the church is to constitute its engagement in, and openness to, society, then the primary incentive must not be to secure democratic culture in society; rather, this distinctiveness must be understood in theological terms.[47]

In the Lutheran tradition, resources are available to illustrate this matter. For example, the Lutheran doctrine of the two regiments—in some of its versions at least—can guide the engagement of the church in discussions on ethical issues in society. According to this teaching, the worldly regiment reflects that God has created the world, and that its purpose is to promote peace, order, and justice in the world; the spiritual regiment reflects God's acts of salvation, which has the purpose of creating pious Christians.[48] The purpose of the worldly regiment corresponds to the first use of the law, which concerns society, while the purpose of the spiritual regiment corresponds to the third use of the law, which concerns the church. Consequently, Christian ethics should not be applied to society because this ethics presupposes Christian faith, which cannot always be presupposed in society.

This line of contention does not mean that the church should withdraw from responding to ethical issues in society. There is still the first use of the law in the Lutheran tradition. Therefore, there can be good reasons for the church to advocate the protection of creation or to speak up against evil. It is worth noting that Luther was deeply involved in the upheaval in both church and society of his time. He dealt with property rights, fought against poverty, criticized whorehouses, commented on the regulation of interest rates, reflected on legal philosophy, discussed tax obligations, engaged himself in the reforms of universities, and much more. Moreover, he recommended that the church discuss a number of concrete political problems at a church council.

There are newer, useful resources that can be employed when considering how the Christian church can take part in public debate. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe has published *Theology of Diaspora*, for instance, which deals with the situation of the Protestant churches in a pluralist Europe and presents a number of concrete suggestions as to how this can take place. The document adds that churches can present public statements, undertake symbolic actions (such as ringing church bells as an act of protest), arrange cultural activities (such as art exhibitions on pressing issues up for debate), develop educational programs focusing on ethical questions, make use of their own media channels to promote theological perspectives, commit to ethical principles in their own practices, and, finally, arrange meetings and panel debates.[49]

---

46. Ibid., p. 77.

47. Nigel Biggar seems to agree: 'It is important that Christian ethics maintains its theological narrative integrity. Self-respect requires it; for if Christian ethics were to cut itself adrift from its theological moorings, then it would no longer be itself and would have to change its name. Social responsibility also requires it; for theological premises will sometimes press the Christian ethics to say something important that no one else is saying.' See Biggar, *Behaving in Public*, p. 25.

48. WA 11,251-252 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*).

49. Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, *Theology of Diaspora: CPCE Study Document to Define the Situation of Protestant Churches in a Pluralist Europe* (Vienna: CPCE, 2018), pp. 72–73. Furthermore, the Lutheran World Federation has published *The Church in the Public Sphere*, which states that

Conclusion

This article has referred to the way in which the Lutheran tradition places a pronounced emphasis on the universal aspects of theological ethics. It has also argued that the development of the particular aspects of theological ethics has become more and more relevant due to the recent pluralization of many societies. The article suggests a contemporary Lutheran position in which the universal and particular aspects of Christian ethics are held together, arguing that, on the one hand, such a position represents a tradition-determined distinctiveness, while, on the other hand, it allows for participation in tradition-transcending dialogue. The relevance of this position to a pluralistic societal situation is also explained, as it maintains that Christian ethics should not be applied to society, since it presupposes Christian faith, which cannot be presupposed in a pluralistic society. Such a position does not mean that the church should hold back from taking part in the discussion of ethical problems in the public sphere, because the Christian church can, with good reason, call for the protection of creation and speak up against evil. Finally, the discussion points to some concrete suggestions as to how the Christian church could participate in the public debate.[50]