

# Educating religiously toward a public spirituality

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Boston College

The Graduate School of Arts and Science

Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry

**EDUCATING RELIGIOUSLY TOWARD A PUBLIC SPIRITUALITY**

a dissertation

by

DANIEL O'CONNELL

submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

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# **Educating Religiously Toward a Public Spirituality**

a dissertation by Daniel O'Connell

Director: Thomas H. Groome, PhD

## **ABSTRACT**

The question at the heart of this dissertation is: “How can Christian religious education help people know the value and importance of a healthy public/common life and further their interest and ability to participate in the public sphere toward the common good?”

Care for our public lives must be a part of our spirituality. It is not enough to know about the importance of the public realm to our well-being, rather, this concern must be part of what matters to us, a dimension of our affect and desire, something we want and care about. Hence the coupling of ‘public’ with ‘spirituality.’ A public spirituality is something that helps us see beyond the interpersonal dimension of life and recognize the wider public context for these relationships. It appreciates the importance of public life, civil society, and the public sphere. It is grounded in the public dimension of Catholic faith and connected to rich sources of wisdom from Christian tradition. This spirituality draws the person or community into the public sphere to participate in sustained, persuasive, respectful, and critical conversations about issues that matter to them. This dissertation argues that the task of religious education is to educate for such a spirituality and using the work of Thomas H. Groome, it outlines a particular way that in which this can happen.

Chapter 1 demonstrates the importance of ‘the public’ to our well-being, looking closely at the role of civil society, the public sphere, and secularization. Chapter 2 articulates the public dimension of Catholic faith, with attention to the themes of participation, the common good, and how theology is done in public. Chapter 3 lays the foundation for a public spirituality, focusing on the Trinity, the challenge of the stranger, the mystical-transformational dimension of Christian spirituality, and Christianity as a way of seeing. Chapter 4 offers illustrations of public spirituality at work in three organizations: the Conference of Religious of Ireland Justice, Theos, U.K., and the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. Finally, Chapter 5, proposes a shared Christian praxis approach to Christian religious education as a model to nurture and nourish a public spirituality.

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Amalee  
mo cuishle

# CHAPTER I

## PUBLIC LIFE

### *Introduction*

This chapter sets the context for the rest of the dissertation. In order to educate for a public spirituality, it is important to understand and appreciate the importance of public life to human well-being. The chapter explores some of the meanings carried by the word public and the growing tendency for people to favor the private over the public dimension of their lives. It describes how the public is the place where strangers meet on a constant basis, interacting with one another in countless ways, often in an unconscious manner. It reflects on the value of such places for society. It then moves from this wide perspective about the public in general to a particular dimension of the public called civil society. The importance of civil society to the well-being of the person, the overall cohesion of society and its relationship to the state and market are all investigated. The final part of the chapter focuses on the public sphere, a particular dimension of civil society. This is the forum that contributes to the creation and shaping of public opinion and ideas in society. Those shaped by a public spirituality need to understand and participate in such a forum.

## 1. *Public Life*

### 1.A Understanding the 'public'

There are many meanings given to the word 'public'. At a very basic level, the public refers to all the people in a society. It makes sense to say something like: 'In the eyes of the public, she did the right thing.' But it can also refer to distinct groups of people within a society who share a common interest. We can have the theatre going public, the Cosmo reading public, or the football public. This latter understanding is created when publics form themselves around what they are interested in, perhaps objects, people, or movements.<sup>1</sup> Finally, when used as an adjective, public describes openness and accessibility. A public school is there for all, a public park can be shared by everyone and a public good, such as a clean environment, is in the common interest.

Just as a public can refer to everyone, a particular interest group, or be used as an adjective, it is important to note that there are different *sorts* of publics. Alastair Hannay, in *On the Public*, makes this point tellingly when he asks "Did Roman citizens form a public? Was there ever an Iraqi public? What about present day China?"<sup>2</sup> If someone were to answer 'yes' to any of these questions, then we need to wonder if the use of the word public in these cases has the same meaning as when we refer to the public in America or Ireland? And if not, what is the difference?

Being a public is more than having freedom to move about in public spaces as one wishes, or to gather as an audience around a common interest. Both of these could have been enjoyed by the Romans. Rather, an essential element "includes the freedom to

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 3 in Alastair Hannay, *On the Public* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

influence public debate.”<sup>3</sup> The opportunity to participate in matters of common concern goes to the heart of a democratic society. A healthy public life helps political institutions to become accountable.<sup>4</sup> It pre-exists political life and allows people to gather casually in a myriad of places throughout society, where they form common lives, where they reflect and feel and debate and participate in what matters to them. This is essential if politics is not to be a ‘theatre of illusion’, with the real work going on backstage. “Public life creates community which both establishes legitimate government and holds it accountable to what the people want.”<sup>5</sup> This is in keeping with the Latin meaning of the word public - *publius*, the people. It is the realm governed by the people and the source of the *republic* – *Res Publica* – ‘things of the public.’<sup>6</sup>

## 1.B Public and Private

I return now to the idea of the public as all the people we meet in our daily lives, those we know but most of all, those we don’t know. Parker Palmer in *The Company of Strangers* describes it very well when he says that:

The word ‘public’ as I understand it contains a vision of our oneness, our unity, our interdependence upon one another. Despite the fact that we are strangers to one another—and will stay stranger for the most part—we occupy a common space, share common resources, have common opportunities, and must somehow learn to live together. To acknowledge that one is a member of the public is to recognize that we are members of one another.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>4</sup> See Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>6</sup> Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, 1st ed. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1999), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, 19.

This vision must battle with the turn to the ‘private’ that is so popular today. When I use the word private in this dissertation, I refer to an understanding of that realm of our lives where we think of ourselves as self-sufficient individuals, who seek, as far as possible, to be in relationships that are chosen and intentional, with responsibility for our actions limited to our immediate families, friends, and sometimes work colleagues. The private is the realm that protects us from unwanted interference by others – such as those who are poor, our neighbors, the government, organizations or political parties. Part of this turn is quite understandable. Often what is public is of a poorer quality to what is private. There are many negative connotations associated with public schools, parks, health-care, amenities, housing, and transport. In many cases they are not up to the same standard as their private counterparts. Public resources are often provided by the government for those who cannot afford to access the benefits of the private sector.<sup>8</sup> And those who can access resources privately expect the government to protect their “right to be left alone.”<sup>9</sup> The private today has normative status. In the midst of strangers, complexity, and ambiguity in the world, people understandably seek refuge and security in the private realm of life.

There is a value to the private realm. It values intimacy, trust, comfort and safety, things not readily available in the public. But the private was not always understood this way. Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* outlines how in Greek and Roman times, the private realm was concerned with the necessities of life—individual survival and continuity of the species—and not considered of any great value at all. To be private literally meant to be deprived of something essential in what it meant to be human. She

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<sup>8</sup> See Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 48.



says “A man who lives only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human.”<sup>10</sup> Participation in the *polis* for the Greeks and the *res publica* for the Romans was seen as their way of counting in this life and being remembered long into the future. Mastering their private lives gave them the opportunity to work towards the good life in the political arena. Being able to contribute to the public (welfare) was what mattered and what was highly valued in their day.

Today, it is the other way around. Having a successful, satisfying, and secure private life is of great importance. The move to the private realm is highly valued and much sought after. It is associated with freedom, individuality, and the place where you can really be yourself. Much of the thinking today regarding the public and private is oppositional. Michael Warner, in *Publics and Counterpublics*, has laid this out clearly.

<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
open to everyone	restricted to some
accessible for money	closed to even those who can pay
state-related, public sector	non state, belonging to civil society, private sector
political	non political
official	non official
common	special
impersonal	personal
national or popular	group, class, or locale
international or universal	particular or finite
in physical view of others	concealed
outside the home	domestic
circulated in print	circulated orally
or electronic media	or in manuscript
known widely	known to initiates
acknowledged and explicit	tacit and implicit <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second edition ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 38.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 100.

However, the oppositional approach to what is public and what is private does not serve us well, for it is rarely a question of ‘either or’. A private conversation can take place in a public place; a kitchen can hold a public meeting; a radio can bring a public discussion into a private bedroom; books can be published privately; a public theatre can be a private enterprise; a private house can be used for a public purpose and a private life can be discussed publicly.<sup>12</sup> It is important to appreciate the vital link between these two realities and how they influence one another.

### **1.B.1 the contribution of feminism**

The separation of the public and private dimension of life was an issue that feminists engaged with in a systematic and sustained manner from the 1960s onwards. They sought to make the case for the public significance of private life. Issues such as gender roles, sexuality, home and family were all shown to be intimately connected to the public domain. For many women the private realm compounded the experience of oppression. They argued that what goes on in private should not necessarily remain private, sometimes it ought to be made public and where appropriate, the state needs to be involved. On issues such as equity, affirmative action, abortion, birth control, rape, adoption, divorce and child support, palimony, sexual harassment, welfare, health care, segregated education, domestic violence and so on, feminism encouraged an activist state to assert the public relevance of private life. They believed that “the social arrangements structuring private life, domestic households, intimacy, gender, and sexuality are neither neutral nor immutable, that they can be seen as relations of power and subject to

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<sup>12</sup> See Ibid., 27, 30.

transformation.”<sup>13</sup> However, there were those that felt that the home was no place for state involvement. The home was the very realm of private freedom and off limits to politics; this raises the important issue of how far the state ought to be involved in the private domain.

### **1.B.2 finding a balance between the public and private**

Despite the gains by feminists and others to illustrate the intimate connections between the private and public dimensions of life and how a healthy private life depends on a healthy public life, there is still a strong tendency for many to live much of their lives in the private realm. Arendt was acutely aware of this danger. She warned against people gathering together in the private realm in such a way that limits their perspective of and participation in the world. The danger of the private realm was of being “deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and heard by them.”<sup>14</sup> The public offers the possibility of seeing and hearing in all sorts of new ways. The people we meet in the public come from different locations and have different perspectives on what we see and understand. According to Arendt, they offer a greater opportunity for worldly reality to truly and reliably appear to us. She warns that

[t]o live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that come from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an ‘objective’ relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

An appreciation of how we are all connected, hearkening back to Palmer's view of our interdependence, is essential but we also need to be open to other perspectives, insights and ways of living in the world. This is not an easy thing to do, such openness can be difficult to realize; it might mean change in how we see the world and change in how we ought to be in the world. A healthy private life is important for this to take place; we need to feel we are safe in some place, secure and at home in some place. Arendt supports such a view, warning against too much time being spent in public, in the presence of others, for life will become shallow.<sup>16</sup> She appreciates the need for places that are 'hidden' from the light of publicity if there is to be depth to our lives. We need good private lives so that we can be in public in ways that allow for an openness and appreciation of others and what they have to offer.

This balancing of both the public and private dimensions of our lives goes on constantly. There is a public/private nexus at work in our families and communities, in our relationship with the market and the state, and in our participation in society at large. Each of us is influenced by this relationship and our personhood is shaped by it. Today this nexus is heavily weighted toward the private dimension of our lives and does not appreciate the value of the public per se. But we must also be aware that the private is hosted by and in the public. A poor public life will negatively impact on the quality of one's private life. Take the example of security. If the public areas in our neighborhood become unsafe, then those private citizens who can afford it will insulate themselves as best they can from it, installing more security and building higher walls. And for those who cannot afford this sort of response, they must be as careful as they can, vigilant to prevent crime and attack. Regardless of where one is located on the socio-economic

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 71.

scale, all private citizens are affected by a change in public safety. This is an insight that has long been a part of the Catholic social thought on the common good and will be explored in the next chapter.

### **1.B.3 experiencing ourselves a public**

It is not enough, however, just to understand the public at an intellectual level and its relationship with private life. We need to experience ourselves as a public, members of the public, woven in webs of relationship with one another. In such a life “strangers come into daily contact with one another, grow accustomed to one another, learn to solve problems which the common life poses, enrich and expand each other’s lives.”<sup>17</sup> Our interest here is not in the static notion of the public but in the dynamic process of a public life. This public process can bring us out of ourselves and help us realize our interdependence and connectedness. However, as our appreciation for the public dimension of life dwindles, there is a danger that we might come to think of the public as an ‘empty abstraction’ or as a “sinister, anonymous crowd who’s potential for violence fills us with fear.”<sup>18</sup> As we become more private, more distant from public life, we pay a terrible price. According to Palmer. “We lose our sense of relatedness to those strangers with whom we must share the earth; we lose our sense of comfort and at-homeness in the world.”<sup>19</sup> Palmer says that a basic and vital human experience is our interaction with strangers and that this is the heart of public life.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

## 1.C World of Strangers

In *The Public Realm*, Lynn Lofland points out that up to recently, the interaction between and among strangers, the dynamic that characterizes public life, was thought to be uninteresting, unimportant, and irrelevant at first glance.<sup>21</sup> Much of what happens in the public seems to be unreflective and immediate. Encounters on buses, streets, cafes, subways, theatres, and sidewalks all seem incidental, without any common purpose or shared values behind them. Lofland disagrees with this view and makes a persuasive case that public life, that interaction among strangers—people who are unknown to one another biologically and culturally—have value and are socially significant.<sup>22</sup> Rather than thinking of public life as meaningless, in actual fact people pay careful attention to “principles of stranger interaction.”<sup>23</sup>

### 1.C.1 norms for acting in public

There are norms for acting in public. Activities such as getting from one side of the street to the other, finding a seat at a bar, restaurant or bus, avoiding unwanted attention, getting into a line, driving in Boston or Bangkok, going to help a stranger on the sidewalk, getting into a conversation with a stranger in a bar are all shaped by one or more of the following five principles.

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<sup>21</sup> See Lyn H. Lofland, *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory* (Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998), xviii.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 27.

*Cooperative Motility*: refers to the way that strangers constantly cooperate with one another to negotiate their way in and through the public – holding doors open, walking in crowds, driving on streets, getting on buses and trains, forming lines.

*Civil Inattention*: is concerned about giving others just enough recognition but not too much so that they do not become uncomfortable. It makes possible copresence without becoming overly involved with someone else; it is an expression of ‘ritual regard.’

*Audience Role Prominence*: a public space is both a stage and a theatre, and public life has both actors and audiences, who may move between identities depending on the context. Examples of this principle are seen in buskers, parades, and protests.

*Restrained Helpfulness*: is concerned with specific and very ordinary requests for help, which take place all the time in public life. ‘What time is it please?’ is answered in a very straightforward manner. ‘Where is the bus station?’ is answered with directions.

*Civility toward Diversity*: suggests that when people meet others who they find ‘personally offensive’, they will act in a civil manner towards them. This is not about being nice or pleasant, rather about even-handedness. Lofland acknowledges that this principle more than likely emerges from indifference to diversity rather than an appreciation of it.<sup>24</sup>

All of these principles have exceptions to them and are regularly interwoven. The principles, often in an unconscious and unreflective way, help people negotiate being in the public. They can help people find some privacy in public places, reach out or not to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 29-33.

others when they need help,<sup>25</sup> find areas of sociability in public life (this happens when strangers meet at a football game or in a pub or café or when there is a triangulation: something external provides a link between strangers, it could be a child, walking the dog or a shared emergency)<sup>26</sup> and finally, the principles themselves are “instruments for communicating equality” between people.<sup>27</sup>

These principles are not just about utility – they also allow for pleasure in public life. There are a number of aesthetic pleasures to be found in the built environment, in being confronted by the unexpected, in public art, in the crowding together of people and things giving rise to ‘visual excitement.’<sup>28</sup> Alongside esthetic pleasures, there are interactional ones as well. These include public solitude (people find pleasure in being alone in public), people watching, public sociability, and playfulness/frivolity/fantasy.<sup>29</sup>

### **1.C.2 five contributions of public life**

Lofland outlines five contributions of public life to living well together.<sup>30</sup> First, it is *an environment for learning*. It is here that “we are reminded that the foundation of

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<sup>25</sup> Lofland points out that when serious help is required in public life, there is often a failure on the part of the bystander to intervene. But this sort of intervention is very complex. Someone may not see what is going on, not realize it is very serious, be without any sense of responsibility to get involved or feel inadequate to the task. And from a counter-intuitive point of view, researchers point out that if there are other strangers around, people are less likely to get involved. They give four reasons for this: (1) Appearing foolish in front of others is a strong inhibitor to action. (2) Because others are doing nothing, and we often take our lead from the guidance of others, then it can follow that not getting involved is the right thing to do. (3) These two processes are mutually reinforcing on all concerned. (4) Because there are others standing around, one does not feel just as responsible for what is happening and there is less impetus to do something than if someone was alone. If intervention is to occur, then the power of these principles needs to be reduced. This happens when someone is there alone, or with a group of friends in the group of bystanders or when a bystander has a special qualification. Ibid., 36-38.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 78-87.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 88-96.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 231-237.



life together is not the intimacy of friends but the capacity of strangers to share a common territory, common resources, and common problems—without ever becoming friends.”<sup>31</sup> It is here that we learn how to relate to others outside of our families. Second, it *provides needed respites and refreshment*. There are all sorts of places in the public that help us get through the day – shops, cafes, community centers, faith communities, hairdressers, bars and theatres. Third, it *operates as a center of communication*. It allows for communication between diverse individuals and groups. Fourth, it helps people learn the ‘*practice of politics*.’ It does not just help people develop the capabilities needed to be political; it also provides a “stage upon which political realities may be enacted—may be given visual form.”<sup>32</sup> Here people learn, according to Richard Sennett, that through the interaction between and among strangers, that they “can act together without the compulsion to be the same.”<sup>33</sup> This is essential to political action. Public life allows for the enactment of social arrangements and social conflict. Through public display, injustices can be revealed, solidarity built, and change generated. Finally, public life helps with the *creation of cosmopolitans*, places that help people to have a sense of world citizenship.<sup>34</sup> The very fact of living and moving in public life among strangers, does seem, over time to create tolerance towards others. There are, of course, many exceptions to this, but public life allows space for human diversity to be openly expressed. And as a consequence, “one of the most critical uses of the public realm is its

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<sup>31</sup> Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Lofland, *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory*, 235.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), 255.

<sup>34</sup> This is a value that is important to Martha C. Nussbaum and articulated well in her book see Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

capacity to teach its residents about tolerance—its capacity to transform its residents into cosmopolitans.”<sup>35</sup>

### 1.C.3 enlarging encounters with the ‘other’

Public life allows for countless opportunities to meet with the ‘other.’ These sorts of meetings can have important significance in shaping one’s consciousness of who should be included and who should be excluded from participation in communities and society. In a study of lives committed to the common good, Laurent Daloz et al., in their book *Common Fire, Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, found that “constructive engagements with otherness was the single most critical element undergirding commitment to the common good in the lives we studied.”<sup>36</sup> Everyone in the study described at least one significant experience at some point during their formative years when they developed a strong attachment with someone previously viewed as ‘other’ than themselves. The authors found that where people crossed boundaries in liberating and transformative ways, they came to a deeply held conviction that *everyone counts*.<sup>37</sup>

This does not *necessarily* happen in public life but it does provide a context for it to take place.

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<sup>35</sup> Lofland, *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory*, 237. When Lofland uses tolerance, she makes an important distinction between negative and positive tolerance. Negative tolerance is when someone or a community puts up with others difference, even though they do not impinge on that person or community very much. Positive tolerance occurs when there is some intersection or interaction between groups who are different from one another and in some cases it might even stretch to appreciation or enjoyment of the difference. Although there is a value to tolerance, David Hollenbach in his book *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) argues persuasively that tolerance is not enough to deal with issues like poverty and racism in societies. So, although there is a value in public life for creating the room for people to develop the value of tolerance, we must not be satisfied with this. Tolerance does not create justice by itself.

<sup>36</sup> Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl Hollman Keen, James P. Keen, Sharon Parks Daloz, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 215.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

These sorts of encounters are not always pleasant or easy. It is in meeting others with whom we disagree, disapprove, or even fear a little, that real transformation can take place. This will only happen if public life is not too safe, cleaned up, tidy, and purified.<sup>38</sup> It needs to have something of a hard edge to it but not too hard; otherwise, people will not venture out and nothing will be learned.

#### **1.C.4 hindrances to appreciating the importance of public life**

Despite the advantages to public life and what it contributes to human well-being, there is much that prevents us from appreciating its importance. Richard Sennett in *The Fall of Public Man* points to the ‘ideology of intimacy’ that dominates how we should interact with others. He says

The reigning belief today is that closeness between persons is a moral good. The reigning aspiration today is to develop individual personality through experiences of closeness and warmth with others. The reigning myth today is that the evils of society can all be understood as the evils of impersonality, alienation, and coldness. The sum of these three is an ideology of intimacy: social relationships of all kinds are real, believable, and authentic the closer they approach the inner psychological concerns of each person. This ideology transmutes political categories into psychological categories.<sup>39</sup>

Sennett’s warning has important implications for how we think about the value of the public and the function of the public. There is a danger that closeness and warmth become the criteria for all meaningful relations, and if this happens, then we are inclined to reject the importance or potential significance of all other relationships that are not characterized by intimacy. This sort of belief has led to efforts to personalize the public

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<sup>38</sup> Lofland describes well the efforts to sanitize public life, to make sections of cities something resembling Disneyland where nothing shocks, and everything is sweet but these sorts of places will not help create world citizens, see Lofland, *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory*, 243.

<sup>39</sup> Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 259.

realm. This is apparent in the interest given to the personal lives of public and political figures. There is often just as much interest in what a politician is like as a person as there is in what this figure contributes regarding social policy or the public good. This is not to say that character or one's identity is unimportant. Rather it points to a danger of imbalance. According to Sennett, when intimacy becomes the "sole criterion for authentic human relationships, we falsify relations in public."<sup>40</sup> Intimacy suggests warmth, trust, safety, mutual exchange, and expression of feelings. But the result in expecting these psychological rewards from others in public life is a sense of being let down by the world outside. It seems to fail us – for it cannot satisfy our expectations for this level of intimacy. This ideology destroys the values of anything that is not intimate. Other relationships that lack depth, intensity and closeness are not seen as valuable. When this is the case, the effect is that people will cultivate private life over public life.

This is an important point for people who come from a religious or church background. In the Christian churches, there is a great deal of emphasis on the personal and interpersonal dimensions of life, communion and right relationship – and rightly so. But people need to be realistic about the appropriate context for such relationships. When participating in public, it is important to find the right balance between working for social change and being overly invested in personal relationships.

A health public life is essential to a safe and meaningful private one. They are inextricably tied together. This is a link that needs to be experienced and recognized in our everyday lives.

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<sup>40</sup> Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, 50.

## **2. Civil Society**

### **2.A What is Civil Society?**

A dimension of public life that contributes towards a healthy balance between the public and private dimension of human existence together is called ‘civil society.’ It is composed of those ‘secondary institutions’ or ‘mediating structures’ that stand between the person and the state on the one hand and the person and the market on the other. Civil society include families, voluntary and community organizations, religious institutions, NGOs and neighborhoods.<sup>41</sup> People are embedded in a host of groups and communities at any one time. They are members of their own families, socialize with their friends, a member of the local football club, a nominal member of their church, sing with a choral society, and do some work with the local Vincent de Paul Society, from time to time.

At the heart of civil society are voluntary and community organizations. These both interact and overlap with the state and the market. In Ireland, for example, the state works with civil society in areas such as education, community development, and social inclusion. It is the main funder of many of these organizations.<sup>42</sup> This raises the question of their independence, along with their freedom to challenge the state and hold it accountable in its provision of welfare and public goods.

In Ireland, there is a national structure called social partnership. It is a form of participative democracy in which unelected members of interest groups work with the government and one another to reach national agreements in the area of economic and

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<sup>41</sup> Don E. Eberly, "The Quest for Civil Society," in *Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21st Century*, ed. Don E. Eberly (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), xxv.

<sup>42</sup> Siobhan Daly, "Mapping Civil Society in the Republic of Ireland," *Community Development Journal* Advance Access Published, no. doi:10.1093/cdj/bsl051 (2007).

social policy. In 1989, the Irish Government began to gather together employers, trade unions, and farming organization to negotiate such agreements. Since 1996, a fourth section has been added to the other three. It is the Community and Voluntary Pillar. It represents seven national organizations, one of which, the Community Platform, consists of 25 smaller organizations. This process is an example of civil society, working with the state and the market to further the national common good. However, there are those who wonder if this form of partnership enhances the life of civil society and society at large or does partnership lead to co-option, and betrayal of the role and function of civil society to the state or the market?

When thinking of civil society, it is important to remember that it is not a homogenous sphere of society. There is great diversity in it and this is the cause of some tension. In order to be effective at the level of social policy, the sector needs to find a balance between presenting a common set of beliefs and finding a space for the diversity of the sector. A vibrant civil “society is one that provides a space for a diverse range of voices to be heard and where different interests and opinions are respected.”<sup>43</sup> But all that goes on in civil society is not positive. For example, racist communities are members of civil society and at times, require the intervention of the state. Although there is great emphasis on the importance of community and belonging in civil society, we need to pay careful attention to what sorts of communities are at work. Communities rich in social capital can be formed in opposition to issues such as immigration or social inclusion. We need to acknowledge the shadow side to civil society.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

## 2.A.1 civil society shapes identity

At a very fundamental level, the relationships, groups, associations, and communities in civil society shape the kinds of persons we are and will become. In civil society, it is not monetary exchange (the market) or the coercive use of power (the state) that creates and sustains relationships and gives them meaning. Rather it is a commitment to a common purpose characterized by qualities such as love, friendship, loyalty, faithfulness, and trust that is essential here. According to Gordon Brown, now the British Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer when he said this, civil society fosters pre-political virtues such as “civility, integrity, honesty, reliability – without which neither the market nor the state can function in the long run.”<sup>44</sup> The market and the state need consumers and citizens who are, among other things, trustworthy, honest, loyal, self-controlled, and fair. It is in civil society that these virtues are learned in such a way that they become ‘habits of the heart.’

These virtues are not learned in an abstract fashion. They are cultivated in the give and take of relationships in specific communities of civil society, which are themselves shaped by the surrounding culture and public institutions. Aristotle pointed this out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He saw that brave men were found where bravery was honored. When the Greeks were at war, it helped to have people who were willing to fight. To recruit soldiers, they built statues to their brave heroes, and they told stories of their great deeds. Children grew up influenced by these sorts of traditions and so were more inclined to follow in the footsteps of those that their community honored.<sup>45</sup> The same dynamic is at work in the cultivation of all sorts of other qualities, such as trust,

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<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Politics of Hope* (London: Vintage, 2000), xvi.

<sup>45</sup> This was something I learned from a class with Kenneth Himes at Boston College, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2004.

compassion, and forgiveness. Bellah et al., in *Habits of the Heart* refers to these sorts of communities as ‘communities of memory.’

The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope. They carry a context of meaning that can allow us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with the aspirations of a larger whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to the common good.<sup>46</sup>

Communities of memory are essential to civil society if it is to act as a counter weight to the market and to the state. In “*Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation*” Alan Wolfe claims that the sheer complexity of modern life contributes to the confusion people feel about their obligations others. They are unsure of what they are supposed to do and unsure of where to look to find out what they are supposed to do.<sup>47</sup> Presently, he says, there are three main sources for moral codes: the market, the state, and civil society. These three all need one another, but all have different emphases. The economic approach holds that society works best when people have plenty of opportunities to maximize their self-interest. This view believes that the pursuit of one’s self-interest will contribute to the collective good and so “my obligation to you is to do what is best for me.”<sup>48</sup> The political approach typically believes that this is a naïve outlook. Its view includes a low anthropology of the human person and suggests that people, given the chance, will find ways to get out of their obligations to others. If this is the case, it makes sense for the state to regulate people’s obligations to others, or else everyone will just do what suits themselves. However, the prevailing belief that motivates the workings of civil society finds these perspectives too pessimistic. It has

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<sup>46</sup> Robert N Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 153.

<sup>47</sup> Alan Wolfe, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



great confidence in the ability of people to find ways to work together, to cooperate with one another, without the incentive of the market or the coercive power of the state.

Wolfe is concerned that those who set their moral compass by the state or the market will be without any real stake in the fate of others. Instead of acting out of their own moral code, they will let the market or the state take care of things. In this way, they absent themselves from forums that would engage and shape their own capacity to make decisions about their obligations to others. The forums Wolfe is referring to are ones that cultivate “self-restraint, ties of solidarity with others, community norms, and voluntary altruism.”<sup>49</sup> These all have roots in civil society.

It is ironic to think that both the market and the state rely on the sorts of qualities that are produced in civil society and at the same time, they both undermine the very conditions that make their own existence possible. Ties of trust and solidarity are essential to markets – but the market does not foster these sorts of qualities. The state relies on communities to keep it at the service of all the people but it does not foster these conditions on its own.

### **2.A.2 civil society and the market**

Today, the logic of the market can be felt more than ever in civil society. Families, communities, and education are influenced more and more by self-interest, buying and selling, technical rationality, cost and effectiveness and the shift from public to private. In a study of Catholic schools and the common good, Anthony Bryk et al., found this sort of dynamic at work. They said:

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 13.

Most troublesome, perhaps, is the manner in which arguments about resource allocations are increasingly phrased. A major rationale for the school closings in Boston and Washington, D.C., for example, was that only a small number of students would be affected. Decision makers also note that the substantial resources deployed in these schools could be reallocated to other religious education programs that would reach many more students. Such cost-benefit arguments of a modern bureaucracy, however, rarely address the genuine human concerns of individual school communities.<sup>50</sup>

The authors claim that if these urban schools were actually viewed as prophetic institutions, different perspective would emerge, giving rise to a different set of questions and outcomes. Is there a value in having a Catholic school in a community that has been stripped of all other resources? How does one calculate the hope and sense of opportunity that such a presence gives to a community? These are the questions promoted by the logic of civil society, not the market. Clearly a balance is essential, but Wolfe feels that in the area of schooling, the privatization that has taken place there is a “step away from the notion of a republic as a group of people who share civic values in common, including the values that shape their growth and development.”<sup>51</sup> Today’s market principles organize more and more services in society. Along with schools, there are similar trends regarding prisons, garbage collection, airlines, data processing, day care, hospitalization, medical research, and fire protection.<sup>52</sup> Although there are many obvious benefits to these developments, market principles that shape society raise a fundamental question: do they help people have a stake in the overall well-being of their society?

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<sup>50</sup> Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter Blakeley Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 338.

<sup>51</sup> Wolfe, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation*, 74.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

### **2.A.3 civil society and the state**

Western liberal democracies place great value on the idea that individuals have the freedom to choose what they ought to do. However, there is a problem. If everyone is free to do as she or he pleases, what is there in society to ensure that people will recognize and act on their obligations towards others? In times past, this was not an issue. The assumption was that citizens were tied together in thousands of ways through family, community, neighborhood, culture, and religion. Civil society was presumed and the benefits of liberal theory made sense in this context. But over time, with the diminishment of these ties, liberal theory has developed in two directions. On the one hand, it emphasizes the benefits of an economic model of self-interest to the common good and on the other, it defends the usefulness of the state in the face of weakening ties between people. In this latter case, the welfare state is the answer to the question, ‘who is responsible for others when everyone is expected to be responsible for themselves?’ Although the modern welfare state is involved in caring for children, the elderly, and those who are poor (there are many views as to how well or not the state does this), much of this work is also being done by civil society. But if civil society were to diminish, two questions arise. Who would look after the people in the care of civil society? And since civil society is the source of caring and obligation to others in society, how long would the state continue to care for the weak and vulnerable in a diminished civil society?

Therefore it is vital that the state appreciates and resources the contribution of civil society, and where appropriate, work in partnership with it. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, in *Deepening Democracy*, suggest that there is a place for civil society to work with the state. In this relationship, civil society seeks the transformation of state

institutions so that they will be: more effective in solving local problems, encourage the cultivation of the participation by those closest to the problems and foster decisions made by deliberation (as opposed to command, aggregation, or strategic negotiation).<sup>53</sup> The authors show these principles at work in the ways in which ordinary people, working in civil society, effectively “participate in and influence policies which directly affect their lives,” and they call this Empowered Participatory Governance.<sup>54</sup> Given these positive results, they believe it can be appropriate for civil society to work in partnership with government. This has a number of advantages. It can minimize the oppositional stance that can characterize the relationship, offer a share of power between the different stakeholders, and gain the wisdom and participation from those closest to the issue. But as mentioned earlier, a balance is important. Civil society must not let itself be co-opted by the state and sustain its own distinct identity and role in society.

#### **2.A.4 importance of civil society**

Gordon Brown states:

My intuition was and still remains that modern politics has been dominated by two entities, the individual and the state. They are embodied in two institutions, namely markets and governments. The shared assumption has been that between them they hold the answer to all social problems. The right prefers the market. The left prefers the state. Both however have found themselves faced with social problems that have resisted all attempts at a solution.<sup>55</sup>

Brown’s obvious point is that civil society is essential. In the relationships, institutions, and structures that characterize this dimension of society, people discover the bonds of

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<sup>53</sup> Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (London: Verso, 2003), 15-24.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Sacks, *The Politics of Hope*, xiv.

love and trust, they hear and participate in the collective stories of which they are a part and in which their lives make sense, and they belong to communities of memory where they learn the importance of solidarity and the common good. This takes place through the sharing of common interests, working with others on common projects such as the Tidy Towns competition in Ireland or through membership of the local football club. Collectively, it is here that the language of ‘we’ is learned along with the language of ‘I’. In civil society, people learn moral literacy, the give and take of rights and responsibilities, and the importance of honesty and fairness. This learning takes place through a myriad of relationships that people are a part of from the cradle to the grave.

These relationships reveal and generate ‘social capital.’ This term refers to the “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”<sup>56</sup> The core idea in social capital theory is that these relationships have value and influence economic, political, social, and cultural life. It is important to distinguish between *bonding* capital—this is present in relationships between people who are quite similar in outlook, interest, and identity—and *bridging* capital, which is more outward looking and forms ties between people from diverse backgrounds and outlooks. A healthy society needs both functions of social capital. It also needs trust among its citizens. Where there are high concentrations of social capital, citizens volunteer more often, contribute more to charity, participate more often in politics and community organizations, serve more readily on juries, give blood more frequently, comply more fully with their tax obligations, are more tolerant of minority

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<sup>56</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.

views and display many other forms of civic virtue.<sup>57</sup>

Although Tocqueville never used the phrase ‘social capital’, he understood the importance of those relationships that produced it—families, religious bodies, associations of all kinds—in forming democratic values and habits, and facilitating citizen participation that could influence and moderate the power of government. Finally, Bellah et al., also remind us that along with providing a check on the function and power of the state, these mediating institutions that constitute civil society are “the only alternative we as a nation have ever had, or are likely to discover, to the dominance of business leaders.”<sup>58</sup>

### **2.A.5 challenges for civil society**

Robert Putnam claims that in the United States, participation in political, civic, and religious organizations, informal connections with family and friends, volunteering and philanthropic giving, and the qualities of altruism, reciprocity, honesty, and trust (each one mutually reinforcing of the other) have all diminished by between twenty-five to fifty percent in the last fifty years.<sup>59</sup> And the most worrisome thing is that hardly anyone has noticed. There has been a huge diminishment of social capital and this impacts negatively on health, wealth, safety, happiness, education, the gaining of wisdom, and the creation of a just and stable democracy.<sup>60</sup> There are many reasons for

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>58</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 212.

<sup>59</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 19. See also Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together, Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 290.

this diminishment. Putnam discovered a good deal of responsibility is due to the pressures of time, money, mobility and sprawl; technology and mass media are heavily implicated, especially television. However, he believes that it is generational change that is the real culprit and that it counts for almost half of the overall decline in social capital. Those succeeding generations born and raised since World War II have slowly been disengaging from social life in America.

Putnam's findings are stark and offer a worrying picture about the quality of relationships and community life in America. However, they are not shared by everyone. In *The Ladd Report*, Everett Carll Ladd refutes the findings and conclusions of Putnam and actually goes as far to say that "civic America is being renewed and extended, not diminished."<sup>61</sup> Social capital has not been depleted as suggested by Putnam but is being generated as never before. Civic life is not declining, rather it is 'churning' and changing to meet the new needs of the day. However, the *Ladd Report's* oppositional and stark contrast with Putnam's work seems to give the report an unbalanced feel and undermine some of Ladd's argument that needs attention.<sup>62</sup>

In a more nuanced way, Robert Wuthnow, in *Loose Connections*, disagrees with Putnam's findings but does not go as far as Ladd. He suggests that involvement in community is changing, and not declining.<sup>63</sup> He acknowledges the problems in communities—violent crime, drug use, terrorism, increase in poverty rates and racial tension—and says that many people care deeply about their communities and make

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<sup>61</sup> Everett Carll Ladd, *The Ladd Report* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>62</sup> Alan Wolfe, *Bowling with Others*, (The New York Times on the web, 1999, accessed 19th November 2007); available from [http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/10/17/reviews/991017.17wolfet.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/10/17/reviews/991017.17wolfet.html?_r=1&oref=slogin).

<sup>63</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), xii.

efforts to reach out in new, realistic, and manageable ways. Wuthnow believes that the difficulty in generating greater civic participation is as a result “of a profound change in the character of our institutions.”<sup>64</sup> Fragmentation in society is a given for him and these new forms of civic involvement are characterized by “looser, more sporadic, ad hoc connections in place of the long term membership in hierarchical organizations in the past.”<sup>65</sup> He is much more upbeat than Putnam about the state of relationships and our connections with one another in society.

One of the clearest examples of this new way of connection is the recent emergence of social networking on the web. MySpace had over 114 million global visitors age 15 and older in June 2007.<sup>66</sup> It “is the digital equivalent of hanging out at the mall for today’s teens, who load the site with photos, news about music groups and detailed profiles about their likes and dislikes.”<sup>67</sup> Other sites include Facebook (which is even more popular than pornographic web sites among college students)<sup>68</sup> and it had up to 52.2 million visitors in June 2007, Bebo had up to 18.2 million visitors. There are about 300 sites to the social network world.

In contrast to the rise in contact between people on the web, social isolation is growing in the United States. Miller MacPherson et al., published their survey entitled *Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks Over Two Decades* in 2006. In the last two decades, Americans have become far more socially isolated from one another. Twenty-five per cent say that they have no one with whom they can discuss

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Lipsman, *Social Networking Goes Global*, (2007, accessed 20th November 2007); available from <http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=1555>.

<sup>67</sup> Knowledge@Wharton, *Myspace, Facebook, and Other Social Networking Sites: Hot Today, Gone Tomorrow?* (2007, accessed November 19th, 2007); available from <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=1463>.

<sup>68</sup> Meghan Michael, "'Face Time' with Facebook," *The Heights*, November 12th, 2007.



important matters.<sup>69</sup> It points to increasing social fragmentation in society, where close social ties are diminishing all the time. The authors claim that increased professional responsibilities, working two or more jobs, and long commutes take up all the energy and resource of people, so they are too tired to make social connections.

In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor expresses his concern at the prevalence of fragmentation in society. The danger is a growing inability of people being “less capable of forming a common purpose and carrying it out. Fragmentation arises when people come to see themselves more and more atomistically, otherwise put, as less and less bound to their fellow citizens in common projects and allegiances.”<sup>70</sup> There are political implications associated with this situation. Due to the lack of cohesion and common purpose in society, more and more effort is put into judicial battles to realize aims and shift social policy. The courts come to decide policy and what is acceptable in society. There is also an increase in interest or advocacy politics. Court judgments and single issue politics leave little room for compromise and are generally ‘winner-take-all’ scenarios. Consequently, making common cause becomes very difficult, and just compounds and contributes to further fragmentation. It is increasingly difficult for people to identify with their communities. This lack of identification or sympathy can lead to an instrumental way of viewing and living in society, coupled with a sense of powerlessness in one’s ability to actually be able to change things, even if one wanted to. Instrumental reason,<sup>71</sup> and atomism or individualism are both reinforced by the market

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<sup>69</sup> Miller MacPherson, Lyn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears, "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades," *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 358.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 112-113.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor sees this as one of three malaises’ in modernity. It can be seen in the ways unequal distributions of wealth and income are justified on grounds of economic growth or how this same sort of reasoning makes us indifferent to the environment. The other two malaises are concerned with individualism and the implications of these two for political life, see *Ibid.*, 2-12.

and the state. According to Taylor, the only effective counter to this drift is the “formation of an effective common purpose through democratic action.”<sup>72</sup> This involves ‘resisting and reversing’ fragmentation. It is a task for civil society, but not civil society alone. It must also be a concern for the market and also the state.

Civil society is important as a buffer against the encroachment of the state and market on the person and community. The mediating institutions of civil society provide a way for people to participate meaningfully in society and they also cultivate the habits and practices that promote the cohesion necessary for the proper functioning and mutual interdependence of these three pillars in society, the state, the market, and civil society. Now I turn attention to one of the key forums for participation in society. A healthy public life requires people being active in shaping the values, policies and direction of a society. The public sphere is one such forum.

### **3. *The Public Sphere***

#### **3.A What is the Public Sphere?**

The public sphere is a metaphor that helps us think about how information, values and ideas circulate in society. According to Jürgen Habermas, it is a “domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed [where] citizens...deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion...[to] express and publicize their views.”<sup>73</sup> It is where and how people find out what is happening in their communities and the world around them. It is the forum in which they see the news, read the papers and magazines, surf the web, blog, podcast, look at television, listen to the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>73</sup> As quoted in Alan McKee, *The Public Sphere: An Introduction* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

radio and so on. But the public sphere is not just a forum for information; it is a space for participation on issues that are of interest to people. They go to meetings, participate in online blogs, write books, articles, journals, submit letters to newspapers, talk on the radio, produce music and theatre, demonstrate and protest. This sort of participation gives rise to public opinion and helps shape consensus about how to live together. The public sphere is not unlike a public notice board where private citizens can publish their views on a whole range of ideas, not just political, but economic, social, and cultural. The important dimension of all this is how debate becomes public. Circulation is an important feature of this context. “Anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo circulation.”<sup>74</sup> The public sphere ought to be characterized by conversation and a diversity of positions.<sup>75</sup> Alan McKee says “We hear a story on the news, then we talk about it with friends; we exchange ideas on email groups, down at the pub, at the hairdresser; we telephone a talkback radio station, write a letter to a magazine, stop buying a newspaper because we disagree with its political stance.”<sup>76</sup>

Charles Taylor in *Modern Social Imaginaries* points out two important features of the public sphere. It is independent of the political and it has a force of legitimacy.<sup>77</sup> In other words, it can lend credence or credibility to particular perspectives or social arrangements. It is in the public sphere that the public have somewhere to stand that is outside of the political and gives a perspective from which to reflect on society. Political society is founded on the consent of those bound to it. The government must always seek

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<sup>74</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 91.

<sup>75</sup> David Tracy has much that is helpful to understand about the dynamics of conversation in *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Hans Georg Gadamer, Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed., Continuum Impacts (London; New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>76</sup> McKee, *The Public Sphere: An Introduction*, 5.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Public Planet Books (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 87.

the consent of those governed. And when the public come to a common mind on important matters, through debate and critical reflection, government is obliged to listen to it. “The public sphere is, then, a locus in which rational views are elaborated that should guide government.”<sup>78</sup> But the public sphere is more than an instrument to guide government. It is, at its best, a humanizing place,<sup>79</sup> where relationships are built across differences, where perspectives are enlarged, and questions about what it means to live a good life are explored and behavior changed accordingly. The public sphere is a place of contestation.<sup>80</sup>

Habermas believes that there were two essential characteristics to the public sphere. It depends “upon both quality of discourse and quality of participation.”<sup>81</sup> These are foundational to the public sphere. According to Alastair Hannay, these characteristics are the “raison d’être of the public sphere.”<sup>82</sup>

### **3.A.1 historical roots**

Habermas’ view of the public sphere grew out of his investigation of the classical bourgeois society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was at this time that the public sphere began to emerge. Previously societies were organized feudally and were strictly hierarchical. The monarch had absolute power, often assumed to have been appointed by God and consequently, the people were subject to the monarch’s will.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>79</sup> This does not mean that it is always pleasant or enjoyable, but it can build community, consensus, and enlarge our sense of ‘we’ and improve our sense of ‘I’ at the same time.

<sup>80</sup> This is a phrase used by Jose Casanova to refer to the public as the place in which ideas are contested with one another.

<sup>81</sup> Craig J. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>82</sup> Hannay, *On the Public*, 34.

However, the rise of capitalism gave certain sectors of society some new autonomy. A new form of sociability in coffee houses and salons throughout Europe provided opportunities for new relationships and the sharing of ideas and opinions.<sup>83</sup> In the early eighteenth century, there were over 3,000 coffee houses in London.<sup>84</sup> Here British businessmen met to discuss the ‘news,’ holding conversations about business, state administration, and politics. Journals of opinion were created, and these linked different places of conversation with one another. New ideas about equality, justice and freedom started to circulate and ordinary people began to shift from being subjects of the king to becoming citizens.

Interestingly, the creation of a place of privacy was influential in creating the public sphere. Here the family and intimate life were seen as the proper seat of humanity and it was possible then for private people to come together to form public opinion.<sup>85</sup> This all marked a pull away from the absolute sovereignty of the ruler and the state. Space was created that allowed for the growth of participation in matters of common interest and through the development of institutions, this participation resulted in communication with the state or with the ruler. These institutions took the form of legally “guaranteed free speech, free press, and free assembly and eventually through the parliamentary institutions of representative government.”<sup>86</sup> In this way, citizens could exchange information and ideas and reach agreement about what they wanted done in their lives. They could then communicate this information to the relevant members of

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<sup>83</sup> These are described well in *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>84</sup> Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere.*, 12.

<sup>85</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 47.

<sup>86</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 112.

society who had the power to act on it. Consequently, the public sphere emerged as a vital and essential part of modernity and democracy.

Today, however, Habermas has his doubts about the ability of the public sphere to provide a counterweight to the state or to be a place of critical and rational discourse and debate in society. He believes that the welfare state has encroached on the public sphere and that debate has given way to negotiation. In his view, the public is marginalized and the exercise of political power in society “now takes place directly between private bureaucracies, special-interest associations, parties, and public administration. The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute to acclamation.”<sup>87</sup> It is his contention that shared, critical activity of public discourse has been replaced by a more passive culture of consumption.<sup>88</sup> While I appreciate the concern of Habermas, I would not go as far with it as he does. I contend that the public sphere still is a context that promotes human dignity and the common good. As this dissertation progresses, I will propose a spirituality that promotes the kind of participation in the public sphere that makes a real contribution to our shared quality of life, while all the time being alert to the kinds of reservations that Habermas has highlighted.

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<sup>87</sup> Craig J. Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 22.

<sup>88</sup> At this point, I would like to point out that there are a number of critiques of Habermas' work, particularly of assumptions contained in his understanding of the public sphere that have not lead to full participation nor promoted meaningful inclusion of minority groups in society, for more on this see Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy."

### 3.A.2 modern and postmodern interpretations of the public sphere

In *The Public Sphere*, Alan McKee argues that, from a postmodern perspective, a trivialized, fragmented, commercialized, spectacular, and public sphere is better able to serve the citizen. According to him, the facts are not what is in question about the public sphere—most agree that it is indeed more trivialized and fragmented etc.—but rather one’s interpretation of it. A modern perspective—like that of Habermas—sees the loss of rational critical debate, in the *one* overarching public sphere, and the introduction of private and personal issues into the public conversation, as undermining the integrity and usefulness of the sphere. However, the postmodern sensibility sees things differently. It appreciates the variety of voices that are now present in the public and the diversity that they reveal. It rejoices in the many different *publics* articulating their own interests and it values the fact that personal issues are now brought out into the public sphere.

One of the important contributions of postmodernity, is that it has given rise to a consciousness about the “inherently ambiguous character of human history.”<sup>89</sup> There is less confidence in the modern notion of the person as an autonomous agent who believes in the inevitable progress of history. The new emergence of people who are excluded and marginalized has revealed the underbelly of the modern project. The positive overarching descriptions of history have not taken these people and their situations of poverty, exclusion and death, into consideration. For modernity, there is a view that knowledge is inherently good and objective. But postmoderns look beyond reason to non

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<sup>89</sup> Roberto S. Goizueta, "Fiesta: Life in the Subjunctive," in *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/ a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, ed. Orlando Espín and Miguel H Diaz (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 86.

rational ways of knowing, giving heightened status to the emotions and intuition.<sup>90</sup> This has implications for how mediums such as music, protests, theatre, and art are introduced into the public sphere. If they are viewed through a modern lens, the absence of critical, rational debate will undermine their contribution. However, a postmodern perspective will appreciate the messages that are communicated in an affective and visceral manner, ones that engage the bodily ‘felt sense’ as well as the rational dimension of the person.

It is important to integrate the concerns of the postmodern sensibility, particularly in the area of diversity, inclusion, a holistic view of the person, along with the wariness about the so called progress of the world. However, I am slow to agree with McKee about the importance of trivialization, commercialization, and the use of the spectacular in the public sphere. There is a thin line between their use and the undermining of human dignity. I believe that there is an important place for the of critical reason in the public sphere – but one that is humble about its it strengths and limitations. Participation in the public sphere needs to appreciate the importance of a holistic participation, one that values reason, emotion and the imagination.

### **3.B Ideas Matter in the Public Sphere<sup>91</sup>**

A theme throughout this dissertation is that all voices must have the opportunity to have a say in the ideas that shape their community and the world. The assumption in the public sphere is that ideas matter and that they make a difference. It is the place to

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<sup>90</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 7, 12.

<sup>91</sup> In this section, I use ‘ideas’ in a broad and inclusive manner, to include as beliefs, understandings, views, and perspectives.



bring ideas about what matters to people and engage with others to find sustainable and meaningful ways forward. For instance, an idea that has a great deal of influence in economic and philosophical theory is that the person is motivated essentially by self-interest.<sup>92</sup> This dominant view holds that the self-interested person rationally decides all things in their life with the aim of maximizing their own advantage. Therefore what is good for society is the sum total of these preferences. Such a hermeneutic has implications for the role of government. Put simply, government is to help people realize their own needs and wants, and stay out of the way as much as possible, only intervening when the market is unable to satisfy people's needs. The implication of this idea is that the state is to act as a 'night watchman' to deal with conflict, and encroachments on trade and the pursuit of self-interest.<sup>93</sup>

Such an idea, according to the premise of this dissertation, needs to be roundly challenged in the public sphere. This narrow view of the person as essentially self-interested does not take into account other deep and powerful motivations that are shaped by one's 'overlapping memberships' and attachments and sense of purpose that is found outside of self-interest.<sup>94</sup> There is evidence that self-interest is not the defining motivation for people to support social policy. Gary R. Orren says that "for all its plausibility, however, the empirical evidence for this argument is thin."<sup>95</sup> Solidary factors and purpose goals were far more influential than self-interest in support or rejection of social policy. Self-interest is only one aspect of what shapes a persons

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<sup>92</sup> See Robert B. Reich, ed., *The Power of Public Ideas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>93</sup> Robert B. Reich, "Introduction," in *The Power of Public Ideas*, ed. Robert B. Reich (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>94</sup> Gary R. Orren, "Beyond Self-Interest," in *The Power of Public Ideas*, ed. Robert B. Reich (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 24-25.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

outlook, what moves them to action, and what sustains their involvement. People's own expression of compassion, loyalty, duty, love, morality, self-sacrifice, and generosity are all located outside of self-interest. This is not to say that self-interest is without influence, but that self-interest is not the driving force behind many other values that people hold close.

A person's values, habits, and virtues are shaped by the prevailing ideas shared in their home, neighborhood, community, and society. These ideas influence how one interprets the world around them. The critical point here is that although both the United States and Ireland are pluralistic countries, with no imposition of any single idea about the good life, it must be remembered that everyone is enveloped in ideas about everything. The unencumbered self is a myth, there is no such thing as living on one's own. We inherit ideas from the past about what is of value and worth. We make sense of these things as best we can – understanding, judging and living in ways that are meaningful to us today. But we are constantly surrounded by ideas about what to wear, how to appear in public, the role of government, what to drink, how to live in an eco-friendly fashion, what is socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior, the value of an education, how to achieve happiness, resolve conflict, how to cross the road, the place of relationships, the importance of sex, working hard, keeping fit and so on. These ideas about social norms come from outside of the self, but they are also internalized and consequently shape our behaviors and are later perpetuated if found meaningful and trustworthy.

Ideas shape the context for deliberation about a whole host of matters in society. They give rise to assumptions, justifications, purposes, and action. Ideas offer reasons

for someone to act in a particular way because it is congruent with a wider set of values and shared beliefs. Ideas can motivate and shape action.<sup>96</sup> For instance, in Ireland there has been a change in the idea of drinking and driving. In the past, many did not hesitate to have a few drinks and drive their cars home. Now there has been a shift in how the public thinks about this issue. Drinking and driving is no longer socially acceptable. This means that friends, hosts, and parents can, with a great degree of self-confidence and conviction work to prevent drinking and driving in a way that would not have been socially acceptable before the idea changed in the public imagination. It also allows the state to take a more proactive role in using the police to stop this occurrence. This is possible, because it is a public idea with broad support.

There are two dimensions to ideas. One is concerned with the intellectual coherency and quality of analysis – the intellectual properties. The other takes account of the fit of ideas in the larger historical and social context – contextual properties. While both properties are essential, it is this latter one that is of particular interest. Ideas are not generally convincing because of the weight of the evidence or careful reasoning.

“Rather, ideas seem to become anchored in people’s minds through illustrative anecdotes, simple diagrams and pictures, or connections with broad commonsense ideologies that define human nature and social responsibilities.”<sup>97</sup> Intellectual properties enhance ideas but are not always the reason that they are attractive in the first place.

In order to use ideas well in the public sphere, some suggestions from Mark H. Moore are helpful:

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<sup>96</sup> Mark Moore, "What Sort of Ideas Become Public Ideas," in *Why Public Ideas Matter*, ed. Robert B. Reich (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 75.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

- ❖ develop a diagnose of the prevailing ideas (both intellectual and contextual) already present in the part of the public sphere one is interested in – what are the values, facts, connections, origins of these ideas;
- ❖ respect the existing ideas – they are there for a reason, and although they might not have been articulated very well, they could have served useful purposes in the past and even up to the present moment;
- ❖ having engaged in a diagnosis and evaluation of old ideas, what are the ideas that might enhance, challenge, or transform the ones that are already there – how does a person or a community construct better ideas and bring them to the fore?
- ❖ the last intellectual task is “to shrink the complexity down to a relatively small number of dimensions.”<sup>98</sup> This is a difficult task and will be resisted by those who favor the intellectual properties of ideas, however, if ideas are to be understood and accepted in the public, they must catch the public imagination.<sup>99</sup>

To engage in the public sphere in a sustained and critical manner, one needs to appreciate the place and function of ideas. Given that this paper is directed to people from a faith perspective, and is aimed to helping them participate more fully in the public sphere, it is very important that they become familiar with one idea that is very influential in the public sphere. It is the idea of secularization. It is a dominant theme that has shaped much of public thinking in both Ireland and the United States.

### **3.C Secularization**

#### **3.C.1 what is secularization?**

After the Protestant Reformation and Religious Wars, “secularization has come to designate the ‘passage,’ transfer, or relocation of persons, things, functions, meanings, and so forth, from their traditional location in the religious sphere to the secular

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>99</sup> See Ibid., 81-82.

spheres.”<sup>100</sup> Secularization initially refers to the shift of influence and power, whether by default or by force, from the churches and religious institutions, to other spheres in society. Institutions such as schools, the state, or hospitals no longer need religious thinking, practices, and organizations to function in society. This is a huge shift from how things were in premodern times. Then it was not possible *not* to believe in God. Everything depended on God. All that was secular was contained in the sacred sphere. Charles Taylor puts it this way:

The difference would then consist in this, that whereas the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection. Churches are now separate from political structures.<sup>101</sup>

This process of secularization stresses the differentiation of the church from different spheres in society.

### **3.C.2 three propositions in the theory of secularization**

José Casanova is helpful in outlining three propositions contained in the theory of secularization. They are secularization as differentiation, religious decline, and privatization.

#### **3.C.2.1 differentiation**

According to Casanova,

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<sup>100</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>101</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

...the core and central thesis of the theory of secularization is the conceptualization of the process of societal modernization as a process of functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres—primarily the state, the economy, and science—from the religious sphere and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion within its own newly found religious sphere.<sup>102</sup>

This is not to say that religion does not have nor will have an influence in other spheres. By its very nature it has something to say to the whole of life, but it will not be privileged nor allowed to dominant as it did in the past. This process of differentiation has proved difficult for those churches that have been tied closely to the state. Grace Davie points out that for those who have resisted this separation, mostly in Europe, “the indicators of religious activity (both organizational and individual) have dropped furthest...Conversely in modern America, where institutional separation is a way of life, religious activity remains high.”<sup>103</sup> For established churches in Europe, negotiating this move from a place of privilege to being another member of civil society is very difficult. According to Tom Inglis, the successful transition “is dependent upon them representing universal human rights and freedoms rather than specific denominational interests.”<sup>104</sup> The churches must recognize that they are now one among many other groups in civil society. This will require a shift in imagination and organization in order to participate in an open, persuasive, and reasonable way in the public sphere.

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<sup>102</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 19.

<sup>103</sup> Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2007), 50.

<sup>104</sup> Tom Inglis, "Understanding Religion and Politics," in *Religion and Politics: East-West Contrasts from Contemporary Europe*, ed. Tom Inglis, Zdzisław Mach, and Rafał Mazanek (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), 13.

### 3.C.2.2 *decline in religion*

The second proposition contained in a theory of secularization is a belief that it necessarily leads to a decline in religion. On the one hand, there is some evidence for this – but it comes only from Western Europe. The evidence, from this one particular context, has been generalized to the rest of the world. Western European countries are some of the most modern, differentiated, industrialized, and educated countries in the world.<sup>105</sup> But just as modern are the United States of America and Japan, neither of these two countries show any signs of decline in religion. This generalization of the European experience raises questions about the validity of the theory. It was not until recently that Europe came to be seen as the exception to the rule, and its forms of religion “are no longer seen as the global prototype; they become instead one strand among many which make up what it means to be European.”<sup>106</sup> A theory of secularization must not presume a necessary decline in religion, just because it happened in Europe. Part of the reason for Europe’s exceptional case was the close relationship between the church and the state.

Casanova says

It was the caesaropapist embrace of throne and altar under absolutism that perhaps more than anything else determined the decline of church religion in Europe...One may say that it was the very attempt to preserve and prolong Christendom in every nation-state and thus to resist modern functional differentiation that nearly destroyed the churches in Europe.<sup>107</sup>

The churches need to adapt to their place now in civil society, and become accustomed to this new context sooner rather than later.

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<sup>105</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 28.

<sup>106</sup> Davie, *The Sociology of Religion*, 62.

<sup>107</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 29.

### 3.C.2.3 *the privatization of religion*

The third assumption in the theory of secularization is that it naturally privatizes religion. Due to the pluralistic nature of society, religion becomes a preference just like anything else and belief becomes a matter of subjectivity. Pluralism undermines the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of religion and raises questions about its plausibility and veracity. Couple this with a ‘turn to the subject’, the importance given to subjective meaning making and religion becomes a strictly personal and private affair. The process of secularization leaves little room for it in the public sphere – there is no longer any need for a public religious worldview or a ‘sacred canopy.’ A society properly differentiated functions just fine without religion, at least according to the theory. The 1980s, however, saw religion leave its assigned place in the private sphere to enter the public arena “of moral and political contestation.”<sup>108</sup> Casanova points to four developments that gave religion this profile: “the Islamic revolution in Iran; the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland; the role of Catholicism in the Sandinista revolution and in other political conflicts throughout Latin America and the public re-emergence of Protestant fundamentalism as a force in American politics.”<sup>109</sup> Along with these developments, I include Vatican II and the new understanding of the Catholic church’s role in the world that emerged from this Council (this will be developed in Chapter 2 of this paper). This deprivatization of religion has taken place in religious traditions as diverse as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity and it takes place in all “three worlds of development.”<sup>110</sup> These developments question the assumption that secularization will necessarily require religion to be confined to the private dimension of society. It is

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 6.



encouraging to see that the essential public nature of religions coming to the surface. However, there is much work to be done in resisting the culture of individualism and the various forces seeking to confine religion to the private sphere in society.

When people participate in the public sphere from a religious point of view, they need to be cognizant of the importance of differentiation in society, that secularization does not necessarily lead to a decline of religion and that there are global movements in world religions that are rediscovering their public significance.

### **3.C.3 three ways of being secular**

Finally, it is important to say a word about what is meant when people use the word secular, as distinct from secularization. Charles Taylor describes three ways in which we can point to our times as being secular (referring to Canada, America and Europe). The first refers to the emptying of our public places of God. The various spheres of society—economic, social, cultural, political, educational, recreational—do not refer us to God through the norms and internal logic of each. They stand autonomously from the church and religion. Taylor makes the important point, that while public spaces may stand empty of God, people are still religious, especially so in the United States. The second characteristic of our secular age is the diminishment of religious belief and practice, people no longer going to church and turning away from God. Grace Davie has described a dimension of this phenomenon as ‘believing without belonging.’ The third characteristic concerns the ‘conditions of belief’ and is concerned with “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and

frequently not the easiest to embrace.”<sup>111</sup> Here Taylor is not so much concerned with the number of people practicing or not, rather, he is interested in the milieu or context that is predominantly secular. He points out that while it might be possible to show that the same number of people attend church/synagogue here in the U.S. as go to Friday mosque attendance in Pakistan or Jordan – these two societies are fundamentally different. There is a different context and culture at work, religion has a different place in both societies and this gives rise to a “whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place.”<sup>112</sup>

### **3.C.4 a complex process**

According to Peter Berger, one of the early exponents of the theory of secularization, today the theory is “essentially wrong.”<sup>113</sup> He says that the “world is massively religious” and this is not what was predicted when the theory was developed. Secularization is an evolving reality and will manifest itself differently in particular places. It is fluid and as it changes so will its attitude to God, faith, and the role of religion in public. At any one time these responses might be characterized by hostility, intellectual condescension, indifference, to a positive and vital relationship with religion in search of peace and security.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 2.

<sup>114</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 40.

We must remember that along with secularization being a complex reality, there is a confusing moral ambivalence to it. And this must be respected. Too often, people from a religious background are quick to criticize secularization or this secular age we live in. But they forget that just as this reality requires a freedom from religion, it also mandates a freedom for religion. It has many moral strengths which are in keeping with much of what is best in the Judeo-Christian tradition:

human dignity, fundamental honesty, concern for others, democracy, equal voice for everyone, equality of race and gender, equality opportunity for all, tolerance of others and their differences, sexual responsibility...hospitality, decency, courtesy...and an openness to God and the transcendent.<sup>115</sup>

It is also true that secularity does not always show these, nor does Christianity for that matter. In its ideal “secular culture...purports many of the deep moral values that are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition and, at times, has even played a major role in reteaching these ideas to the churches.”<sup>116</sup> But there are also limitations and inadequacies. Rationality independent of a faith tradition can be overconfident and too full of hubris. Within secularism, there can be a relativizing tendency that emphasizes the individual over the common good and a moral ambiguity that gives rise to social exclusion, sexual irresponsibility, pornography, abortion, the death penalty, and poverty.

In educating people towards a public spirituality, an appreciation of this complexity and confusing moral signals within secularization is very important. We need to appreciate its many strengths and how it has enhanced the quality of our lives together. But we must also recognize the moral failings and challenge those in a respectful and dignified manner.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

## ***Conclusion***

A strong public life is essential for the overall cohesion of society and well-being of the person-in-community. Civil society plays a critical role in finding the right balance between the public and private dimensions of our lives. It is the place in society—outside of the state and the market—where civic virtues are taught and interests are acted upon in organized and meaningful ways. Participation in the public sphere itself is essential if members of the public are not to become passive in the face of the state and simply consumers in response to the market. It is in the public sphere that ideas are generated, contested, accepted or rejected, and these in turn shape identity, understanding, and action. This is the context for the Catholic church to articulate its own vision of what it means to live fully, in right relationship with God, self, others, institutions, and the whole of the created order. But what does the Catholic church have to contribute to such a context, and should it be there at all? These are the questions that will be explored in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER II

# THE PUBLIC DIMENSION OF CATHOLIC FAITH

### *Introduction*

For people and communities in the Catholic tradition a public spirituality is grounded in the social mission of the Catholic church.<sup>1</sup> This chapter first explores the relationship between religion and society and the contribution that religion makes to society. It then articulates the theological basis for Catholic Christians to be involved in the economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of society and the world. It pays particular attention to two central themes in Catholic social thought: participation and the common good. These need to be at the heart of a public spirituality that is drawn from Catholic tradition. And finally, the chapter looks at the ‘how’ of bringing theology into the public sphere, paying particular attention to the theological method of ‘revised critical correlation.’

### **1. Religion and Society**

#### **1.A Framing the Relationship**

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<sup>1</sup> There is no one public spirituality, each will be shaped by the sources and traditions from within one’s own particular Christian denomination or faith community. A desire to contribute to the temporal and spiritual dimension of the common good is something they all have in common with one another.

The relationship between religion and society can be characterized by two very different points of view.<sup>2</sup> The first can be called the ‘inclusive’ position. It holds that Jerusalem does have something to say to Athens and that it is appropriate for people of faith to bring the social significance of their religious traditions to bear on public issues.

The other view, sometimes referred to as the exclusive position, suggests that religion and religious beliefs are best kept at home or within the church. People who hold this view are conscious of the pluralistic nature of societies today. Since there are many different religious beliefs present in society, they fear that the public involvement of religion will inevitably lead to a loss of freedom for some or the imposition of an agenda that is religiously based, thus compromising the neutrality of the state. Behind these fears is the assumption that religion in public inevitably leads to conflict and division.<sup>3</sup>

The two ways of framing the relationship between religion and society just outlined need more nuance. Religion is not simply a set of convictions that one can bring to bear on issues of public significance. “It is a considerably more dynamic and multidimensional reality than the term ‘convictions’ might suggest.”<sup>4</sup> It is part of the identity of the person and community. It is one of the ‘ways’ that people make sense of the world. It shapes how people see, feel, understand, judge, and act in society. Therefore, it is not so easy to bring religion deliberately into the public or to have it

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<sup>2</sup> See Kent Greenawalt, "Religion and American Political Judgments," *Wake Forest Law Review* 36, no. 219 (2001).

<sup>3</sup> For more about people’s fears concerning the negative dimension of religion in public see Kristin E. Heyer, *Prophetic & Public: The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), Chapter 1, Martin E. Marty and Jonathan Moore, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation About Religion's Role in Our Shared Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 23-41.

<sup>4</sup> David Hollenbach, "Contexts of the Political Role of Religion: Civil Society and Culture," *San Diego Law Review* 30, no. 4 (1993): 878.

confined to the private dimension of people's lives. It is too dynamic for that. Much will depend on the prevailing cultural assumptions about what is the most appropriate place for religious expression and these vary from place to place.

## **1.B Philosophical View of Religion and Society**

The fact of pluralism, according to John Rawls, requires religion to remain in the private sphere. He believes that there can be no agreement on a single conception of the good life among citizens, and the only way to have one would be through the use of the coercive power of the state. There are various comprehensive views of what it means to live well, what is of value and how people should live together. If there is to be any agreement among citizens, then these comprehensive views need to be kept out the public sphere. They are too divisive and to this end, Rawls recommends that the 'method of avoidance be used in politics.' This method demands that in political life "we try, so far as we can, neither to assert nor to deny any religious, philosophical or moral views, or their associated philosophical accounts of truth and the state of values."<sup>5</sup> He believes that consensus will only be realized with the avoidance of these views in public. This is not to say that individuals cannot hold their own views of topics based on their religious beliefs but just that these views must be kept in private.

Rawls believes that when people engage in public discourse it ought to be done in terms of public reason, or in such a way that all reasonable citizens will be able to understand what is being communicated. This is especially true for governments in democratic countries. In order to have legitimacy, they must not give weight to or favor

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

any of the competing comprehensive world views that are present within society. They must be neutral towards them all. The life of a government, its policy and legislation must be equally accessible to all citizens. Jürgen Habermas puts it this way. “In a secular state only those political decisions are taken to be legitimate as can be impartially justified in the light of generally accessible reasons, in other words, equally justified vis-à-vis religious and non-religious citizens and citizens of different confessions.”<sup>6</sup> This is the only way to ensure that a particular religious tradition does not use the state to impose its agenda on the rest of the population.

Although Rawls is opposed to religious traditions and comprehensive world views being part of public, political deliberation, he does allow for it with a proviso. He says that

reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrine—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the view that religious and comprehensive views of the good life are not welcomed in public, political discussions, without being translated into language that is reasonably acceptable to all people, according to some authors, is too restrictive. Kent Greenawalt believes that sources which bring understanding and enlightenment—whether the Pope, religious text or one’s own sense of God—ought to count on public issues. Fairness is about inclusion of what people find most convincing.<sup>8</sup> Michael Sandel argues that we respect religious beliefs by engaging them and not having

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<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Religion and the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 5.

<sup>7</sup> John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64 (1997): 783.

<sup>8</sup> Greenawalt, "Religion and American Political Judgments," 406-407.



them excluded to the private sphere of life. He does not believe it is always reasonable to bracket religious beliefs, especially on matters that have important moral content.<sup>9</sup>

Jürgen Habermas, points out the positive political influences of religion in public life and acknowledge the stabilizing and advancing influence of religion on liberal political culture; he objects to Rawls separation on the basis that “many religious citizens would not be able to undertake such an artificial division within their own minds without jeopardizing their existence as pious persons.”<sup>10</sup> This echoes Greenawalt’s view that “People do not feel whole if they try to divorce their deepest sources of insight from their political stances.”<sup>11</sup>

Habermas makes the case that if society really values religious freedom, then the effort of Rawls’ proviso demands too much, if it is to apply to the whole of society. However, Habermas insists that in the matter of government, the language used needs to be equally accessible to all; it needs to be reasonable. But his understanding of what it means to be a religious person—someone whose faith is a source of life and not simply a list of convictions, cognitively held to be applied in a rational debate in the public sphere—gives him pause for thought. He understands faith as a something that is a part of the whole person and recognizes how it is very important for a good many religious people to actually base their political views on their religious convictions.

A public spirituality appreciates the holistic view Habermas assigns to faith. While being aware of the importance of a neutral state and the democratic process, those communities and institutions shaped by a public spirituality have no hesitation in allowing their religious identity be a part of their public discourse.

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<sup>9</sup> As referred to in Heyer, *Prophetic & Public: The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism*, 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Habermas, "Religion and the Public Sphere," 8.

<sup>11</sup> Greenawalt, "Religion and American Political Judgments," 406.

## 1.C Contribution of Religion to Society

Much of the discussion about religion and society concerns the influence of religion on the state and policy issues. This is a very narrow focus and one that misses much of how this relationship actually takes place. David Hollenbach reframes this conversation in a very helpful way. He goes beyond the direct impact of religion on policy choices and explores the more indirect and subtle ways that religion influences politics and society at large. He emphasizes the importance of intermediary associations in realizing human dignity and the value of civil society as a counter weight to the market on the one hand and the state on the other. “Society is composed of a rich and overlapping set of human communities such as families, neighborhoods, churches, labor unions, corporations, professional associations, credit unions, co-operatives, universities, and a host of other associations.”<sup>12</sup> These overlapping communities, their identity and values, give rise to particular political environments. And it is here, in and among these different communities, that religion has its greatest influence.

Communities in civil society have a critical role to play in sustaining a healthy public life. They provide opportunities for real and meaningful participation in society and acts as a buffer between the person and the market, and the person and the state. Churches make a significant contribution to the qualities of civil society. The fact of religious freedom—something that is essential in the development of democracies—draws attention to the importance of this right for other diverse groups to organize and participate in society.

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<sup>12</sup> Hollenbach, "Contexts of the Political Role of Religion: Civil Society and Culture," 884.

The right to religious freedom allows religious traditions to be resources to democratic states through their teaching of compassion, love of neighbor, their myths and stories, imaginations and source of civic skills.<sup>13</sup> Martin Marty fleshes out the contribution of religion, at its best, to society. He says that one of the positive elements of religious discourse in public is that it reveals the hidden motivations and assumptions of ones conversation partners. “A republic would be better off if everyone brought into the open whatever motivates and impels the citizens to decide and to act.”<sup>14</sup> Marty outlines many other contributions of religion to society. He points out how religion can help bring perspective and point to the limits of politics; it can help combat apathy; its communities are practiced and durable; it contributes to conversations about the common good, and can draw on overlooked resources such as community, tradition, memory, intuition, affection and hope; religion provides a voice for the voiceless; encourage dealing positively with the other; provide stamina for dealing with crisis and offers chances for renewal.<sup>15</sup> Habermas recognizes this contribution of religion to society and suggests that the liberal state

has an interest in unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere, and in the political participation of religious organizations as well. It must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves politically as such, for it cannot know whether secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity.<sup>16</sup>

In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues say that secular culture has already cut itself off from ‘key resources in the creation of meaning and identity.’

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: 888.

<sup>14</sup> Marty and Moore, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation About Religion's Role in Our Shared Life*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 2 in Marty and Moore.

<sup>16</sup> Habermas, "Religion and the Public Sphere," 10.

They noticed that despite the dominance of the language of individualism, people still acted in ways that were more in accord with the language of civic republicanism and biblical religion. But the ability to use these languages is diminishing. People were not able to describe actions—practices that required commitment and sacrifice—in ways that made a lot of sense. The language of individualism did not describe their whole lives, it was not able to account for selflessness, duty, and sustained faithfulness.

Another way to look at the contribution of religion to society is to recognize the social capital it generates. According to sociologist John A. Coleman, religion generates “an inordinate amount” of social capital.<sup>17</sup> Active citizenship relies on social capital. People who are connected to others in bonds that are characterized by trust and reciprocity are more likely to vote and engage in volunteer activity. And if they belong to churches, they are significantly more likely to vote and give money to others.<sup>18</sup> In their sociological survey, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady found in the United States participation in churches sow seeds of political activism and facilitates political participation in the United States.<sup>19</sup> This is because churches offer three key resources that increase the likelihood of political and civic participation in society. First, people learn transferable skills, such as public speaking, setting and running a meeting, writing a memo and raising money. These are the sorts of things that make the transition to wider participation much easier. Second, the churches provide dense networks of relationships among a wide variety of organizations; this makes it all the more likely that someone will

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<sup>17</sup> John A. Coleman, "Compassion, Solidarity and Empowerment: The Ethical Contribution of Religion to Society," *Journal of Religion in the Social Services* 19, no. 2 (1999): 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 13.

<sup>19</sup> Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 9.

be 'asked' to become involved in something more. And finally, churches give people a sense of their own power and ability to make a difference.<sup>20</sup> *Voice and Equality* provides evidence of the importance of churches to civil society and democracy. Coleman sums it up by saying that "The churches make our society more participatory, more egalitarian and more communitarian than it would be without them."<sup>21</sup>

These findings are confirmed by a later survey conducted by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. In 2001, a survey entitled the "Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey," found that

religiously engaged people are more likely than religiously disengaged people to be involved in civic groups of all sorts, to vote, to be active in community affairs, to give blood, to trust other people (from shopkeepers to neighbors), to know the names of public officials, to socialize with friends and neighbors, and even simply to have a wider circle of friends.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the public role of Christianity and the Catholic church in particular, has been noted for their contribution to building up democracy throughout the world since Vatican II. Samuel Huntington illustrates how more than thirty countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America moved from authoritarianism to democracy between 1974 and 1989. He points out that most of the population in them is Catholic and that their culture has been shaped by Catholicism in significant ways.<sup>23</sup>

In their day to day activities, religious organizations generate much needed social capital and teach necessary civic skills that are required by functioning democracies.

They shape and influence the culture of a society in thousands of ways. Religious values

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<sup>20</sup> See Coleman, "Compassion, Solidarity and Empowerment: The Ethical Contribution of Religion to Society," 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 14.

<sup>22</sup> John F. Kennedy School of Government, *Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey*, (2001, accessed 30 October 2007); available from <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/index.html>.

<sup>23</sup> As found in David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 98.

and arguments that take place in the public sphere, that shape the imagination and vision of communities and persons, also filter up into the working of government by a process of osmosis. There is a symbiotic relationship between what happens in the background culture of a society and the apparatus of the state. Religious institutions, leaving aside the philosophical difficulties of being involved directly with the government, might be far more effective if they concentrated on shaping the culture of a society that in turn will require particular policy changes to be made by that government. But what is the theological warrant for such an engagement of religion and society?

## ***2. Social Mission of the Catholic Church***

### **2.A Place of Social Mission in the identity of the Church**

This section explores some of the theological sources that place the social mission at the heart of the Catholic church. Although Christianity has always been involved in one way or another with social issues, it is only recently that the importance of its social mission has come to the fore. There are four interrelated reasons for this. First, since the middle of the twentieth century, there has been a shift from an institutional to a theological view of the church itself. If the social mission of the church is understood to be religious in nature, it takes on a new significance. It is no longer just one more thing that the church does among others. “Instead the social mission becomes a symbol and sacrament of the religious nature of the church as such. It is the church in action, expressing and symbolizing itself in practice. The social mission of the church, as an

integral and essential action of the church, constitutes the very being of the church.”<sup>24</sup>

Second, the nature of society is changing. The structures, arrangements, and systems in society are no longer believed to be divinely ordered and fixed. Consequently, the social mission of the church expanded its horizons, enlarging its sense of what was possible and needed in society. It no longer focused solely on individuals and their personal behavior but also sought to transform society itself in structural and systemic ways.<sup>25</sup> Third, there was an increased awareness of social injustice around the world, with a growing realization that concentration on mercy and charity was inadequate to growing disparity and inequality. Finally, the deepening understanding of the relationship between theory and praxis helped bring the social mission of the church to the fore. Up till recently, it was believed by many that social engagement and practice was simply the application of theology. But new understandings appreciate the fact that practice is not just about the application of theory but that it is rather a source of “experience that affects theory and influences how we understand the world and our tradition...Practice is a way of life, a source of knowledge by which we come to new insights.”<sup>26</sup> This view appreciates the social mission as a source of knowledge and insight itself. This has improved its place in the life of the church.

Another development that contributed to the centralizing of the social mission in the life of the church has been a changing understanding in the actual mission of the church itself. At a very basic level, the mission was understood as having people convert to Christianity and the spreading of the institution throughout the world. The social

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<sup>24</sup> Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Social Mission of Church," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 152.

<sup>25</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

mission was then seen as a preparation for this mission of conversion; poverty can hinder people's participation in the life of the church. And so people could legitimately be involved in the alleviation of poverty and other social tasks as long as they lead to a fuller participation in the life of the church. Just as the social mission was appreciated for what it could do to prepare for evangelization, it was also understood to be the consequence of evangelization. It arises out of and in response to meeting Jesus Christ and wanting to share in his mission in and to the world. Part of the reason for the social mission being viewed as a preparation or consequence of evangelization was the supposed separation between the religious and social dimension of life.

This dualistic view of the world and the confinement of religion to the private domain is described by *Gaudium et Spes* as one of the "more serious errors of our age."<sup>27</sup> One of the ways to avoid such an error is to re-examine the relationship between the religious and social mission of the church. These two dimensions do not exist independently of one another – rather, they are constitutive and indispensable to one another. It is not possible to find something 'essential' in each so that a clear distinction can be made between them. Rather, we need to allow for a complex intersection between them – one that is in constant motion and creative tension.<sup>28</sup> Theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza offers a helpful analogy. If we are asked to define what it means to be human, we might say that our rationality is what makes us different from animals. But that answer would not be sufficient on its own. We would need to add something about

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<sup>27</sup> Vatican II, "Gaudium Et Spes," in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), #43.

<sup>28</sup> A helpful way to look at this is through the relationship between the sacred and secular. Kenneth Himes and Michael Himes show how the sacred is the sacramental form of the secular. There is no false opposition between them and that everything is rooted in God; see Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 74-103.



our emotions and the fact that we are embodied. In this way, we inevitably show how there is some overlap between what it means to be human and what it means to be animal. The same is true for the social mission of the church. The religious dimension does not stand alone; it crisscrosses with economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions of life. Attempts at exclusive descriptions inevitably lead to distortions. Fiorenza suggests that the “religious and social mission of the church relate to each other not in a singular or essential manner but with overlapping and crisscrossing characteristics.”<sup>29</sup> There are dialectical, in that the religious and social constantly *affirm*, *question*, and *enhance* each other. The religious mission crisscrosses with the humanization of the world in which we live. This is not only a social task but rather is also “a sacred task for a vision of the world and humanity, as created and redeemed by God in an eschatological hope and promise.”<sup>30</sup>

## **2.B Ecclesiological Foundations for the Social Mission**

In this next section we look more specifically at some of the ecclesiological foundations that make it possible to say that the humanization of society is a sacred task. The ecclesiological contributions at Vatican II were new. Up to that point, from *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to *Pacem in Terris* (1963) there was very little in the way of ecclesiological foundations for the role of the church in the world. Consequently, the social role of the church was kept to the margins. Although it was valued, it was understood to be an extension of the church’s life and not something that was part of the

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<sup>29</sup> Fiorenza, "Social Mission of Church."

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

church's nature. Therefore involvement in the social mission of the church was something secondary and optional, it was not an essential dimension of one's faith.

### **2.B.1 *Gaudium et Spes***

Prior to the Council there was a great deal of work being done by theologians to overcome a separated theology and share with the world “an intellectually rich and spiritually powerful Christian vision.”<sup>31</sup> This theology sought to overcome the dualistic eschatological vision of life that had come to characterize the practice of faith. It wanted to move the church from being ‘over against’ the world, to a place where it was in conversation with social movements, both learning from society and teaching out of its own tradition and wisdom.<sup>32</sup> This was an enormous shift; for so long Catholicism had defined itself over and against three movements: the Protestant Reformation, the Democratic Revolution, and the Enlightenment.<sup>33</sup> Now the church was placing itself ‘in’ the world, not over and against it but in it. “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men (sic) of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the follows of Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the church starts with examining the ‘signs of the times,’ listening to the world. This listening is done in light of a particular biblical anthropology,

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<sup>31</sup> J. Bryan Hehir, "The Church in the World: Responding to the Call of the Council," in *Faith and the Intellectual Life: Marianist Award Lectures*, ed. James L. Heft (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 107.

<sup>32</sup> See J. Bryan Hehir, "The Social Role of the Church: Leo XIII, Vatican II and John Paul II," in *Catholic Social Thought and the New World Order*, ed. Oliver F and John W. Houck Williams (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 37.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Vatican II, "Gaudium Et Spes," #1.

eschatology, ecclesiology and Christology.<sup>35</sup> This shift in the church's relationship to the world has been described as being from a juridical conception of the church's role to an anthropological one.<sup>36</sup> This is one of the central theological shifts that places the social mission at the heart of the church. Significantly, the person is now seen as the place of intersection between the church and the world. *Gaudium et spes* says "The role and competence of the Church being what it is, she must in no way be confused with the political community, nor bound to any political system. For she is at once a sign and safeguard of the transcendence of the human person."<sup>37</sup> This text captures the essence of how *Gaudium et Spes* understands the relationship of the church to the world. It takes the central theme of social teaching – the protection of human dignity – and gives it ecclesial standing.<sup>38</sup> Bryan Hehir puts it this way: "The reason why the church enters public or social ministry is to protect the transcendent dignity of the human person."<sup>39</sup> The decisive shift of this text was to locate the defense of the human person at the center of Catholic ecclesiology and this moved the social ministry from the margins of the church to the center.

The first three chapters of *Gaudium et Spes* illustrate how the social mission of the church is integral to its salvific mission. The first chapter deals with the dignity of the human person. This dignity reflects the creation of humanity in the image of God and of its redemption in Christ. The second chapter outlines the need for community and relationships for human dignity to be realized, and they need to be characterized by social

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<sup>35</sup> David Hollenbach, "Gaudium Et Spes," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 273.

<sup>36</sup> Hehir, "The Church in the World: Responding to the Call of the Council," 113.

<sup>37</sup> Vatican II, "Gaudium Et Spes," #76.

<sup>38</sup> Hehir, "The Social Role of the Church: Leo XIII, Vatican II and John Paul II," 37.

<sup>39</sup> J. Bryan Hehir, "Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications," *Catholic Theological Society of America* 41 (1986): 57.

justice, equality, and be in solidarity with Christ. The third chapter argues that the realization of dignity requires the humanization of life and that much of this work contributes to the reign of God. Finally, the fourth chapter explores the relationship of the church to the world, how the secular world can learn from the church and what the church has to learn from the secular world.

In paragraphs 40 – 42 the conciliar text offers a number of principles:

- (1) the ministry of the church is religious in nature and it has no political charism or ambition;
- (2) the religious mission is to seek the reign of God, this is its purpose and the church serves this aim;
- (3) the religious mission touches all parts of life; there is no part removed from God's reigning power;
- (4) finally, there are economic (resources), political (power), social (relationships) and cultural (meaning) consequences to the gospel – the church seeks to fulfill its religious mission by asking its members to uphold human dignity, promote human rights, contribute to the unity of the human family and help people make meaning in their lives.<sup>40</sup>

### ***2.B.2 Dignitatis Humanae***

The social mission is realizable because of the recasting of the church – state relationship that took place in *Dignitatis Humanae*, Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom. Since the seventeenth century, the Catholic church believed it should be accorded special status in society by the state and that the coercive power of the state should be used to promote Catholic faith. However, *Dignitatis Humanae* replaced this belief with three principles. The first accepted the reality of religious pluralism in society and that religious freedom is a human right and should be protected by civil law. The second accepts the secular nature of the state – that it is not divinely constituted nor so

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<sup>40</sup> See Ibid, Hehir, "The Social Role of the Church: Leo XIII, Vatican II and John Paul II.", Hehir, "The Church in the World: Responding to the Call of the Council.", Hollenbach, "Gaudium Et Spes."

ordered – rather, it has its own constitution and is limited by the law on the use of force. The third concerns the freedom of the church to be itself, without particular favor from the state.<sup>41</sup> This last principle creates a challenge for the church, in that, without any favoritism from the state, it is only as good as its witness. Sociologist Jose Casanova sees in this differentiation of the church from the state an opportunity for the church to “come fully into its own, specializing in ‘its own religious’ function and either dropping or losing many other ‘nonreligious’ functions it had accumulated and could no longer meet efficiently.”<sup>42</sup> This separation or differentiation of the church from the state does not mean a separation of the church from society. The state is part of society, an essential part but only one and a narrow one at that.

*Dignitatis Humanae* has helped depoliticize the church-state relationship and *Gaudium et Spes* is responsible for putting the social mission of the church at the center of its identity. Taken together, their legacy has been, as Hehir puts it, “to plunge the church more deeply into the political arena precisely because the protection of human dignity and the promotion of human rights in fact happen in a political context.”<sup>43</sup> Although this can sound very unreligious and very political, we must remember the context. The church is focused on improving the dignity of the person, building up solidarity among the human community, and with caring for creation. It has this purpose because by its nature it is to “continue to make present in history God’s salvation in Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup> It is a sacrament of Him, it is a sign of Him and it also contains His presence and mission in the world. In its social mission, the church seeks to make present, in

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<sup>41</sup> See Hehir, "Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications," 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Hehir, "Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications," 58.

<sup>44</sup> Fiorenza, "Social Mission of Church," 156.

every dimension of life, the love of God for all. Where men and women are working to benefit society, “They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creators’ work, consulting the advantages of their brother men (sic), and contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan.”<sup>45</sup>

## 2.C Implications of Vatican II

The work done at Vatican II regarding the church’s social mission meant three things. First, the social mission became central to the nature of the church. It is no longer an optional task on the margins to be engaged with from time to time, before or after evangelization. Second, the church has a right to work in freedom from political systems in society, expecting no favors from the state, while acknowledging the secular nature of the state. And finally, Vatican II has provided the theological basis for the church’s legitimate engagement with the world.

The work the Council did on articulating theological principles that brought the social mission of the church to the center of its identity was solidified in the 1971 and 1975 synodal documents, *Justitia in Mundo* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. In the now famous statement of the bishops in 1971, there is no doubt about the centrality of the social mission, “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”<sup>46</sup> However one understands the use of the word

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<sup>45</sup> Vatican II, "Gaudium Et Spes," #34.

<sup>46</sup> Synod of Bishops, "Justitia in Mundo," in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), #6.

‘constitutive’,<sup>47</sup> there is no doubt that its use places the social mission at the heart of the identity and purpose of the church in and to the world. The concern for justice must be a part of all the dimensions of Christian life, and every aspect of the Church’s ministries should help promote social justice and the dignity of the person in community.

The requirement of justice as a central dimension of Christian life is also emphasized a few years later in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. This proclamation of the Good News sought to do away with false dualisms between the sacred and secular, the spiritual and temporal. It understood that

evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and man’s (sic) concrete life, both personal and social. This is why evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life without which personal growth and development is hardly possible, about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development – a message especially energetic today about liberation.<sup>48</sup>

The duty to work for social liberation is central to Christian evangelization. However, there are dangers if there is too much emphasis on liberation, with only a horizontal view of the world. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* warns against the reduction of the Good News, the politicization of the Christian message, the over identification of religion with the struggle for liberation, and a danger of forgetting about the importance of attitudinal change.<sup>49</sup> These are helpful provisos in finding the right balance in the overlapping and crisscrossing characteristics that make up the church’s social mission.

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<sup>47</sup> Kenneth Himes, O.F.M. asks if the bishops were “putting the work of justice on a par with the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments as being definitive of the Church? Or were the bishops simply making the point that working for justice is not merely an ethical implication of discipleship but something at the very heart of Christian life?” see Kenneth R. Himes O.F.M., "Commentary on *Justitia in Mundo* (Justice in the World)," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes O.F.M. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 341.

<sup>48</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Evangelii Nuntiandi," in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), #29.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, #32, #33, #35, #36.

### **3. Participation**

#### **3.A Signs of the Times**

This section of the paper explores two themes that are central to the social mission of the Catholic church: *participation* and the *common good*. We start with participation.

One of the ‘signs of the times’ today is the extent and systematic exclusion of billions of people from what they need to live life with dignity. These exclusions can be placed in four interdependent and mutually related categories: economic (resources), political (power), cultural (meaning) and social (relationships). These categorizations of exclusion illustrate the essential nature of participation in the lives of people today.

When people are excluded from meaningful participation, their dignity is eroded and they are unable to flourish in life.

The first category concerns economics, it refers to the resources needed to live with dignity such as food, water, clothing, shelter, employment, medicines, education, housing, and transportation. At its most extreme, if someone does not have enough to eat or the necessary treatment for infection, they die. This is the case for the 1,200 children who die every hour throughout the world as a result of poverty and preventable disease.<sup>50</sup> A further 1 billion people survive in abject poverty on less than \$1 a day.<sup>51</sup> Those who live in such acute poverty have little access to political influence to change their situation; this economic structure leads to the second category, the political dimension of what is needed to live with dignity.

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<sup>50</sup> United Nations Development Programme., *International Cooperation at a Crossroads: Aid, Trade and Security in an Unequal World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. In this section of the report, the authors provocatively point out how 1/5 of the world’s population do not think anything about spending \$2 on a coffee while another 1/5 of the world’s population survive on less than \$1 a day and where children die because of the lack of anti mosquito bed nets.



Without good governance, inclusive state infrastructure and healthy mediating institutions, both global and national, societies will be unable to care for *all* their citizens. Those without a voice or a say in how things are organized are very exposed to the vagaries of the market and the power of the state. According to the United Nations Report on Human Development entitled *Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, “For politics and political institutions to promote human development and safeguard the freedom and dignity of all people, democracy must widen and deepen.”<sup>52</sup> It needs to be a democracy in both ‘form and substance’, by the people and for the people. The aim is for people to be free to decide how to live their own lives, express their own views and participate in organizations and institutions that can shape how they live together. Institutions, legislation, and infrastructure are essential to this task, but just as important is culture – the values and meanings circulating in societies and among different communities and people that give rise to and sustain social structures.

The third category that is essential to living life with dignity is a life giving culture. Michael Paul Gallagher asks a very helpful and revealing question that helps us into this category. “Is the culture leading us towards what is profoundly humanizing and creative of love, or pushing us towards what is imprisoning, destructive, and closed to compassion?”<sup>53</sup> Any answer to this question will require nuance and discernment, but it does help make the point. Culture—the values, beliefs, stories, traditions and assumptions—profoundly shapes what we need to live life with dignity. The combination of these three categories: the economic (resources), political (power) and

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<sup>52</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 122.

culture (meaning) gives rise to certain relationships in society based on who has what resources, access to power, and what meaning is given to these structures.

The fourth category refers to the social dimension of our lives together and is extremely important in living with dignity. Relationships which are loving, just, supportive, inclusive, reciprocal, self-giving and appreciative are all essential to human well-being. However, access to and participation in healthy and life giving relationships is often contingent on people's ethnic identity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and nationality. The impact of culture, politics and resources all give rise to views of the other and patterns of relating that can be inclusive or exclusive. All four categories influence one another but fundamentally, we live in a very divided world and societies marked by poverty and exclusion – meaningful participation is essential in this context.<sup>54</sup>

### **3.B Having the Say**

One of the key ways to structure societies that are less divided and more equitable is through creating opportunities for people to 'have their say.' This is a central theme in the Hebrew scriptures as identified by J.P.M. Walsh. In his book, *The Mighty from their Thrones*, Walsh points out how important it was for the Hebrews to have the say in their

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<sup>54</sup> In the USA, for the first time in five years, the poverty rate and the number of Americans living in poverty both remained the same from the prior year. The official poverty rate in 2005 (the most current year for which figures are available) was 12.6 percent. Total Americans below the official poverty thresholds numbered 37 million. Since 2000, the number of poor Americans has grown by more than 6 million. In 2005, the number of people living in extreme poverty, that is, with incomes below half the poverty line, remained the same at 15.6 million people. The number of Americans living in extreme poverty remains the highest level on record, since data first became available in 1975 – see Catholic Campaign for Human Development United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Poverty in America: Together We Can End It," (2007).. In Ireland, 18.5% of people live below the poverty line. In 2007 the poverty line for a single person is €209.87 a week or €10,951 a year; 22% of Ireland's children (just over 200,000 individuals) live in households whose income is below the poverty line. See Conference of Religious of Ireland Justice Commission, "Election Briefing," (2007).

own lives. It is a value connected to power, belonging, participation and is at the heart of our existence as human beings; “we express and embody and affirm ourselves, and to that extent realize ourselves, in choice and action.”<sup>55</sup> This would not be possible without the use of our voice, without our views and opinions mattering to others, without our being able to influence and shape the world around us. According to Walsh, there is a Hebrew word for having the say and it is *mišpat*, a term essential for human existence, and particularly for a harmony that comes from right relationship.

This value of having the say or participation in community is at the heart of the covenant between the people of Israel and Yahweh. Michael Walzer points out that for the people to move from slavery—physical, emotional and mental—to freedom, they needed to participate in the covenant that was made with Yahweh. They needed to have their say, otherwise they would simply have “transferred their slavish obedience from Pharaoh to God.”<sup>56</sup> Participation in this context requires the taking of responsibility and accepting of accountability. On their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, a moment of choice emerges – to remain as they were or to become the people of God. They were asked to choose between remaining as slave in their habits and imaginations or to live as a free people in the promised land. Exodus describes this gathering and moment of decision where the people accept the covenant for themselves by themselves. “And all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8). In this way, the old hierarchies are suspended, the covenant is entered into by all. In this section, Exodus says ‘all’ but Deuteronomy elaborates on who is included in the ‘all’:

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<sup>55</sup> J. P. M. Walsh, *The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 73.

All of you stand here today in the presence of Yahweh your God: your heads of tribes, your elders, your scribes, all the men of Israel, with your children and your wives (and the stranger too who is in your camp, whether he cuts wood or draws water for you), and you are about to enter into the covenant of Yahweh your God...and by which, today, he makes a nation of you and he himself becomes a God to you (Deut. 29:10-13).

It is through their active participation in this founding act that they begin to become a people. The making of this covenant was not made through representatives or leaders, each needed to give their voice, each needed to have their say.

### **3.C Participation as Justice**

When we think about justice and what is due to people, we can often think of the issue of distribution and focus on who is to get how much. However, there is a prior issue to be taken into account. David Hollenbach puts it well when he says “More basic than the arguments about the size of the slices is the one about who should be at the table in the first place.”<sup>57</sup> Central to the issue of justice and distribution is concern with the matter of participation and who has the say in how resources are distributed, how power is organized, how values are communicated and how relationships are structured.

At a fundamental level, we need to ask whose voice counts and carries the weight of influence in any given community. This is a helpful question in identifying arenas of injustice that sit behind the visible manifestation of injustice. Participation is necessary for justice. Michael Walzer puts it this way,

The primary good we distribute to one another is membership in some human community. And what we do with regard to membership structures all our other distributive choices: it determines with whom we make choices, and from whom

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<sup>57</sup> David Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights: American Catholic Social Ethics in a Pluralistic World* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 80.

we require obedience and collect taxes, to whom we allocate goods and services.<sup>58</sup>

There is not one universal criteria for justice; it has different manifestations in different contexts. What is fair at home will be quite different to what is fair at work or on the baseball field. The different contexts give rise to different criteria. The value of participation lies in the ability to shape what is fair and what it means to live life with dignity in these different contexts, or at least choose to subscribe to the criteria of what is just in a particular system. Clearly it is not possible for everyone to have a say about everything that structures their lives together – but this is not to undermine the value of participation. It is a human need; to be a person is to be a member of society – and this membership takes place in all sorts of different subcommunities, be it families, neighborhoods, labor unions, small business, giant corporations, farm cooperatives, and voluntary organizations.<sup>59</sup> Participation in social life is constitutive of the human person<sup>60</sup> – this is a central belief of the Catholic Christian faith. Dignity is realized in community,<sup>61</sup> people flourish through participation in life giving communities. Kenneth Himes and Michael Himes put it starkly when they say “To deny relationality and to reject relationships is to hover on the edge of non-being.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 31.

<sup>59</sup> See Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights: American Catholic Social Ethics in a Pluralistic World*, 81.

<sup>60</sup> Himes and Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology.*, 36.

<sup>61</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Tenth Anniversary Edition of Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy; a Catholic Framework for Economic Life; a Decade after "Economic Justice for All": Continuing Principles, Changing Context, New Challenges.* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1997), #28.

<sup>62</sup> Himes and Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology.*, 57.

### 3.D Participation and Horizons of Significance

Along with being a matter of justice, participation is also important because it connects people to horizons of significance. Charles Taylor in *The Ethics of Authenticity* claims that the advent of individualism embodies the valuable ideal of authenticity. However, the emergence of the dark side of individualism has created a centering on the self which “both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning and less concerned with others in society.”<sup>63</sup> This centering on the self has given rise to people determining, by and for themselves alone, what is significant in their own individual lives. They believe that human significance is conferred through the act of choosing itself; choice is the good – not so much what is chosen but that it is chosen. Some believe all options are equally valid and worth is conferred on something by the act of it being chosen in the first place. This denies the pre-existence of horizons of significance, where somethings are more valuable than others, before we get to choose at all. There must be some choices that are better than others, some choices that are more likely to enhance dignity than undermine it. Without a background of significance, choice becomes meaningless. “Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else in this order matter crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.”<sup>64</sup> Taylor believes that human life is fundamentally dialogical in character; it is through interaction with others that people become more fully human. Consequently, meaningful participation in society goes to the very heart of what is needed by people to realize their identity and live meaningfully.

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<sup>63</sup> Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

### 3.E Participation as Self-Gift

The recognition of participation as a right is a strong statement and if it is a right, then there are also responsibilities to provide for its realization on the part of institutions, communities, and people in society. Along with it being a right with a corresponding responsibility, the Catholic tradition also points to the obligation to participate in itself – it is a blessing and as such, ought not to be taken for granted.<sup>65</sup> This right, responsibility, obligation, and blessing is concerned with creating the conditions not alone for one’s own well-being or that of one’s community but just as importantly, for self-gift. According to Kenneth Himes and Michael Himes, “The fundamental human right is the right to give oneself away to another and ultimately to the Other.”<sup>66</sup> This giving of the self to another reflects the nature of God as pure self-gift. In God, there is no distinction between being and loving. This is revealed in the identity of God as Trinity and described in patristic imagery: God is lover, the beloved, and the love between them. God is a relationship and community of love – God is love (1 Jn 4:8), a self-giving love. In order to be close to our true nature, as created in the image and likeness of this Triune and self-giving God, we too need to be in self-giving<sup>67</sup> loving relationships. We need to participate in communities that promote inclusion and allow for this authentic giving of the self to the other. That is why social exclusion is so harmful to the dignity of the person. It strikes at the very thing that is essential to human well being – relationships. It prevents people

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<sup>65</sup> Catholic Church. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Administrative Committee., *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility: A Statement by the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003), 7, Thomas Massaro, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 2000).

<sup>66</sup> Himes and Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology.*, 59.

<sup>67</sup> A note of caution to the use of self-giving is important; too often people have been and are forced to give of themselves in ways that are oppressive and exploitative. Self-giving must be characterized by love and come from a place of freedom.

from connecting with others, making a contribution to their community and realizing their sense of worth. The American Bishops have referred to this kind of exclusion as a form of social sin. And the maintenance of this situation is a ‘dereliction of Christian duty.’<sup>68</sup> They have stated unequivocally that “Basic justice demands the establishment of minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons...that social institutions be ordered in a way that guarantees all persons the ability to participate actively in the economic, political, and cultural life of society.”<sup>69</sup>

Participation then, is essential to human well-being. It is a matter of justice but more than that, it is a matter of love, of giving and receiving – being in relationships that shape meaning and offer horizons of significance. A public spirituality, grounded in Catholic tradition, ought to create a desire in people and communities for such participation. This sort of participation contributes to our next topic, the common good.

## **4. The Common Good**

### **4.A What Does It Mean?**

The key insight of the common good is that the “good of the single person and the quality of the common life persons share with one another in society are linked.”<sup>70</sup> One way that this linkage takes place is through the use of ‘public goods’. These are things that are present for all members of a relevant community – if they are there for some, they must be there for all. They are non-rivalrous in consumption; if someone is enjoying

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<sup>68</sup> Bishops, *Tenth Anniversary Edition of Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy; a Catholic Framework for Economic Life; a Decade after "Economic Justice for All": Continuing Principles, Changing Context, New Challenges.*, #77.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, #77, #78.

<sup>70</sup> Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics.*, 3.



the good, it does not preclude others from doing the same. A public park is an example of a public good, whereas a golf club is not. A public good is also non-excludible. It cannot be easily confined to a few people or a particular community. The air we breathe is an example of this kind of public good. But public goods are only a part of the common good.

In reflecting on the relationship between the person and the common life of a society, we might think that the gross national product (GNP) of a country is a measure of the common good. However, this would be misleading, as the GNP does not give an accurate picture of how *all* members of a country are living. In a particular society, the GNP might be high, but this might hide from view a gross inequality and social exclusion that is a reality for large parts of the population. The common good requires that all must participate and benefit from it.<sup>71</sup>

If the common good is not comparable to public goods or the GNP (although these are part of it), what is it? Is it cultural values and traditions or is it healthy and life giving institutions. It is these but it is more than these. An analogy might be helpful. When we attend a symphony orchestra, we are aware of the different parts that combine to produce a concordant piece of music. Some of these parts include the musicians, their talent, their love of music, their discipline, their relationships with one another, the score, their instruments, the conductor, the concert hall, and the audience. All these parts come together in a particular way, in a specific place and time, and creates something that would not be possible through the efforts of only a few.<sup>72</sup> The common good works like

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<sup>71</sup> David Hollenbach, "Common Good," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 193.

<sup>72</sup> This is an analogy that I heard from Kenneth Himes, O.F.M.

that; it refers to how the different parts of society, country or the world work together for the good of all.

A key element in thinking about the nature of the common good is the good of being a community in the first place. If there was no community or relationship between the members of the orchestra, there would be no cohesion or music. Relationships contribute to public goods and the GNP, and where there are no relationships, there can be no common good.

#### **4.B Catholic Understandings of the Common Good**

In the classic definition of the common good in Catholic social thought, Pope John XXIII says that it is “the sum total of the conditions of social living, whereby men (sic) are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection.”<sup>73</sup> Although perfection here is a theological term, it can also be understood to mean fulfillment or development. The common good claims that people will only flourish in a community context and that there are certain goods that can only be enjoyed by being part of a community. A short while later, in *Pacem et Terris*, Pope John XXIII brought another dimension to the understanding of the common good, expanding its meaning to issues of international relations. He said, “public and universal authority must have as its fundamental objective the recognition, respect, safeguarding, and promotion of human

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<sup>73</sup> John XXIII, "Mater Et Magistra," in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), #65.

rights.”<sup>74</sup> By placing the common good in relationship to human rights, he managed to lessen the fear that the common good was in opposition to personal rights and freedom.

Suspicion of the common good is deeply embedded in the western imagination as a result of the Wars of Religion.<sup>75</sup> This fear is compounded because of the pluralism in society today and the assumption by many that pursuit of the common good inevitably leads to conflict and in some cases violence. The fear is that one group will try to impose its view of how society should be organized regardless of the views and traditions of others. Consequently, many advocate disengagement from the forging of ideas in the public forum, for fear of division and disruption. David Hollenbach believes that there is an option between the forceful imposition of ones views on others and abandonment of the public sphere altogether. By going back in history, before the Wars of Religion, he shows that commitment to the common good was not necessarily in conflict with equality and suggests that it does not have to be today. He says that the “active engagement of free citizens in public debate about how they would live together was the mark of their equality.”<sup>76</sup> This active engagement today is a critical dimension of the common good itself, as it provides the opportunities for such engagement. The common good points to the ‘conditions’ that are necessary for a life of fullness and to the rights that are essential to live with dignity. Drew Christensen believes that this emphasis on human rights offers

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<sup>74</sup> John XXIII, "Pacem in Terris," in *Catholic Social Teaching: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), #139.

<sup>75</sup> Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics.*, 24. The Wars of Religion refers to the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in France, 1562 – 1598. The traditional saying ‘one faith, one law, one king’ helps us understand the thinking of the day. Religion, the state and society were intimately connected. Attempts to control power by the monarchy and the nobles led to great devastation and suffering between the different religious traditions. There were eight wars in all.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

a more “comprehensive, accurate, and definitive understanding of the common good than the customary appeal to ‘conditions of social living.’”<sup>77</sup>

While rights indeed help and facilitate the common good, we need to be careful of overdependence on the popular language of rights, particularly in connection with the common good. Mary Ann Glendon offers a helpful warning to this tendency today when she says “Saturated with rights, political language can no longer perform the important function of facilitating public discussion of the right ordering of our lives together.”<sup>78</sup> If everyone claims to have a right to nearly everything, there is little room for discussion, consensus, and participation. Rights have to be correlated with responsibilities and obligations. If the common good relies too much on the language of rights, it will lose an essential dimension of its role in society. This dimension is its emphasis on relationships and thus responsibilities are part of the common good itself.

David Hollenbach suggests that a being is a person to the extent that they are “a-being-in-relationship-to-other-persons.”<sup>79</sup> The common good is what helps people be in relationships that are open and just and when people are in these sorts of relationships – that also *is* the common good.

#### **4.C Shared Assumptions Reveal a Good in Common**

While a communitarian and personalist view of society seems to be more in keeping with the common good, it must also be acknowledged that values which seem to

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<sup>77</sup> S.J. Christiansen, Drew, "The Common Good and the Politics of Self-Interest: A Catholic Contribution to the Practice of Citizenship," in *Beyond Individualism: Toward a Retrieval of Moral Discourse in America*, ed. Donald L Gelpi S.J. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 63.

<sup>78</sup> Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse*, xi.

<sup>79</sup> Hollenbach, "Common Good," 194.

privilege individualism and promote tolerance, actually exist because of the common good. Without shared assumptions and belief in the value of self-determination and respect for other people, individualism and tolerance could not be sustained in society. Freedom is only possible in a certain context – where there are shared meanings and beliefs about the importance of choice and autonomy. These meanings and beliefs are carried in the culture of any given society and community. At different times, in particular places, there will be different degrees of emphasis on the freedom of the person and the collective welfare of the community. This is a balance that is always shifting and in a state of motion. There can never be any real separation between the person and society – only degrees of emphasis.

#### **4.D Interconnectedness of the World**

Working towards the common good requires a grasp of the interconnectedness of the world today and its interdependence. This understanding goes to the heart of the common good – it leaves no room for compartmentalization of one’s life but requires an appreciation that the well-being of the whole is dependent on the well-being of all the parts. This can be seen most visibly through environmental issues. For instance, there is a ready consciousness among the public of the connection between the destruction of rain forests in Brazil and the quality of air in Boston, between CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and global warming, between global warming and rising sea levels, and between rising sea levels and the erosion of life on particular coasts.

The common good, in the midst of our radical interdependence, seeks to work for a balance in the institutions, systems, structures of any given society or international

relationship so that *all* people have what they need to live life meaningfully and that the whole of creation is cherished. In this way, the common good can act as a norm of accountability for social policy decisions. It asks if decisions being made take sufficient account of the needs of the whole community.<sup>80</sup> It is a criterion by which self-interest or the interest of groups, markets, or governments can be challenged by the value of common advancement.

In conclusion, the common good is about identifying one's personhood with the well-being of all life, appreciating the fundamental interdependent nature of our existence and working towards a balance where the whole of creation flourishes, while acknowledging that this will only be realized fully in the eschaton.

So far, I've pointed out the contribution of religion to society, the theological basis for involvement in public issues, and the importance of working for meaningful participation and the common good. Now we turn our attention to the 'how' of this involvement in society. A public spirituality—which refers to a desire and a capacity to work for the common good, one that is rooted in a particular religious tradition—should draw people to participate in our common life. Attention is needed to both the method and style of this participation.

## **5. *Theology in the Public Sphere***

### **5.A Correlation**

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<sup>80</sup> Christiansen, "The Common Good and the Politics of Self-Interest: A Catholic Contribution to the Practice of Citizenship," 69.

Christianity has always had to articulate what it means to live in the world as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This has manifested itself in different ways over the centuries. In his classic work, H. Richard Niebuhr outlined five approaches – Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture.<sup>81</sup> This chapter places its emphasis on the contribution of Christianity to the transformation of culture; it is most in keeping with the theological rationale as articulated earlier in this chapter.

The revised critical correlational model of theology is one that provides a framework for the relationship between religion and society and the one favored by a public spirituality. It is not just concerned with how Christianity—and given the particular focus of this chapter, Catholicism—can transform culture but how it is also called to conversion and change itself. Theological correlation “emphasizes the importance of theology’s engagement with contemporary culture.”<sup>82</sup> This engagement can take different forms in various contexts at given times.

St. Paul engaged with the Athenians in a particular way. When he stood in front of the council of the Areopagus he said:

Men of Athens, I have seen for myself how extremely scrupulous you are in all religious matters, because I noticed, as I strolled round admiring your sacred monuments, that you had an altar inscribed: ‘To An Unknown God.’ Well, the God whom I proclaim is in fact the one whom you already worship without knowing it” (Acts 17:23).

Paul did not confine himself to preach to those from a Jewish background but also sought out others from the Graeco-Roman tradition. He spoke to them in a way that makes use of their own images and values. He entered their world and affirmed their search for

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<sup>81</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

<sup>82</sup> Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Francis Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 138.

truth and God. His success was connected to his ability to harness the “thought forms of the prevailing culture and to depict it as an embryonic revelation of the God whose presence is already dimly apparent to human reasoning independent of revelation.”<sup>83</sup>

Paul’s ability to connect with the questions of others, to use their language and idiom to communicate Christian faith is central to correlational theology. Paul Tillich sought a way for theology to engage with the existential and moral questions of each generation. He believed that theology could offer a source of understanding that made it possible to live meaningfully. For him, the theologian needed to pay close attention to the culture, to listen to the questions being asked and offer a response that is both theologically authentic and understandable to the culture. He says:

The answers implied in the event of revelation are meaningful only in so far as they are in correlation with questions concerning the whole of our existence... Only those who have experienced the shock of transitoriness, the anxiety in which they are aware of their finitude, the threat of non-being, can understand what the notion of God means. Only those who have experienced the tragic ambiguities of our historical existence and have totally questioned the meaning of existence can understand what the symbol of God means...<sup>84</sup>

He sought to make Christianity understandable and relevant to ‘modern’ people who were skeptical and without its wisdom. However, Tillich’s correlation presumed a non-critical exchange between the gospel and culture, more of an application than a dialectical correlation.

## 5.B Revised Critical Correlation

David Tracy built on the work of Tillich. He believes that theology ought to be at the interface of human experience and Christian truth claims. Theology is not just a

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Tillich and James Luther Adams, *Political Expectation* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1981), 57.



resource for the questions of the day, a place where answers are to be found – it is also a partner in the conversation and as such, is open to new insights about its own identity and beliefs. He says:

In short, the revisionist theologian is committed to what seems clearly to be the central task of contemporary Christian theology: the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between the principle values, cognitive claims, and existential faith of both the reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity.<sup>85</sup>

Tracy envisages a multiplicity of ways that a reinterpreted postmodern consciousness might relate to a reinterpreted Christianity and visa versa. The correlation, regardless of outcome, needs to be mutually critical and corrective. Both sources must be open to investigation and critique and to the mutual enrichment of each other. The aim of revised correlational theology for Tracy is to alleviate suffering in the world.<sup>86</sup> This requires imagination and adaptability on the part of those using the method. Tracy points out that when suffering is principally political or social, theology will turn into a political or liberative form of correlating the Christian search for true development in areas such as economic, politics, and socio-cultural realities. And when theologians hear the cry of pain in people from the personal realm of life, theology as a ‘correctional discipline’ will become a psychological theology that seeks to correlate the Christian call for healing “and transformation with the results, in both theory and practice, of contemporary psychology.”<sup>87</sup> Theology must be able to connect with issues and questions in particular contexts, using a language that makes available its experience and insight.

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<sup>85</sup> David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order, the New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 32.

<sup>86</sup> David W. Tracy, "The Role of Theology in Public Life: Some Reflections," *Word & World* 4 (1984): 238.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

## 5.C Conversation for Integration

The metaphor of conversation is helpful in understanding the dynamic that takes place when human experience and the Christian tradition are brought into relationship with one another. At the heart of conversation, there is a dialectical dimension and used in the context of this dissertation, it refers to the encounter between “an already cultured version of Christian faith and another culture.”<sup>88</sup> This encounter is characterized by a back-and-forth movement between partners, an exchange between the ‘gospel’ and the culture and the culture and the ‘gospel’. Within this conversation, there are three possible aspects: “one of affirming, giving assent, or accepting; an aspect of questioning and possibly of refusing or negating;”<sup>89</sup> and “of moving one to new and transformed possibilities for both ‘gospel’ and culture.”<sup>90</sup> In such a conversation, the Christian faith might affirm dimensions of the culture as being congruent with its deepest convictions; or there may be parts of the culture that Christian faith questions or rejects as being opposed to God’s reign and perhaps, though the conversation, Christian faith will move on and be enriched by the encounter. This sequence also works the other way. There will be “aspects of this culturally laden ‘gospel’”<sup>91</sup> that culture will affirm and encourage; there will be aspects that the culture will critique and call into question and it is hoped that this encounter will help the culture to move on and be enriched by the conversation.

Conversation is something that we should not emerge intact from, according to the poet David Whyte. It ought to enlarge our understanding of ourselves, others and creation. David Tracy defines conversation this way:

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas H. Groome, "Inculturation: How to Proceed in a Pastoral Context," *Concilium* (1994): 121.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 101.

<sup>90</sup> Groome, "Inculturation: How to Proceed in a Pastoral Context," 121.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.<sup>92</sup>

Conversation is complex and requires real participation, far more than takes place in a chat or a casual encounter with another. When entered into the way that Tracy suggests, it can be transformative. But we must realize, as Hans Georg Gadamer helpfully points out in *Truth and Method*, that when we enter into conversations with others, we are all the time engaged in interpretation. All our perceptions of others are based on interpretation. We project meaning onto them and these projected meanings, our prejudices, need to be checked out to see if they are valid or distortions or a bit of both.<sup>93</sup> But it is not possible to check them out on our own; only when they are provoked do we notice them in the first place.<sup>94</sup> Only when we are ‘pulled up short’, when there is a dissonance between what we believe and some new perspective, do we begin to intuit the need for further reflection. New understanding will happen at the in-between of what is familiar and what is strange. The art of good questioning can bring us there. Questions open up possibilities and engage assumptions. But allowing ourselves to ask questions or be asked questions is risky, older understandings and ways of seeing the world might be found wanting and require adjustment.

There are many examples of people and organizations participating in the public sphere that have no desire for conversation. They simply want to communicate their message and move their agenda – and this is perfectly reasonable. However, a public

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<sup>92</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 19.

<sup>93</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed., Continuum Impacts (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 269.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

spirituality, drawn from a Catholic perspective will attempt more. It seeks to participate in ways that fosters conversation, advancing the common good and improving the quality of the public sphere itself.

When we are in conversation with someone or a text for the first time, we find ourselves agreeing, disagreeing, surprised or confused in varying combinations and degrees of intensity. These are our initial interpretative reactions, our first impressions. To listen better and understand more fully the position of another, we must temporarily suspend concern for our own position on a particular issue. This will help us grasp the point that the other is making. This is not to be equated with a facile agreement with the other's position but rather as an attempt to "build a bridge of trust and mutual respect for the subsequent negotiation of differences in interest and perspective."<sup>95</sup> It is only when we have come to understand the position and interest of another that the back-and-forth movement of authentic conversation may begin to unfold in a transformative manner. The challenging, confirming, negating, confusing, surprising, reassuring, disturbing, comforting dynamics of the conversation can 'pull us up short' and help reveal our presuppositions and enlarge our understanding of the issue at hand.

When a conversation gets to this level, the participants must be prepared to "submit all positions to a critical and creative suspicion, to expose and challenge systematic biases on both sides."<sup>96</sup> This process can involve people in the four transcendental precepts proposed by Bernard Lonergan. Conversation helps us tend to our experience of the 'given' data, to understand the intelligible, to judge the truth, and to

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<sup>95</sup> Michael Cowan and Bernard J. Lee, *Conversation, Risk, and Conversion: The Inner and Public Life of Small Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 85.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

be responsible for the good.<sup>97</sup> The bringing together of theology and experience, or faith and life, in a conversational manner is essential if faith is not to be marginalized and shrunk to fit the private dimension of our lives together. In the following section, I explore 3 approaches to bringing theology to public life.

## 5.D Theology in Public Life – 3 Approaches

Cardinal Bernardin wrote that the ‘how’ or the ‘style’ of the church’s engagement in public life is crucial to the outcome.<sup>98</sup> I believe it is possible to see three different ‘styles’ at work today in the USA and Ireland. One places great emphasis on persuasion and dialogue, one believes in taking a more prophetic stance and another, which is difficult to categorize, places much of its effort in shaping the law of the church and the law of the land.<sup>99</sup> Before I describe these, it is useful to remember that there is quite a bit of overlap between them. At their best, they can complement one another. Also, depending on the context, one ‘style’ might be more appropriate than another.

### 5.D.1 a conversational approach

The first approach, drawn from Vatican II, emphasizes that the church be in dialogue with the world.<sup>100</sup> This is a two way relationship, where the church has

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<sup>97</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 133.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph Bernardin, "The Public Life and Witness of the Church," *America* (1996): 18.

<sup>99</sup> To apply more classic types to these categories, the first category described by Niebuhr as Christ the Transformer of Culture, the second could also fit here or could be described, along with the third category as Christ against Culture, see Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*; also the first category could be described as ‘church’ and the second and third one as ‘sect’, see Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 Vols (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960).

<sup>100</sup> See especially *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae* in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).

something to learn from the world and something to offer the world. The reciprocal nature of the relationship is fostered by “the clear recognition of the intrinsic value and validity of secular institutions and secular disciplines.”<sup>101</sup> This view allows the church to engage in authentic conversation – for without an openness to learning something from others, there can be no real dialogue. The organizations, communities and people who find a home in this category value persuasion as a means of communicating Gospel values. They seek to communicate the wisdom of tradition in a credible and engaging way – appealing to the intellect, desires, and innate sense of goodness and justice in people. This style, which is respectful of the variety of ways that people of goodwill interpret their faith, is committed to the process of transformation that takes place incrementally over long periods of time. It does not see itself as having definitive answers to give to the world. Rather it is more of a “catalyst moving the public argument to grapple with questions of moral values, ethical principles and the human and religious meaning of policy choices.”<sup>102</sup> In this way, it can help shape public opinion, values, and influence the culture. This influence on culture is the approach favored by David Hollenbach.<sup>103</sup> He says, “Far better and more likely to succeed would be a church strategy of persuasion that operates on the cultural rather than the legal level.”<sup>104</sup> Such an approach requires patience, courage, wisdom and humility.<sup>105</sup>

To such an approach, there are some necessary cautions. There is the danger that involvement with the public will lead to accommodation and co-option with the values of

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<sup>101</sup> Hehir, "The Church in the World: Responding to the Call of the Council," 112.

<sup>102</sup> Hehir, "Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications," 64.

<sup>103</sup> David Hollenbach, "Catholicism and American Political Culture: Confrontation, Accommodation, or Transformation," in *Inculturation and the Church in North America*, ed. T. Frank Kennedy S.J. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>105</sup> For further reading on the ‘how’ of theology in the public sphere see Dan O’Connell, "Religious Education and the Public Sphere," *The Furrow* 57, no. 7/8 (2006).

the world, thereby diluting the imperatives of the Christian message. Persuasion can take time and this is something that many people who suffer injustice and exclusion do not have; they need help immediately. And so, there is need for something more immediate, and at times, confrontational.

### **5.D.2 a prophetic approach**

This leads to the second approach, which can be broadly categorized as prophetic. It seeks to persuade by witness and being uncompromising in its demands for social justice. This approach has deep roots in both the Christian and Hebrew scriptures. According to Abraham Heschel, “the prophet was someone who said No to his (sic) society, condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacency, waywardness, and syncretism.”<sup>106</sup> The prophets were steeped in the justice of Yahweh and as a consequence were acutely aware of the presence of injustice and oppression within society. This awareness was nearly unbearable for them. They felt the pain of those excluded, the anger and compassion of Yahweh, and lived in the fissure between the prevailing culture of oppression and Yahweh’s desire for justice. According to Walter Brueggemann, the task of the prophet is to “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the dominant community around us.”<sup>107</sup> This consciousness is to accomplish two things. Firstly, it is to use criticism in dismantling the dominant consciousness and secondly, it is to energize people through a vision of what is possible here and now. Those who are poor and powerless are at the heart of such an approach. It lifts up their lives, juxtaposing how things are for them and how things are for the rest of

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<sup>106</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial, 2001), xxix.

<sup>107</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

us. It seeks to transform the dominant consciousness that sustains inequality and social exclusion, often in jarring and confrontational ways.

A critique of this approach concerns its danger of politicizing the Gospel by getting too involved in politics and the work for social justice. At times, it can lose connection with its own religious traditions. Such an approach can be polarizing; you are either with or against us – there is no middle ground. It often deals in broad strokes about issues of social justice and “[D]istinction, qualifications, and contending opinions are not the prophet’s stock in trade.”<sup>108</sup> This tendency can lead to work on single issues, which perpetuate single issue politics, fragmenting further the political process, and distorting the particular religious tradition one belongs to – making it equivalent to the issue at hand.

### **5.D.3 a juridical approach**

The third approach can be seen at work in debates concerning such issues as abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, cloning, gay marriage and adoption of children by gay parents. It is characterized by an oppositional stance on these issues. Within this category, there is a desire and a drive for clear and radical Gospel teaching. The certainty that emerges for some out of this approach requires a sharp break by the church with society. A consequence of this break is for Christians to live over and against society, a clear boundary is constructed dividing those in communion with the church and those outside its boundaries. It is reminiscent of the ‘Christ against Culture; category as

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<sup>108</sup> J. Bryan Hehir, "Can the Church Convincingly Engage American Culture," *Church* (2004): 7.



outlined by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*. Those who favor this approach seek to use legislation to further their mission. This is quite a different method from the one outlined in the first category, which seeks to influence the culture, which will in turn influence the law. This group aims to shape the law and so influence the culture. They believe it is reasonable to use the coercive power of the state to help shape the values and habits of citizens in society. They appreciate the educative qualities of the law.<sup>109</sup>

Those who question this approach believe that it is alienating of church members and of society in general, and in the end is counterproductive. It does not appreciate the complexity of issues, nor the intricacies involved in working for social change. For instance, some in the church make claims about gay marriage and the harm it does to society, but the arguments it uses are not substantiated by sociological research and are found wanting by the general population and are unconvincing. Therefore, there is little resonance on the part of the general public and with some sections of the church's own leadership with the view of the church on some issues in the culture at large. Without this meeting of minds and hearts, there is little chance that the law is going to move too far ahead of public opinion. Referring to the mission of the church in working for justice and human rights, Hollenbach believes it will be compromised "by misdirected appeals to the coercive power of the state and by failure to make carefully reasoned and persuasive contributions on these matters in the cultural debates of the United States today."<sup>110</sup>

Another danger with this juridical approach is that at some stage, Catholicism appears as only a "collection of prohibitions."<sup>111</sup> John Waters, writing in the *Irish Times*, makes the

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<sup>109</sup> Hollenbach, "Catholicism and American Political Culture: Confrontation, Accommodation, or Transformation," 17.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>111</sup> John Waters, "Hearing Only Pious Cliches," *The Irish Times*, 22nd October 2007.

point that if the culture perceives the church as being interested only in prohibitions, then regardless of what is said, it will not be heard properly. The danger then is that people only hear “pious regurgitation of what always sounds like clichés. The meaning shorts out on the circuit board of collective understanding, with its crisscrossing wires of prejudice, hostility, assumed knowledge, ideology and rote learning.”<sup>112</sup> Clearly, it would be an overstatement to lay the blame for this situation at the feet of an approach by the church that seeks to shape the laws of the land. However, if the church places too much emphasis on using the coercive arm of the state to realize its mission, especially in a pluralistic context, there is every chance that people—both within and outside the church—will not be open to hearing or being in conversation with the church about what it means to live well today. They will associate the church with rules, prohibitions and the imposition of the law.

#### **5.D.4 favoring one approach**

I believe the style best suited to a public spirituality, is ‘a conversational approach.’ Being ‘public’ is not just a matter of being visible *in* the public. It is about being visible in an intelligible and understandable way *to* the public. The conversational approach places its emphasis on persuasion, dialogue, reasoned discussion, and debate. It wants to be in a dialectical relationship with its conversation partner, one in which there is some back-and-forth movement in the relationship. This is the approach best suited to the nature and purpose of the public sphere. Referring to the appointment of Diarmuid

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

Martin as the archbishop of Dublin and the change in style from his predecessor, Fintan O'Toole writes,

The church acquired a new style of leadership with the accession of Diarmuid Martin to the diocese of Dublin. He has been a huge gain for Irish public life – articulate, unregimented, thoughtful. Along with some of his fellow bishops, he has fundamentally altered the terms on which the church engages with Irish society, switching from the arrogant display of power to a language of morally serious persuasion.<sup>113</sup>

This is the sort of style that reveals the strength of a public spirituality.

Along with it using ‘a language of morally serious persuasion,’ a public spirituality is one that expects to learn something from its interlocutor and approaches the public with this in mind. It also seeks to shape the very forums in which these conversation takes place, to help them become more participative and inclusive. The quality of the context is an important consideration for a public spirituality. It is not only interested in using the existing mechanisms to achieve a particular goal or result in public. It is concerned to provide opportunities for people to be in sustained, critical conversations about things that matter to them and to do this in the public sphere. But it wants more than conversation. It also seeks change and action. The dialectic between Catholic Christian faith and culture should leave neither unchanged. Finally, a public spirituality will also make use of the prophetic and juridical approaches where appropriate. It is not shy of being forceful when needed or using legislation in particular instances. However, its favored approach is a conversation one.

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<sup>113</sup> Fintan O'Toole, "Hierarchy Has Put FF to Shame," *The Irish Times*, 19th February 2008. FF stands for Fianna Fáil, one of the political parties in Ireland.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter has put in place some of the theological foundations necessary for a public spirituality that is rooted in Catholic Christian tradition. Care for the common good, the dignity of the person, and the importance of participation are central to the mission and identity of the Catholic church and need to be at the heart of any public spirituality. Now it is time to explore the importance and function of spirituality, with particular attention to Christian spirituality.

# CHAPTER III

## CONSTRUCTING A PUBLIC SPIRITUALITY

### ***Introduction***

This chapter presupposes the theological work in Chapter 2—the important contribution that religion can make to society, the social mission of the church, the importance of working for the common good and building participation, and finding ways to bring theology into the public sphere—and articulates a spirituality that leads in these directions.

It does this in three parts. The first explores the meaning of spirituality; the second articulates an understanding of a Christian spirituality; the third builds on both of these and suggests some essential components of a public spirituality.

### ***1. Spirituality***

#### **1.A What Does it Mean?**

In recent years, there has been a turn to the spiritual just as there was a turn to the subject in Enlightenment thought.<sup>1</sup> The spiritual side of the person and dimension of life is given great attention through the vast amount of spirituality books, cds, courses, programs, dvds, internet sites, movies and television programs that are readily available today. These sources encourage participation in a wide variety of activities, groups and

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Lesniak, "Contemporary Spirituality," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip F. Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 8.

organizations. These in turn can give rise to particular spiritual habits, practices and patterns of life, which reflect a distinct spiritual outlook. Spirituality is a term that is used constantly today, but what does it mean – even as a working description.

Sandra Schneiders offers a very helpful and concise definition. She says that “Spirituality as lived experience can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”<sup>2</sup> Such a definition is wide enough to include many different sorts of spiritualities that can be both religious and secular. In this definition, there are a number of important elements that require attention. Spirituality is not some set of particular beliefs or convictions but rather a process or an ongoing experience. Its aim is integration of the person; if an organizing principle leads to fragmentation of some sort, it is not a spirituality. Spirituality is a process of self-transcendence, thus opposing anything that is narcissistic or selfish. And finally, a spiritual life is one aimed toward what is of ultimate value, this can take on any variety of different shapes from belief in a Christian God to saving the earth.<sup>3</sup>

Ronald Rolheiser defines spirituality in less technical terms. At a basic level there is a fundamental dis-ease within us all. He describes it as “an unquenchable fire that renders us incapable, in this life, of ever coming to full peace.”<sup>4</sup> This dis-ease lies at the center of our lives and is in the very marrow of our bones. It shows itself in the

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<sup>2</sup> Sandra M Schneiders, "Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip F. Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>3</sup> These themes are all reflected in the writing of Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), Colleen M. Griffith, "What Is Spirituality?" in *Spirituality for the 21st Century: Experiencing God in the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Richard W Miller II (Missouri: Liguori, 2006), Schneiders, "Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types."

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality: Guidelines for a Christian Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), 3.

experience of longing or aching for some sort of fulfillment, or in a restlessness that cannot find final peace. These desires at the center of our being need to be organized, and channeled in ways that lead to integration. “What we do with our longings, both in terms of handling the pain and the hope they bring us, is our spirituality” according to Rolheiser.<sup>5</sup> It is something foundational to everyone; no one chooses to have a spirituality, it is a given, something vital and nonnegotiable. It is much more basic than going to church or saying one’s prayers. “Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us.”<sup>6</sup> And the question at the heart of spirituality is whether it leads to integration or fragmentation. Does it lead to a healthy sense of one’s whole personhood, mind, body and spirit and does it connect oneself with others in life giving ways.<sup>7</sup>

So far, I’ve pointed to the essential role that spirituality plays in all our lives. It is an intentional and organizing principle that can lead toward integration through self-transcendence in the light of what is valued most in life. Examples of this can be seen at work in many of the spiritualities in the world today. There are Celtic, native-American, and New Age spiritualities; there are feminist, womanist and male spiritualities; there are spiritualities of the workplace and everyday life; spiritualities for gay and lesbian people,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>7</sup> Rolheiser illustrates this very well when he juxtaposes the lives of three spiritual people to one another. They are Mother Teresa, Janis Joplin and Princess Diana. All three manage the fire that burns within them in different ways. In the case of Mother Teresa, she was able to ‘will the one thing’, and her spirituality marshall her energy and fire in a way that held her together and led toward integration and right relationship. In the case of Janis Joplin, who also was very spiritual and creative, she was unable to control her fire. She wills many things and ‘tasted and tested too much, too much’ and it pulled her asunder. Her habits of life did not lead towards integration or self-transcendence. Finally, Princess Diana was something of both. She was passionate, creative and energetic and at times willed the one thing and at other times allowed her energy and fire to get the better of her. She was not able to live with a discipline or habits that would keep her safe. She got caught between her family, her lovers and her causes.

for teens, married couples, single and divorced people, and spiritualities based on particular religious traditions, such as Ignatian, Franciscan and Vincentian.

### **1.A.1 spirituality and culture**

It is important to notice that these spiritualities, whatever they are, however they are lived and practiced, are all shaped by the cultures of which they are a part. They do not stand alone, apart from, or in some way independent of the values and beliefs, assumptions and presuppositions of the culture in a particular society. Nor can spirituality be identified with culture – it is not the same. Culture provides the context for spirituality. No spirituality, “in its expression and development escapes reliance on the culture that ‘hosts’ it.”<sup>8</sup> Each spirituality is marked by its own cultural context. “There is only spiritualities-in-culture and cultures-hosting-spiritualities.”<sup>9</sup>

### **1.A.2 hindrances to spirituality**

Richard Gaillardetz, while acknowledging evidence for the emergence of spirituality today, cautions that “this spiritual quest has become increasingly privatized.”<sup>10</sup> Michael Downey shares a similar belief. He says that spirituality today is “a highly individualized, indeed privatized approach to the sacred, devoid of any clear sense of belonging to a community, and a lack of a clear sense of critical social

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<sup>8</sup> James Corkery, "Spirituality and Culture," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip F. Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 80.



responsibility which any authentic awareness of the sacred demands.”<sup>11</sup> Clare Wolfteich sees an overly individualistic and therapeutic understanding of spirituality as undermining the public dimension of faithful living.<sup>12</sup> She says that insufficient attention has been given to the impact of our public lives on our spiritualities. She makes the point that our identities are at least partly formed in public spaces and this needs to be reflected in our spirituality.

Along with the cultural bias towards individualism and privatization, there are other hindrances to a healthy spirituality. Ronald Rolheiser names three. The first one is narcissism: excessive pre-occupation with oneself. The second is pragmatism: an excessive focus on work, achievement, and inordinate value given to results. And third, an unbridled restlessness: an excessive greed for experience.<sup>13</sup> Valerie Lesniak picks up on the second of these points. She describes how some people overly associate spiritual practices with results. It is true that participating in particular spiritual practices often have beneficial outcomes. Some people have a better sense of self-esteem from their spirituality, maybe a lessening of anxiety; perhaps they do something for the planet or ease the pain of someone else. But Lesniak says that “Spiritual disciplines so quickly associated with pragmatic results run the risk of becoming yet another product to be tried, consumed and discarded at will.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> See Clare Wolfteich, "Public Life and Spirituality," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip F. Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 515.

<sup>13</sup> Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality: Guidelines for a Christian Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Lesniak, "Contemporary Spirituality," 12.

### 1.A.3 trends helpful to a healthy spirituality

While recognizing some of the negative cultural influences on spirituality, there are other tendencies and traces within culture that offer help for spiritualities to lead towards integration. Some of these currents question the notion of unending progress at whatever the cost to the planet; the power of the rational mind alone to arrive at truth and justice, and the modern construction of the self-sufficient individual. There are many today who appreciate the interdependence of the human species with all that exists. They believe that the person does not stand outside this interdependence but comes to *be* through participation in a whole host of relationships.<sup>15</sup> These relationships should be characterized by justice, where the dignity of all, especially those who are poor and excluded, is realized through meaningful participation in community. Other trends point to the holistic nature of the person and that any spirituality which seeks integration would do well to pay careful attention to the whole person – mind, emotions, soul, and body of the person-in-community. Such an approach does away with harmful dualisms between the mind and body, the sacred and profane, male and female. There has recently been a lot of interest in the contribution of psychology and psychoanalysis to spirituality, along with interest in what the East has to teach the West about contemplation and much recent appreciation of the care needed for the earth.<sup>16</sup> These values embedded in the culture can all contribute to a healthy spirituality.

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<sup>15</sup> See *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 8.

#### 1.A.4 spirituality and religion

I mentioned earlier that spirituality does not necessarily have to be religious, that all of us have a spirituality and its function, at a basic level, is to marshal our energy, through self-transcendence towards some ultimate value – to help toward personal integration. Whereas in the past, there was a strong overlap between spirituality and religion, that is less the case today. Deliberate interest in the spiritual dimension of our lives is growing, while participation in religious traditions is on the wane.<sup>17</sup> People do not appear to need religious traditions to pursue the spiritual life. In the popular imagination, spirituality is understood as something alive, personal, and immediately helpful. It is fresh, fluid, and inclusive of all sorts of people and beliefs. This is in contrast to an understanding of religion as a ‘man’ made construct, rigid and unyielding to the personal dimension of life, one that seems to perpetuate the status quo, is controlling and removed from everyday life.

But this is far too narrow a view of something essential to the well being of spirituality, particularly when spirituality is understood as concerned with the sacred dimension of life. Colleen Griffith believes:

Religion that is bereft of spirituality becomes anemic, irrelevant, and self-serving. Spirituality that lacks connection with religious tradition has no roots, lacking both community and tradition. It has no recourse to the benefits of a larger body of discourse and accountability and is prone to hyperbole and instability.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Griffith, "What Is Spirituality?" 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

### 1.A.5 importance of religious tradition

In order to construct a public spirituality—one that promotes personal integration, that evokes and nourishes a desire for the common good and leads to action on behalf of the reign of God—a religious tradition is needed as a counterweight to the power of the prevailing culture’s emphasis on the individual and private dimension of one’s life. A public spirituality, without the wisdom and weight of a religious tradition is susceptible to being shaped in ways that do not draw attention to the importance of public life. Michael Downey puts it this way:

...spirituality has just as much to do with participation with others in community and in wider social spaces. The search for the sacred is not something done alone. Our sense of the sacred is mediated through texts, traditions, communal arrangements which embody our sense of meaning, purpose and value.<sup>19</sup>

It is through institutions and traditions, those places that hold the wisdom and contain the spiritual experience of others that we can come to share in tried and trusted ways to live meaningfully in the world today. We must remember that religion is not identical to religious institutions. According to Downey, who uses the work of Friedrich von Hügel, there are three elements to religion. There is the institutional dimension, where our search for the sacred is organized, given shape, and made visible. Secondly, there is an intellectual element. This helps persons and communities access formulated systems of thought, and belief, develop critical capacities to make sense of the sacred, share it with others, and critique its absence or where it is betrayed in society. And finally, there is a mystical element to it. This dimension speaks to the actual experience of the sacred in one’s own life or community. All three elements are very important in any religion.

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<sup>19</sup> Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*.

So far I have suggested that spirituality is something common and essential to human living. It is a force towards integration through self-transcendence in light of one's ultimate value. It is shaped by the culture and needs to be rooted in a religious tradition. In the next section, I look specifically at Christian spirituality.

## **2. *Christian Spirituality***

### **2.A What is It?**

Earlier I suggested that spirituality is the process of organizing one's life—desires, behavior, thoughts—toward integration through self-transcendence in the light of one's ultimate concern. Now if one's ultimate concern is “the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ and communicated through the Holy Spirit, and the project of self-transcendence is the living of the paschal mystery within the context of the church community, the spirituality is specifically Christian.”<sup>20</sup> This sort of spirituality requires belonging to a people, to a church or a congregation. It is in the context of a community that all the elements of this definition are held together. There is a Trinitarian (nature of God), Christological (person of Jesus Christ), anthropological (understanding of the nature of the human person), pneumatological (activity of God's Spirit), and ecclesiological (role of church community) aspect to what it means to participate in a Christian spirituality. These all interweave with one another to create an identity and a particular way of spiritually living in the world.

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<sup>20</sup> Schneiders, "Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types," 1.

### **2.A.1 two coordinates to navigate Christian spirituality**

These aspects (Trinitarian, Christological, anthropological, pneumatological, ecclesiological) are vital to a Christian spirituality and their embodiment gives rise to great diversity depending on the location of a given community. Those participating in Christian spirituality in Boston will live and approach life differently than those living out of one in Bangladesh, and those living a Christian spirituality in Dublin will embody it differently to those in Dubrovnik. Michael Buckley offers a helpful way to think about these sorts of patterns. He says that there are two coordinates in any Christian spirituality; we can talk about God and the human pathway toward God.

Referring to God we must ask what is the manner of how this ‘incomprehensible’ God comes to be named and understood. What are the images used to make this God visible to us and in what ways or events does God disclose God’s self and presence in history to us. How these questions are answered will have a great impact on one’s pathway to God, one’s Christian spirituality. Buckley asks “What understanding or appreciation of God is dominant or strongly characteristic of this spirituality” and “What is the career or community of practices or life that will respond to God so understood?”<sup>21</sup>

### **2.A.2 two spiritualities: ascent and incarnation**

Buckley illustrates his point by offering an outline of two distinct Christian spiritualities. One is a spirituality of ascent and the other a spirituality of incarnation. To illustrate his spirituality of ascent, he refers to one of the most influential works on

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<sup>21</sup> Michael J. Buckley S.J., "Spirituality and the Incarnate God," in *Spirituality for the 21st Century: Experiencing God in the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Richard W Miller II (Missouri: Liguori, 2006), 26.

Christian spirituality called the *Life of Moses* by Gregory of Nyssa. In it, there is great emphasis placed on Moses' withdrawal from the community and everyday life in order to meet God. He has to withdraw from the desert and go up to Mount Sinai. He did not experience God or learn about God primarily from the people. Gregory understood God as mystery, and God so understood required leaving behind whatever was finite and visible as one "ascends into the darkness of the incomprehensible God."<sup>22</sup> This spirituality is distinct from one that is shaped by the event of the Incarnation. The focus here is not so much the mystery of God as it is on God's involvement with the world and human history. Buckley points out that the question at the core of the ascent spirituality is 'what is God?' whereas the question that emerges from an incarnational or descent spirituality is "What is God doing in the world?"<sup>23</sup> This is a very different kind of question, with the assumption that not alone is God to be found in the world but that God is active in the world. "A human being, then, is to find God not in spite of all things, but in all things—to find God where God is actually present and acting and directing, that is, in all created things."<sup>24</sup> This is a central point to constructing a public spirituality, which has as its premise the involvement of God in the public dimension of our lives.

## **2.B Two Christian Spiritual Frameworks**

### **2.B.1 unitarian or 'solitary' framework**

In *Transformation Our Days*, Richard Gaillardetz illustrates two different Christian spiritual frameworks which are illustrative of Buckley's point and essential to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 30.

constructing a public spirituality. In the first one, which Gaillardetz calls Unitarian or ‘Solitary’ Theism, the emphasis is on the distance and difference between God and the rest of the world. In this framework, “God is conceived as an individual being who is bigger, better, and more powerful than ourselves, but an individual nonetheless. The alternative, which actually differs little, is that God is viewed as a community of three individual beings, one of whom we will tend to address in prayer.”<sup>25</sup> The central point is that God is an individual, out there beyond our planet. See figure 1.

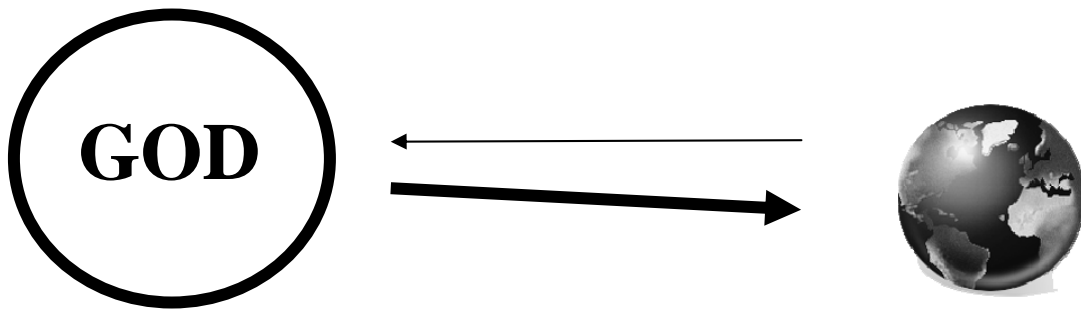


Figure 1<sup>26</sup>

Gaillardetz believes that this unitarian framework dominates the religious imagination of most Christians today. God is outside the world and responds from time to time to our prayers and intercessions. This understanding and image of God has two consequences. If God is one being among the many others in my life

then God will inevitably have to compete for my love and attention. My whole life will be an endless tug-of war between the matters that demand my attention in the course of human affairs—preparing classes, buying groceries, playing with my children, talking with my wife—and my religious obligations to God.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> This image is copied from *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.



The second practical consequence is that if God is competing for my attention among everything else, then my encounter with God will only happen from time to time, perhaps in response to prayer or our connection to something holy, like going to mass. In this way, life is organized in a dualistic manner between what is sacred and what is profane. Teilhard de Chardin noticed and worried about this tendency. “In spite of the practice of right intentions, and the day offered every morning to God, the general run of the faithful dimly feel that time spent at the office or the studio, in the fields or the factory, is time taken away from prayer and adoration.”<sup>28</sup> Teilhard believed that large numbers of Catholics lead a double life in practice, moving between their human work and Christian faith. Therefore, the Christian spiritual life is spent trying to squeeze in as many moments of what is holy into the rest of one’s day.

This framework and the habits and patterns of life that emerge from it does not lead to integration. It fosters a separation and a commodification of spiritual practices. These practices are often ‘techniques’ in the midst of a busy life that help access what is sacred and fit it into the patterns and agendas of our daily lives. This is not done in any deliberate narcissistic or selfish way. Rather, it is the logical outcome of a spiritual framework that sees God as another individual, bigger and better, who is outside of our world and who might intervene if the proper techniques of prayer and intercession were used. However, there is another way to understand the action of God that does not foster this dualistic worldview and one that is essential to a public spirituality.

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<sup>28</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper, 1960), 23.

## 2.B.2 Trinitarian or ‘relational’ framework

Gaillardetz offers another framework. In this one, God is not another individual competing for our attention in the midst of our busy lives. Rather, God is the “loving and creative ground of our existence, the very atmosphere in whom we ‘live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:28). This framework is rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity, which itself is at the heart of Christian spirituality. This doctrine affirms that it is part of God’s very nature to be relational and thus to care and be committed to human beings and all of creation. The Trinity means that God is a triune communion of loving relationships both within the Godself and thus always towards us – calling us to live in right loving relationships with God, self, others, institutions, and creation. For Downey, the Trinity means that “God’s face is immutably turned toward us in love, that God’s presence to us is utterly reliable and constant.”<sup>29</sup> This presence is a force, a movement, a life pulsing toward us in love. The doctrine of the Trinity tries to put words on this mystery of God. It conceives of God as a ‘dynamism of divine love’ and points out that “God’s very being, what it is for God *to be*, is loving, life-giving relationality. God does not just *have* a love relationship with us, God *is* loving relationality. There is no self-contained, divine individual residing in heaven far away from us; there is simply a dynamic movement of divine love, which *is* God.”<sup>30</sup> This is illustrated in Figure 2.

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<sup>29</sup> Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*, 54, 55.



Figure 2<sup>31</sup>

In this image, the world is *in* God. Within this framework, there is no such thing as a dualistic notion of what is sacred or profane. All is sacred, for all is in God and all can be disclosive of God's presence. Some have sought to describe the nature of this divine presence as that of the lover-beloved-love, or Being-in-Communion. There is a diversity, equality and interdependence between the divine persons. And so, when Christian spirituality is rooted in the Trinity, it will inevitably emphasize the communal and interdependent dimension of life – dimensions that must be fostered in a public spirituality.

### **2.B.3 a Trinitarian spirituality**

While this doctrine reflects the nature of God, it also tells us something about our own nature. Being created in the image and likeness of this Triune God, this loving relationality—called to live as people of God—means that we too need to be in relationships that are characterized by self-gift, mutuality, and interdependence. Our

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<sup>31</sup> This image was adapted from Ibid.

imaging of God grounds the ethical demands of the Christian life. We are invited to be in communion with the world around us, to be in right relationship with others, especially those who are excluded and poor, with our very selves and with the whole cosmos – and in this way, in right relationship with God.

This demand is echoed in Jesus' own preaching of the two great commandments. In the Synoptic Gospels—Matt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-31; Lk 10:25-28—Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment of the Mosaic code. At that time, there were two answers to this question. One believed that it was to love God with all one's heart, soul and strength. The other held that it was to love your neighbor as yourself. In the view of the day, these were two separate commandments.<sup>32</sup> However, in the answer Jesus gave to the question, he fused them together. He said that they were one and the same. They were two ways to say one thing. According to Michael Himes, "It is not a case of loving God and loving our neighbor; loving God *is* loving our neighbor; loving our neighbor *is* loving God. They are identical."<sup>33</sup> That is because "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8, 16). God is "what happens between and among us, is the foundation of the possibility of our loving one another at all."<sup>34</sup> We are *in* God, in a loving relationship, one that makes it possible for us to love one another and at the same time to discover the presence of God in the in-between of our relationships.

There is a marked difference between the unitarian and Trinitarian frameworks. In the first, we must find moments to meet with God in our busy days, since God is another individual looking for our attention and love. In the Trinitarian view, however, it

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<sup>32</sup> Michael J. Himes, "Contrasting Views of the Church's Mission," in *National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers Annual Meeting* (London: 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

is precisely in our relationships with others and the world around us that we are “simultaneously drawn into communion with God who makes all love, all authentic relationships possible.”<sup>35</sup> In a Trinitarian spirituality, God does not compete for the love I have for my wife, family or friends. In loving them, I am participating in the love of God. It is not necessary to bring God into our relationships, God is what sustains them, holding us in relationship and moving between those in the relationship. God is the love ‘in-between’ those in relationship.

A Trinitarian spirituality cares about the whole of life. It is not one dimension among others in a life of faith. It is concerned with our own integration and the ability of all to flourish in this life; living in accord with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, who conforms us to Jesus Christ; issues of unemployment and health insurance, our private lives and our public lives; international trade and globalization, issues of justice and peace and care for the earth. There is nothing that does not fall under the umbrella of a Christian spirituality.

A Trinitarian understanding of God is rich with possibilities for constructing a public spirituality. As Trinitarians we believe in one God. This is reflected in the First Commandment—“I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ‘You shall have no gods except me’” (Ex 20:1-3). We cannot have a God in the private and personal dimensions of our lives and have no God in the public sphere. Our radical monotheism calls us to let God be God of our whole lives – personal and public.

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<sup>35</sup> Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*, 59.

## 2.B.4 grace

Grace is the “love of God outside the Trinity”<sup>36</sup> and there are a number of dimensions to it.<sup>37</sup> One is described as ‘operating grace,’ which refers to the action of God that holds all of creation in being, as well as God’s own activity in creation. The whole world is in grace – in God’s love. It is foundational to God’s relationship with humanity and is prior to any response to God’s initiative. Another dimension of grace is called ‘sanctifying grace.’ It refers to the way in which humans are made holy by encountering the grace of God. This grace transforms the human person so that they participate in the divine nature, become friends with God, incorporated into Christ and dwell in the Trinity. This grace makes it possible to live in right relationships, ones that are characterized by agape or self-giving love. Human persons, however, need help to respond to the invitation of God to live in grace. We need cooperative grace. This refers to the action of the Holy Spirit that “enables the human response to God’s initial action in the divine-human relationship.”<sup>38</sup> The human person is reliant on the grace of God to be open and respond to God’s sustained invitation of friendship. In actual fact, the human person is reliant on the grace of God for everything. But it is also possible to refuse grace and act in ways that are opposed to God and to life. At the heart of a public spirituality is an acknowledgment that all is grace; along with an appreciation of the need to grow in habits and practices that help to co-operate with the grace of God, particularly in the public sphere of life.

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<sup>36</sup> Michael J. Himes, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>37</sup> See Richard P. McBrien and Harold W. Attridge, *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 583-584.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 583.

Too often grace has been understood as only available through religious moments in our lives, such as prayer, liturgical events or the visiting of a holy place. These practices were thought to ‘fill’ the person with grace so that they could withstand and endure the effort it takes to live in a secular world and participate in the public sphere. Gaillardetz puts it well when he says that there has been a strong tendency to see grace as “something that was ‘injected’ into an otherwise profane world.”<sup>39</sup> However, this is at odds with the theology that has emerged since Vatican II. Karl Rahner says:

The world is permeated by the grace of God... The world is constantly and ceaselessly possessed by grace from its innermost roots, from the innermost personal center of the spiritual subject... Whether the world gives the impression, so far as our superficial everyday experience is concerned, of being imbued with grace in this way, or whether it constantly seems to give the lie to this state of being permeated by God’s grace which it has, this in no sense alters the fact that it is so.<sup>40</sup>

Grace is everywhere, available to all, urging the “human personality toward expansiveness and self-transcendence.”<sup>41</sup> The key here is that grace is not confined to the religious and personal moments of our lives. Since the world is in-grace (see figure 2), God is just as active in our lives while we engage in the public sphere—writing a letter to the paper, speaking on the radio, posting a blog or attending a local meeting—as when we say our prayers, go to church or attend a religious event. It is not an ‘either or’ situation. Rather, the religious events ought to disclose the all pervasive presence of God’s effective love in our lives and help us through grace to respond in a cooperative manner. This is a central point and absolutely fundamental to a public spirituality. Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* gets to the heart of it when one of her characters asks:

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<sup>39</sup> Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*, 98.

<sup>40</sup> As quoted in *Ibid.*, 98-99.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 169.

“Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in Church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.”<sup>42</sup>

### **3. A Public Spirituality: Some Essentials**

#### **3.A The Stranger as Spiritual Neighbor**

A Trinitarian spirituality as just outlined, offers us the possibility of encountering God in the public dimension of our lives. In this way of thinking, public life is a place of spiritual significance and experience. It is an arena where God speaks to us and shapes our hearts with words that cannot be heard in private. For Parker Palmer, “without public experience we cannot experience the fullness of God’s word for our lives.”<sup>43</sup> For him, the key figure in public life is the stranger. We are constantly among strangers. We meet them in the streets, in shops, on the T, in work, at worship, online, and in our neighborhoods. For most people, these meetings are without significance. However, seen through the lens of a Christian spirituality, strangers have always had great significance in the Judeo-Christian traditions. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures are full of stories about strangers. The journey of faith always seems to take people into a strange land and there meet up with strangers. And it is often the stranger who speaks the word of God to them – a word that they are now able to hear because they are not at home, with all the usual distracts and securities in their lives.

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<sup>42</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple: A Novel* (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1986), 176.

<sup>43</sup> Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, 56.



### **3.A.1 the stranger in scripture**

We read in the Letter to the Hebrews “Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:1-2). Palmer points out that this command refers back to a story in Genesis concerning the strangers who visited Abraham and Sarah (Gen: 18). The strangers were welcomed and given refreshment. Then they told Sarah that she would have a child, even though she was passed the age of child bearing. This seemed so strange to her that she laughed – but it turned out to be true. The strangers were angels, messengers from God. Palmer wonders what might have happened if Abraham had not welcomed the stranger into his home.

Palmer then points to the importance of the stranger on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). After the crucifixion, the tomb has been found empty and the two disciples are walking to Emmaus. There is a suggestion that this was a Roman garrison town and that the disciples were deserting Jerusalem for Rome, giving it all up and leaving the Way of Jesus behind. However, a stranger came among them, they opened their hearts to him and invited him to stay. It was then, at the breaking of the bread by this stranger that they witnessed the resurrection and their hearts burned within them. They returned to Jerusalem. Again, Palmer wonders what might have happened if they had not issued that invitation for the stranger to remain with them – would they have experienced the resurrection or would they have just kept going to Emmaus?

Whatever the answer to such a question, the point that Palmer makes is that “Both stories tell us that our everyday perceptions and assumptions must be shaken by the

intrusion of strangeness if we are to hear God's word."<sup>44</sup> The stranger can offer us another perspective, enlarging our own sense of the world, our place in it and our relation to others. These encounters with strangers can be uncomfortable. They might be brief or prolonged. But an important dimension is to hold the tension of the relationship – to invite the stranger in and not seek the security of “the same.”

### **3.A.2 our need of the stranger**

In the life of Jesus, the stranger accounted for a whole class of people. They included those who were poor, women, the sick and those who were sinners. The one thing they all had in common was that they were despised and feared by those in the dominant community at the time. In his own life, Jesus sought to affirm their dignity and worth. He hinged our own salvation on the quality of our relationship with the stranger.<sup>45</sup> But Palmer makes the point that this is a two way relationship and that it is not just the stranger who needs us, but it is also we who need the stranger.

The presence of the stranger in our lives—the feelings that emerge in their company, the ideas that come to mind and our actions in relationship to those who are strangers—can remind us of the stranger within our very selves. It is far easier to project onto others the qualities and dispositions that we refuse to acknowledge in our own lives. Thomas E. Clarke puts it starkly when he says that there is a repressed self-hatred in the heart of humanity and it is projected onto others – and they are made into our scapegoats.<sup>46</sup> He claims that we affirm our identity at the expense of the other. We talk

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>45</sup> See Ibid., 65.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas E. Clarke, "Option for the Poor: A Reflection," *America*, no. 98 (1988).

about ‘them’ out there as opposed to ‘us’ in here. This sets up polarities of either ‘us’ or ‘them’, polarities based on difference and separation.

Miroslav Volf points out that much of our world is “constructed around exclusive moral polarities. Here, on our side, ‘the just,’ ‘the pure,’ ‘the innocent,’ ‘the true,’ ‘the good,’ and there on the other side, ‘the unjust,’ ‘the corrupt,’ ‘the guilty,’ ‘the liars,’ ‘the evil.’”<sup>47</sup> In our world today, with its fear of terrorism, genocide, war and fragmentation, it is very difficult to imagine the possibility that the stranger might indeed be an ‘angel’ or messenger from God, calling us into freedom and right relationship. Volf makes a very telling point when he says that “The closer we get, however, the more the line between the guilty and the innocent blurs and we see an intractable maze of small and large hatreds, dishonesties, manipulations, and brutalities, each reinforcing the other.”<sup>48</sup> The reluctance to get close, then, is tied up with being too fixed on the roles and identities we assign to others. In getting closer, our assumptions may be found wanting, our perception mistaken and we may begin to realize that things are more ambiguous and complex than we first imagined. Subsequently, we may need to make the necessary changes in outlook and behavior. Responding appropriately to the presence of the stranger in our lives can be an occasion of correcting, realigning and healing relationships for the good of all concerned. This can take place in a person’s own life, the life of a community, or even that of a country.

One of the manifestations of a public spirituality is an overcoming of this reluctance to get close to strangers, despite fear and hesitation. One of the aims of such a spirituality is that it provide the ‘self-security’ – the personal integration – needed to

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<sup>47</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 85.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

embrace the other. Likewise, reaching out to the other, enacts our spirituality, deepening our ability to live in right relationships.

### **3.A.3 the practice of hospitality**

One practice that is central in such a spirituality is that of ‘hospitality.’ It bridges the private and public dimension of our lives. This is an ancient custom found in many cultures throughout the world. Palmer believes, however, at least in the United States, it has become “a harmless urbane quality in the order of ...civility, politeness, and table manners.”<sup>49</sup> He is concerned that hospitality is being drawn exclusively into the private realm of life, interested with inviting our friends to dinner and providing a hospitable place for them. There is little room in the idea of hospitality for the stranger any more. And yet Palmer believes that this metaphor is full of potential. He points out the wonderful gift it is to receive hospitality. Part of that gift is being left to your own identity. Properly understood, hospitality does not try to make the ‘other’ like oneself, to make the stranger into one’s friend or have the relationship characterized by intimacy. It leaves room for people to be themselves. Its function is to create space for encounter – one that is characterized by graciousness and generosity. It offers a way for the stranger to come into one’s space. This is not just physical space, like one’s home, although it could be, it is also one’s imagination, one’s professional life, one’s heart and one’s actions.

Wherever some hospitable space is created, there is the possibility of enlarging one’s way of imagining, remembering, thinking, judging, feeling, and acting. Just as a

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<sup>49</sup> Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, 67.

public spirituality calls us to be hospitable to the stranger, we must be ready to receive hospitality when it is offered to us *by* strangers. These moments may be less comfortable for us, for they are not as much of our own making but can be just as transformative as when we are inviting, perhaps more so. But it does not have to be either/or, either ‘us’ inviting ‘them’ in or ‘they’ inviting ‘us’ into some hospitable space. Both together can create a space where each can be seen as they are and not as they are so often ‘ungenerously imagined to be.’ And perhaps, in working together to create hospitable space, hospitality between strangers is already taking place.

The effort to create hospitality between strangers is fundamentally about how all can be at ‘home’ in the world – where everyone has what is needed to live with dignity, to flourish, to be in right relationship with themselves, others, institutions, the environment and their ultimate concern. To this end, a view of the stranger as spiritual neighbor is a helpful one. “Through the stranger our view of self, of world, of God is deepened and expanded. And through the stranger, God finds us and offers us the gift of wholeness in the midst of our estranged lives.”<sup>50</sup> Consequently, a public spirituality tries to create a hermeneutic that appreciates the stranger as spiritual neighbor.

### **3.B Mystical-Transformational Dimensions of Christian Spirituality**

It can be difficult to find the right balance between our desire for the holy and sacred and our efforts to simply live day by day. We are tempted to place more value and time on one dimension to the detriment of the other. This gives rise to a dichotomy in Christian spirituality. There is great emphasis today on the inner journey, and in many

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 70.

ways this is quite understandable given the fragmented, busy and chaotic nature of life today.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, spirituality can be characterized by a kind of parallelism between the journey of inwardness and the work of everyday life. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has criticized a spirituality that only pursues ‘individual inwardness.’ He says:

Common to a good deal of contemporary philosophical reflection on human identity is the conviction that we are systematically misled, even corrupted, by a picture of the human agent as divided into an outside and inside—a ‘true self,’ hidden, buried, to be excavated by one or another kind of therapy.<sup>52</sup>

This understanding of the self is a fiction. It suggests that the true and deepest self is to be found alone and inside of ourselves. This is at odds with an understanding of Christian spirituality that claims the realization of the person is something that is done both in the context of a community *and* through paying attention to the inner life.

According to Philip Sheldrake, there is no ‘a priori’ identity found by going deeper and deeper into oneself, peeling away all the distractions to get to our true selves. Rather, “the real self is found or made from the very beginning in human communication and interaction.”<sup>53</sup> It is in the ongoing and difficult process of ‘human engagement’ that the self emerges. This is not to say that the interior life is not important, quite the contrary, it is essential. But both are needed. One can be referred to as the draw to the mystical dimension of life and the other to the transformational dimension. Both must be held in a dialectical tension, where they can constantly shape and influence each other. These two dimensions are “two poles of a paradox, no more in opposition than breathing

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>52</sup> As quotes in Philip F. Sheldrake, "Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic," *Spiritus*, no. 3 (2003): 19.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

in and out; and when we attempt to have one without the other, we suffocate and die.”<sup>54</sup> They are two sides of the one coin and they need to take place symbiotically.<sup>55</sup> A public spirituality requires an appreciation that the self is partly formed through our participation in the public, in those social encounters among the people we hardly know. If our public lives are to be life giving to ourselves and to others, then maintaining the tension between the mystical and transformational dimension within Christian spirituality will be an important source of wisdom for us.

### **3.B.1 the mysticism dimension**

When we think of mystics, we often imagine of people who are other-worldly, holy, and with whom we have little in common. In constructing a public spirituality, however, there is much to learn from within the mystical tradition. Writing of all the baptized, Karl Rahner says that “In the future, we shall be mystics...or we shall be nothing.”<sup>56</sup> But what is it to be mystical? Bernard McGinn says that “the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concern the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct experience of God.”<sup>57</sup> This is not referring to a once off event but rather a whole process over the course of a life time and is located within the context of a religious tradition.

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<sup>54</sup> Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, 156.

<sup>55</sup> See Susan Rakoczy, *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Spirituality of the Future," in *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 149.

<sup>57</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Doctors of the Church: Thirty-Three Men and Women Who Shaped Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), xvii.

Rahner is pointing to the importance of actually experiencing God in our lives. It is not enough to participate in the rituals, programs, and faith events that are part of a particular tradition, without knowing or being known by God. According to Rahner, this knowing is not something that is reserved for the very holy, a special sort of grace available to an elite; rather it is something that all people can experience, either in the discovery of God in everyday life or in ‘distinct mystical’ experiences.<sup>58</sup>

Bernard Lonergan says that the mystical experience is about being absorbed into God’s love, which is a gift and available to all. He compares it to music playing constantly in the background. It is possible to be conscious of it at particular times in our lives and be completely unaware of it at other times. This is because it is “the subject’s attention not God’s love, that is intermittent, and the goal of a mystical life that is available to everyone is to become progressively more attentive to what has in fact been going on all the time.”<sup>59</sup>

According to Robert Egan, mystical experiences are liberating. This is because they give a direct experience of “a reality that transcends and overwhelms the meaning, density, finality, and obviousness of the reality of everydayness, the mystical experience relativizes conventional judgments about plausibility and frees the person having the experience from conventional definitions of reality.”<sup>60</sup> Such experiences enable the person to imaginatively realize that things do not have to be the way they are, that they can be different – there are other ways to proceed and relate to one another, to organize our resources and find meaning in life. Egan makes the interesting point that the

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<sup>58</sup> Karl Rahner, Karl Lehmann, and Albert Raffelt, *The Practice of Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 84.

<sup>59</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 176.

<sup>60</sup> S.J. Egan, Robert J, "Forward," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet Ruffing (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), ix.



relationship between the world as it is now and the world as it possibly could be is not just a matter of what ‘ought’ or ‘should’ be. Rather, he suggests that mystical experiences help us realize that there is “always already an emergent possibility available to the imagination that requires an inner gesture like *allowing*—or better, *welcoming*.”<sup>61</sup> Dorothee Sölle makes a similar point. She says that through our origins in Jewish history, we are not so much seekers but a “people who have been found; we are preceded always by the goodness we have already experienced.”<sup>62</sup>

The mystical dimension of our lives helps us respond to an invitation to know God. We do not initiate this invitation, it is God’s work and God’s own initiative. A mystical sensibility allows us realize that we have been found and are invited to welcome God into our lives and to respond, through grace, by living as people of God. This happens just as much in our public as in our private lives. Mysticism shapes the awareness of a public spirituality to the presence of God in the public dimension of life and our ability to co-operate with God’s Spirit in the public sphere.

### **3.B.2 the transformational dimension**

In discovering ourselves welcomed and found by God’s initiative as part of the mystical sensibility, we also realize that we become part of the *missio Dei* (mission of God). This is the “divine activity of self-disclosure in creation, salvation history and Incarnation, drawing all things into the limitless embrace of God’s unifying love. The life of discipleship is to participate ever more deeply in this *missio Dei* through a faithful

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Dorothee Sölle, "To Be Amazed, to Let Go, to Resist: Outline for a Mystical Journey Today," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet Ruffing (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 46.

following of the way of Jesus, the bearer and expression of God's mission."<sup>63</sup> The saving work of God in history is salvific, seeking communion for all of creation. Consequently, the God discovered through mystical experience does not want to sustain the status quo. Rather, we are invited to participate in God's love, a love that seeks to resist whatever oppresses, divides, and undermines the dignity of people and the integrity of creation. Mysticism is not about inner rapture, but the discovery of God's love and responding by loving others as ourselves – it is a transformative force in the world.

When we look at the lives of the prophets in the scriptures, they all have deep and profound mystical experiences of God. In response they seek to transform injustices and promote right relationships. They hear God's voice in their daily lives and respond to it, though often with reluctance. A public spirituality is one that is grounded in the experience of and response to God in our everyday social existence but it has content; it has a prophetic and transformative dimension.

According to Janet Ruffing, "The mysticism of the prophets is what frees their imaginations and desires from the defining and constraining power of the world as it is, the world as it stands."<sup>64</sup> Prophets are able to nurture a consciousness that is alternative to the dominant 'royal' or 'false' consciousness of the day. They see and oppose unjust systems that inflict untold suffering on people all over the world, along with harmful practices that erode the life of our planet. Prophetic opposition takes the form of denunciation, revealing what they see to others. But they also appeal to the memories and norms of a given community or country. They seek to tap into the better part of the

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<sup>63</sup> Sheldrake, "Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic," 26.

<sup>64</sup> Janet Ruffing R.S.M., "Introduction," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet Ruffing (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 10.

nature of people, touching into aspirations for themselves and others. According to Michael Walzer, “Prophecy aims to arouse remembrance, recognition, indignation, repentance.”<sup>65</sup> It seeks to help people interpret the present in a new way, one that sees—understands with one’s whole body, mind, emotion and a ‘felt sense’—injustice and the possibilities for change. A public spirituality fosters both the mystical and transformative dimension of life.

### **3.B.3 the value of pondering**

Holding the tension between the experience of God and sustained commitment to social transformation is extremely difficult and can only be done by the grace of God. A community needs the wisdom and experience of the mystical tradition to maintain its commitment to social engagement and the common good. Part of this wisdom includes a disposition *to ponder*. Ronald Rolheiser says that “For our generation, given our own particular Achilles’ heel, the brand of mysticism that we most need is that of pondering in the biblical sense.”<sup>66</sup> This is not so much thinking about an issue intellectually, although this is necessary; it is more concerned with staying with issues, even though they are unresolved and the source of discomfort for us. Sometimes we are unable to change things, to fix situations, or make a difference despite our best efforts. We must learn to live with these limitations in our lives. Pondering is quite counter-cultural, as we are often given the impression that it is better to satisfy our desires immediately and collapse any tension that might exist in our lives. But the mystical tradition points us in another

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<sup>65</sup> Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 75.

<sup>66</sup> Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality: Guidelines for a Christian Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century*, 208.

direction. The ability to ponder and hold tension creates a possibility for sustained commitment and transformation. We see examples of this in scripture and great literature. In both, the men and women who are lifted up as exemplars of a good life, who have a ‘nobility of soul’, are people who put aside their own comfort and need and are willing to stay with the unresolvedness of issues for some time.

Those who are able to ponder can resist immediate urges and temptations that distract us from what is right and what we know we need to do. Like Jesus in the Garden at Gethsemane, people metaphorically sweat blood over the sorts of choices that they know they need to make. But without this ability to hold the tension, to let what is right and good emerge, there will not be faithful relationships between couples, friends, families and colleagues. There will be no commitment to do what is right and no ability to live with the consequences. Beneath this ability, is always the presence and grace of God providing the ground for our choices. We do not do this alone.

The mystical tradition has a wisdom about the value and patterns of pondering. It sometimes refers to this as time in the desert or the dark night of the soul. Living publicly requires the ability to ponder, to hold the tension of things unresolved. Sometime we become aware that no amount of rational reflection and thought on particular issues in our life or the life of the world is adequate any more; we have exhausted all rational investigation. It is then we realize that there is just nothing for us to do – nothing we can do. Another “way must be found; not to think our way out of suffering but enter into the fullness of the power of the suffering, trust that there is another way to life in the midst of utter darkness.”<sup>67</sup> A note of caution must be made at this stage. This is not to say that suffering is good and should be sought after – suffering

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<sup>67</sup> Rakoczy, *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love*, 196.

should be resisted with all one's strength. But that there are moments and times when all we can do is turn inward, into the suffering and ponder this reality.

For these times, the mystical tradition offers us the symbols of the desert and the dark night of the soul. They are helpful images concerning this turn into the suffering and how transformative it can be for the person or community. The desert and the dark night are the places where people are tested, tried, purified, and called to go deeper in relationships with others, oneself, institutions, creation, and God. This sort of experience shatters images and understandings of life and God that are no longer adequate and that only constrain future growth and maturity. John of the Cross wrote about the movement from twilight, to midnight, and then to dawn. Holding, pondering, and maintaining tension can bring us to such places and there are paths already worn there by others and they will give us some guidance.

The coupling of the mystical-political dimension is very important to any public spirituality if it is to connect one or a community to the source of life that is God, and at the same time, invite a particular way of being public that resists suffering and promotes reconciliation. This will require growing in the ability to ponder and hold tension in a way that is transformative.

Up to now I have dwelt on the importance of the stranger as spiritual neighbor, the mystical and transformative dimensions of a public spirituality, and the ability to ponder what cannot readily be resolved. Now I turn attention to another dimension of a public spirituality – as a way of seeing.

### 3.C Christianity – A Way of Seeing

“Christianity is, above all, a way of *seeing*. Everything else in Christian life flows from and circles around the transformation of vision.”<sup>68</sup> A public spirituality is one that helps us to see well the world around us. It’s a call to open our eyes, our hearts, our imaginations, and our hands to what is hidden and what goes unnoticed, particularly in the public dimension of life. Jesus says to his disciples, “But happy are your eyes because they see, your ears because they hear!” (Matt 13:16). All Christians should be able to see what is and imagine what should be. Without this ability, spirituality will inevitably perpetuate “an alienating parallelism in which the spiritual life and historical activity never meet.”<sup>69</sup> Or at least, the spiritual life will never meets any historical activity outside of one’s private or personal life. Jon Sobrino suggests three movements which are essential for any spirituality that cares about transformation and justice; they are also essential for a public spirituality. The movements are “(1) honesty about the real, (2) fidelity to the real, and (3) a certain ‘correspondence’ by which we permit ourselves to be carried along by the ‘more’ of the real.”<sup>70</sup> But Sobrino does not mention the importance of desire and wanting to see the real. I will explore this after opening up Sobrino’s three movements.

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<sup>68</sup> Robert E. Barron, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 1.

<sup>69</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 13.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

### **3.C.1 honesty about the real**

Honesty about the real requires a willingness to look carefully and critically at the world around us. It challenges us to get behind what we normally see and take for granted. It asks us to look hard into our world, to contemplate it, and notice what does not suit us to see or what we have chosen to ignore in the past, and what society and the culture have hidden from us. One way to do this is to look at the world through the lens of those who are marginalized and see what it looks and feels like from where they live. To look at the world from a prison cell, homeless shelter, a refugee camp in Darfur, or a hospital bed will give some insight into the real. Couple this with good social analysis and the reason ‘why’ things are the way they are begins to emerge – we can then move beyond the anecdote to a more systemic view of reality, noticing the interconnectedness of many issues.<sup>71</sup>

### **3.C.2 fidelity to the real**

It is one thing to be momentarily honest about the real we see, it is quite another to be faithful to it. This is what Sobrino emphasizes in this second movement ‘fidelity to the real.’ It is “simply and solely perseverance in our original honesty, however we may be burdened with, yes, engulfed in, the negative element in history.”<sup>72</sup> This fidelity can prove costly and is often resisted for a whole host of ‘good’ reasons – we’re too busy, we might lose our jobs, our friends, our money, or our reputations.

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<sup>71</sup> For excellent resources on social analysis and how to do it, see Sean Healy and Brigid Reynolds, *Social Analysis in the Light of the Gospel* (Dublin: Folens and Co, 1983), Joe Holland and Peter J. Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983).

<sup>72</sup> Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, 18.

This ‘shouldering the weight of reality’ as Ignacio Ellacuría describes it, asks us to become aware of our own social location.<sup>73</sup> If we are to be faithful to the real, then we must be willing “to be confronted by reality, this willingness, in turn, entails risks and gives rise to responsibilities.”<sup>74</sup> To be faithful requires some vulnerability and an openness to see ourselves the way others see us. Rather than just looking at the world through the lens of someone in a prison cell, homeless shelter, a refugee camp in Darfur or a hospital bed – it is vital to ask how do we ourselves appear to people in these social contexts? Do we allow ourselves to be asked the kinds of questions that might emerge for such locations? To be seen by the real requires relationships with others that are characterized by solidarity – relationships that are built by perseverance, trust, and openness.

### **3.C.3 seeing the ‘more’ in the real**

Being honest and faithful to the real is often very difficult. However, it is not the whole picture. Sobrino writes that “reality contains something of promise, something of hope unquenched by long ages of misery.”<sup>75</sup> By God’s grace, there are possibilities of a new exodus, a new return from exile and liberation from captivity. This is not unlike what Egan wrote about mysticism, and there being present ‘an emergent possibility’ that we need to allow or welcome in. The ‘more’ of reality refers to what gives people hope and energy to carry on in the face of difficult and painful situations. Perhaps it’s a moments laughter, an embrace, an act of kindness or the experience of an inner resistance

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<sup>73</sup> Kevin F. Burke, *The Ground Beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 104.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>75</sup> Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, 19.



in spite of everything. Whatever it is, ‘the more’ is very important; it is what gives people heart.

### **3.C.4 desire for the real**

Despite knowing what we ought to do, oftentimes we are inclined to do otherwise. It is not enough ‘to know’ what we should do. We know we should see the real and be in solidarity with those who suffer in our world. But knowing does not necessarily lead to action. A failure to act is sometimes thought to reflect a lack of understanding of the issue at hand. But this would be to miss the importance of the affective and imaginative dimension of our lives. The problem for many of us is not that we fail to believe or understand what needs to be done – the problem is that we fail to desire it. “As the Augustinian tradition insists, the link between belief and practice is forged by human desire and attitude. Both our cognitive and practical efforts arise out of loves.”<sup>76</sup> This is why spirituality is so important. Spirituality is concerned with what we do with our desires, how we live in a way that leads towards integration. It is about participating in “a consciously lived relationship with God in Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit, in the context of the Christian community of faith in midst of the world.”<sup>77</sup> With the help of God’s grace public spirituality tries to harness the power and life present in the Christian tradition with one’s own desires and affections. This can often be done indirectly, as an anonymous Christian once wrote:

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<sup>76</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," in *Practicing Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 45.

<sup>77</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 35.

O my God I do not love Thee,  
O my god I do not want to love Thee,  
But O my God I do want to want to love Thee.<sup>78</sup>

Greater effort at identifying ‘what we want to want’ might be helpful here. This approach might help us to orientate ourselves to the grace of God, our own limitations, and our need for a Christian community. A central aspect of a public spirituality, then, is nurturing and nourishing the ‘desire’ to see.

We need to be like the blind on the roadside, outside Jericho. They heard that Jesus was passing by and would not be silenced by the crowd from crying out to him. Jesus heard their appeal, stopped and called them over, asking “What do you want me to do for you?” They answered him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” Jesus touched their eyes and they received their sight (Matt 20:29-34). Continual reliance on grace, on the indwelling of the Spirit, to open our eyes is essential if we *want to want* to ‘shoulder the weight of reality’.

#### **4. A Sacramental Imagination**

A public spirituality is premised on the belief that “the action of God in human life can be experienced.”<sup>79</sup> This action is not confined to the intimate, private and personal dimension of one’s life – rather, it is all encompassing, present in the public, impersonal, and institutional moments of our lives as well. In order to recognize this action in the more public realm of our lives, we need a particular understanding of the

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<sup>78</sup> Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," 47.

<sup>79</sup> Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace*, 144.

relationship between the sacred and the secular, and an ability to recognize this presence, in other words, have a sacramental imagination.

#### **4.A The public: a place ‘crammed with heaven’**

The view articulated by Walker that we ‘come to church to share God’ is very important. It presupposes that God is active in our lives outside the religious sphere. It does not hold with the false separation between what is sacred and what is secular – as if they were two opposing and competing spheres. This opposition does not make sense theologically. If the world is in-graced, in-God, then *all* is sacred – there is no sphere that is beyond the embrace of God’s love. But coming to experience and recognize this in a conscious and mindful way is very difficult. Precisely because it is something that we constantly experience, it is often taken for granted. It is like the love of a parent, something that is always there, but rarely appreciated, and it is only from time to time that we actually realize its power, importance, and strength in our lives.

Michael Himes says that since “God is present everywhere, you and I need to notice, accept, and celebrate that presence somewhere.”<sup>80</sup> This is the function and role of sacraments in our lives. They “are experiences which uncover for us the presence of the radical mystery of God’s self-gift which is the ground of every experience.”<sup>81</sup> These might include people, events, places, things, or actions that somehow disclose the more in life. “Every experience, every act, every event, *can* be a disclosure of the sacred depth of

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<sup>80</sup> Himes, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism*, 12.

<sup>81</sup> Himes and Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology.*, 82.

reality.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, everything and anything can be sacramental – reminding us of the constant embrace of God’s self-giving love.

This is a critical point in developing a public spirituality. We need to have a sacramental imagination towards the world, with particular emphasis on the public dimensions of our lives. This imagination must help us recognize the graced nature of the public. It needs to help us discern the presence and action of God in places that we do not easily associate with God, places outside the ones designated as sacred and holy, the private and personal. Such an imagination helps us appreciate that work in the public sphere can be disclosive of the presence of God; an arena for responding to God’s grace by the grace of God. Work on public policy, the effort to shape public opinion and organizing people to act on issues of justice *can* be moments of co-operation with the grace of God.

At this stage, an important caveat needs to be made. While we may speak about the disclosure of God, we need to approach this area with great humility and care. We must always remember that God remains incomprehensible to us, far beyond anything we can imagine. Michael Himes gets to this aspect well when he asks, “What’s the least worst way of thinking about God?” Whatever way we think of God will only be a paltry reflection of what and who God is. Great harm has been done in the past and in the present by those who feel overly confident that they know God, know what it is that God wants for the world and what God wants them to do about it.

Finally, I am not describing two different realms of reality here, one sacred and one secular. Rather there is one reality looked at from two different perspectives. Traditionally, the sacred perspective was what the person drew upon to sustain them in

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

the secular world – people often came to mass to get an injection of grace. According to Richard Gaillardetz, the sacraments were thought to infuse grace into a graceless people.<sup>83</sup> But today, a sacrament (including the seven ‘great communal’ sacraments) is something that seeks to disclose the presence of grace already in the world and help us to respond to this self-disclosure in appropriate ways. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in her poem, “Aurora Leigh” makes reference to Moses meeting God at the burning bush and being invited to take off his shoes as he is on holy ground. She points to the difference a sacramental imagination can make. She writes:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—  
The rest sit around and pluck blackberries  
And daub their natural faces unaware  
More and more from the first similitude...  
If a man could feel,  
Not one day, in the artist’s ecstasy,  
But everyday, feast, fast, or working-day,  
The spiritual significance burn through  
The hieroglyphic of material shows,  
Henceforth he would paint the globe with wings,  
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,  
And even his very body as a man.<sup>84</sup>

A sacramental imagination, in the service of a public spirituality, helps us see how ‘the public’ is crammed with heaven. Too often we miss the revelatory potential of those places, events, and moments that are thought too ordinary, random, unholy, conflictual or abrasive to be disclosive of God or the arena for responding to God.

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<sup>83</sup> Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*, 99.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Mrs. Browning's Complete Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1900), Book VII, lines 821-26, 857-64.

Such a sacramental imagination is not only in the service of ‘seeing’ the sacred nature of public life, but it is concerned with taking appropriate action that is in keeping with the God disclosed in Jesus Christ, whose spirit is at work in the world.

## ***Conclusion***

In this chapter, I have highlighted some of the essential components to a public spirituality. It must engage the whole person, leads toward integration and be grounded in a particular religious tradition. This tradition, as understood within the Catholic framework, needs to appreciate the graced nature of all creation and approach the public as a place ‘crammed with heaven’ and not something to be avoided as detrimental to one’s soul, faith, and relationship with God. A public spirituality appreciates the important role of the stranger in society, while drawing on the mystical and transformative wisdom of the Christian tradition. It builds up a capacity for people to see the real, shoulder the weight of what it is that they see, while being always able to see the more in reality – such as hope and joy when these are in short supply. But living out of a public spirituality is not just about seeing and living more publicly; it is also about allowing oneself to be seen, to notice one’s own social location and have one’s own perspective and assumptions called into question by others. These can be sacramental moments and require a sacramental imagination to notice them. Finally, a public spirituality is about belonging to a tradition that ignites and sustains a desire and a will to be socially engaged and contribute to the common good. But what does it look like in practice? What is the identity and style of an organization that embodies a public spirituality? These are the sorts of questions explored in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Review of Organizations Embodying a Public Spirituality**

#### ***Introduction***

In the previous chapters I wrote about the importance of a public spirituality, how it is in keeping with the social mission of the Catholic church and outlined some of its constitutive elements. In this chapter I point to three organizations that manifest a public spirituality: the Conference of Religious of Ireland, Justice; the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, and Theos, England. The chapter describes the work of each organization and then brings them into conversation with one another under three heading: operative spirituality, approaches to the public, and educating for a public spirituality. The findings from this chapter will be used in Chapter 5 to help construct a model of religious education that fosters a public spirituality.

#### **Background and Methodology**

I have known CORI Justice since 1993. I worked in a part-time capacity with them from 1995-1996 and again in 2003-2004 to develop a Masters in Social Justice and Public Policy, taught at All Hallows College and accredited through Dublin City University.

I worked in a part-time voluntary capacity with GBIO on an immigration campaign in south Boston, 2000-2001. This work was part of a course on community organizing entitled People, Power and Change at the Kennedy School of Government.

Before I began this dissertation I did not have any relationship to Theos. I met Alison LeCornu, member of the Advisory Board of Theos, at a religious education conference in Boston, November 2007 and she provided me with introductions to others in the organization.

Following the dynamics of a shared praxis approach,<sup>1</sup> I interviewed three people from each organization, nine in all. I spoke to them on the phone for up to an hour (except for Larry Gordon, GBIO, who I met in person). The people were: Sean Healy, Director (CORI Justice), Brigid Reynolds, Director (CORI Justice), Bridget O’Keefe, Member (CORI Justice); Sheryl Andes, Lead Organizer (GBIO), Larry Gordon, Part-Time Organizer (GBIO), Dan Finn, member (GBIO); Paul Woolley, Director (Theos), Nick Spencer, Director of Studies (Theos), Alison LeCornu, Member of Advisory Group (Theos).<sup>2</sup>

The questionnaire I put to all of them can be found in Appendix 1.

### **1. Conference of Religious of Ireland Justice<sup>3</sup>**

The Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI) is made up of 135 Catholic religious congregations, incorporating more than 10,000 personnel, spread out in 1,200

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<sup>1</sup> A ‘shared praxis approach’ is a way of bringing one’s historical reality into conversation with a particular tradition, with an aim towards decision and action. It is an approach that has been developed by Thomas Groome and is widely used in Christian religious education throughout the world. My aim in using this method is to use the insights from this chapter to construct a way that the shared praxis approach can be used to foster a public spirituality. This will take place in chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> All the participants have agreed that I can use their real names in the paper. I emailed them the quotes I used in the paper and they have agreed to their appearing in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the following information is available from their website, with particular attention given to Sean Healy S.M.A. and Brigid Reynolds S.M., *Twenty-Five Years Working for Social Justice*, (2007, accessed 22nd January 2008); available from [http://www.corri.ie/Justice/About\\_Us](http://www.corri.ie/Justice/About_Us).



locations throughout the country.<sup>4</sup> This Conference came about with the merger of the two separate Conferences of religious men and women in 1983. The purpose of the Conference is to serve the leaders of these religious congregations, and in this way, to also serve the members. It offers a forum for people to pool resources and share experience in areas of common mission.

CORI Justice began in 1981 (it was then the Conference of Major Religious Superiors). At the beginning, its role was to resource the membership of the religious orders concerning issues of justice. It did this through running workshops, seminars and research into the reality of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland. However, after a process of mission development within CORI in the mid 80s, a more public function was assigned to CORI Justice. It was asked to use its energies and expertise in social justice work to shape public policy in Ireland from a Christian values perspective. It has been doing that for the past twenty five years.

## **1.A Description of the Work**

CORI Justice work can be placed into four broad programs. They are as follows:

### **1.A.1 public policy**

It is a member of the national Social Partnership process.<sup>5</sup> Since becoming a member in 1996, CORI Justice has taken part in four successive negotiations that resulted in four national agreements implemented by the Irish Government. As a social partner, CORI Justice is well placed to shape the development, and implementation of social policy in Ireland.

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<sup>4</sup> See Tony Fahey, "The Catholic Church and Social Policy," in *Social Policy in Ireland. Principles, Practice and Problems*, ed. Sean Healy S.M.A. and Brigid Reynolds S.M. (Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> This is a national structure that emerged in the late 1980s. Three groups (pillars) negotiated and agreed the first three programs with government. There were the business community, the trade unions and the farming organizations.

Each year it publishes a socio-economic review.

It has an annual social policy conference, that addresses a wide range of issues and is attended by academics, politicians, advocates, and members of religious congregations.

It recently published a second, updated edition of their social policy text book entitled: *Social Policy in Ireland—Principles, Practice and Problems*. It was first published in 1998.

Each year, CORI makes submissions to governments, both written and in person, on a wide range of issues, such as: rural development, third world aid, unemployment, taxation policy, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, poverty, the National Development Plan, housing and social inclusion. These also include recommendations for the forthcoming budget, analysis of the actual budget and a workshop immediately after its publication.

### **1.A.2 enabling and empowering**

For ten years CORI Justice conducted a year long internship training program, completed by 30 interns. It provided formation in work for social justice. This program has developed into a Masters degree in Social Justice and Public Policy offered at All Hallows College, Dublin and accredited through Dublin City University.

CORI Justice facilitates a network called Communications, Analysis, Relationships, Action (CARA) for both religious and lay people, who work for social justice. It has another network solely for religious who are responsible for justice work in their own congregations. Over the past twenty five years, CORI Justice have organized over 600 seminars and workshops across Ireland and abroad on issues of social justice with over 50,000 participants.

### **1.A.3 spirituality**

The spirituality of CORI Justice is rooted in the Judeo-Christian appreciation for the dignity of the human person, the centrality of community and commitment to justice. The person develops in relationship to other people and justice is thought of in terms of the kinds of relationships that foster dignity. Its spirituality, rooted in scripture and Catholic tradition, understands justice as a harmony which comes from fidelity to right relationships with God, people, institutions, and the environment.

Although CORI Justice has always worked out of ‘a spirituality for social engagement,’ in the past seven or eight years it has begun to address this topic in a public and deliberate manner. It recognizes the value of a spirituality that motivates someone or a community to act for justice, along with the importance of a spirituality that will sustain people in this work. To this end, CORI Justice organizes conversations bringing together people from a wide variety of

backgrounds, such as economics, sociology, philosophy, theology, and anthropology.

In the last four years, CORI Justice has organized three conferences on the theme of spirituality for social engagement: *Spirituality and Poverty in a Land of Plenty* (2004); *Human Dignity and Spirituality in a Globalized World* (2006) and *Spirituality and Hope in a Changing World* (2007). The papers of the earlier two have both published<sup>6</sup> and the third will be published this year.

#### **1.A.4 communication and advocacy**

CORI Justice spends a great deal of time and energy in the area of communication as a form of advocacy. They produce about twelve publications a year. These include three books (an annual socio-economic review, an annual social policy book and a book on spirituality for social engagement), along with a series of policy briefings, an analysis of the national Irish budget and their newsletter CONTACT. Their website ([www.cori.ie/justice](http://www.cori.ie/justice)) receives about 1.8 million visits a year.

Along with their own publications, it has made many appearances in the Irish national and local media – resulting in a sustained presence in the public sphere. In a typical year, they are part of up to 200 stories in the national media, 1,400 internet stories, and more than 100 reports on national radio and TV and up to 100 interviews on local radio.

## **2. Greater Boston Interfaith Organization<sup>7</sup>**

In 1996, 45 clergy (from different Christian denominations) and community leaders gathered together in Boston with the hope of finding ways to move beyond the entrenched historic divisions of class and race that were characteristic of life in Boston. They wanted to build an organization that would foster relationships across these divisions and in the process generate power to act together in an effective manner on common interests. They raised some seed money from their respective congregations

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<sup>6</sup> Sean Healy S.M.A., Tom Jordan O.P., and Brigid Reynolds S.M., *Human Dignity and Spirituality in a Globalized World* (Dublin: Dominican publications, 2006), S.M.A. Healy, Sean, Brigid Reynolds S.M., and Tom Jordan O.P., *Spirituality and Poverty in a Land of Plenty* (Dublin: CORI Justice Commission in Association with Dominican publications, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Much of this information is taken from their website at *Greater Boston Interfaith Organization*, (accessed 26th January 2008); available from <http://www.gbio.org/>.

and hired the first organizer in 1997. The following year, the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) held its first assembly attended by some 4000 people.

GBIO has about 58 member organizations. These include religious congregations (comprising the majority of the membership), community development corporations, unions and other civic organizations. Their membership represents about 50,000 people.

## **2.A Description of the Work<sup>8</sup>**

### **2.A.1 public policy**

GBIO engages in public policy development at local and regional levels. It identifies common interests shared by its member organizations and designs campaigns around those interests. This involves research to understand the issues as fully as possible, identifying the policies that need to be changed, the new ones that need to be implemented, the stake holders and a mechanism to realize the required shift in policy. For instance, they have been involved in securing affordable health care for over 300,000 people in the state of Massachusetts, securing \$100 million for a Housing Trust Fund; \$30 million annual increase in budget for housing; significant pay and benefits increase for Janitors; and negotiated with Citizen's Bank of Massachusetts a financial empowerment program for members of GBIO.

### **2.A.2 enabling and empowering**

At the heart of GBIO's work is the growth of leadership. It constantly identifies, recruits and develops leadership. The organizers do not work 'on behalf' of their membership, rather they create opportunities to work 'with' their membership in ways that build capacity and confidence. This is part of the culture of the organization.

Along with developing leadership, GBIO is constantly helping people to become more involved in issues they care about. It provides ways for people to act on shared interests that are effective and manageable. This builds the confidence of the participants and can have the effect of creating an appetite for further involvement.

GBIO believes that wide involvement and good leadership can give rise to power. This is created through people having a sense of their own ability to make a difference through their relationship with many other people, often from diverse

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<sup>8</sup> In the following description I use the four program headings from CORI Justice. Much of the following information was gathered from their website, [www.gbio.org](http://www.gbio.org) and interviews.

communities, who also care deeply about the same issue. When this power is targeted in strategic ways, it has been very effective.

### **2.A.3 spirituality**

As an organization, GBIO itself does not claim to have any particular religious spirituality. However, the majority of its members are drawn from religious communities and they do have spiritualities rooted in religious traditions. One of the common beliefs shared by all members and organizers is that everyone is created in the *Imago Dei*. Worth and dignity are independent of class, race, gender, nationality or personality and are realized in relationships.

The very existence of GBIO provides a platform and a vehicle for the member organizations and institutions to give voice to their spiritualities, to act on the social and public dimensions of their faith traditions. GBIO counts on the spiritualities of its member organizations for its direction, reflection and action. And it provides opportunities for the public display of spirituality at large gatherings and events.

It provides clergy retreat days and opportunities for theological reflection with their members.

### **2.A.4 communication and advocacy**

It is not possible to be effective on social policy without being a successful communicator. Since building relationships are at the heart of GBIO, communication is essential among members, member organizations, and between GBIO itself and the wider public. This takes place in wide variety of ways. The most basic is the face to face meeting – one-to-ones between people. There are also house meetings, public events, and engagement with the wider media in print and on TV. GBIO prides itself on communicating with others in a frank and straightforward manner.

## **3. *Theos: public theology think tank*<sup>9</sup>**

Theos is a public theology think tank based in London, England. It is ecumenical Christian, drawing its theological base from Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions.

It began in November 2006 and its aim is to have an impact on public opinion about the

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<sup>9</sup> Much of this information is taken from their website at *Theos - the Public Theology Think Tank*, (accessed 24th January 2008); available from <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/mainnav/home.aspx>.

importance of faith and belief in and to society. It believes that although faith is personal, it is not a private matter – and if it were, society would be greatly diminished.

Theos believes that the structure best suited to this kind of work is that of the ‘think tank’ – given the success of other think tanks in shaping and forming public opinion in areas such as democracy and free markets. Theos is modeled on think tanks such as Demos<sup>10</sup> and the Institute of Economic Affairs.<sup>11</sup> It provides theological commentary on social and political issues. Theos is supported by both the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams (Anglican) and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor (Catholic).

### **3.A Description of the Work**

The heart of Theos’ work is their engagement in public conversation concerning the role of faith in and to society. There is much talk about the role of values and identity in the arts, humanities, and social sciences today and Theos seeks to draw attention to the importance and contribution of faith in these areas as well as to society itself.

#### **3.A.1 public policy**

Theos’ effort at changing public policy is much less direct than the other two organizations. It places more emphasis on seeking to change the context, the climate of opinion – the culture in which policy is shaped and informed. To this end, it organizes and participates in conferences, seminars, lectures and debates. These are attended by members of the churches, media professionals, public affairs specialists, politicians, academics, theologians and members of the general public. Some of the themes it has addressed have been concerned with faith in education, charity and welfare, Christianity and sustainable development, immigration, and role of faith in Britain today. Similar to CORI Justice and

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<sup>10</sup> Demos is an independent think tank for ‘everyday democracy.’ It works with organizations throughout society to improve their legitimacy and effectiveness. See [www.demos.co.uk](http://www.demos.co.uk)

<sup>11</sup> The Institute for Economic Affairs is the United Kingdom’s original free market think tank. Their goal is to explain free market ideas to the public. See [www.iea.org.uk](http://www.iea.org.uk)

GBIO, it places great emphasis on good research and proposing alternatives to the status quo, along with detailed policy suggestions.

### **3.A.2 enabling and empowering**

Theos has an internship program that provides opportunities for people interested in doing public theology to work alongside its members. In this way, the interns learn some of the skills necessary to bring faith to public life in a dignified, respectful and transformative manner.

Its manner of bringing faith to public life is one that empowers other people. Its example gives others courage and insight into how to bring their own faith into public life.

Its publications help people into the conversation about the contribution and importance of faith to society. These are an educational resource.

It provides a consultancy service. It offers research, analysis and advice to people and organizations across the public, private and not-for-profit sector on issues pertaining to faith and society.

### **3.A.3 spirituality**

The spirituality of the organization is based on the belief that human beings are created in the image and likeness of a Trinitarian God. Two implications flow from this: the first is that human beings are social creatures, and since God is a loving relationship, to be fully human—and reflect the divine image of God—means that people need to be in life giving relationships with one another. The second implication is that human beings are responsible to one another and to God. According to Theos, human flourishing is fundamentally about relationships between ourselves, God, and the rest of the created order.

Through its research, publications, organization and participation in a variety of public forums, Theos witnesses to the public significance of Christian spirituality. They provide a credible perspective on issues of public concern and interest from a Christian point of view.

### **3.A.4 communication and advocacy**

Theos has a publishing program, which publishes reports<sup>12</sup> and research (opinion polls).<sup>13</sup> These in turn lead to further conversations in the public sphere and the identification of shared interests and alliances with other organizations.

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<sup>12</sup> See Stephen Backhouse, *Red, White, Blue...and Brown - Citizens, Patriots, and the Prime Minister* (London: Theos, 2007), Andrew Partington and Paul Bickley, *Coming Off the Bench: The Past, Present, and Future of Religious Representation of the House of Lords* (London: Theos, 2007), Nick Spencer, *'Doing God' a Future for Faith in the Public Square* (London: Theos, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> See *Doing God Survey*, November 2006; *Public Attitudes Towards Christmas Survey*, December 2006; and *NHS Chaplaincy Provision in England*, October 2007.

It has a sustained presence in the media. This is recorded on its website. It participates on the media in a variety of ways: TV, print, radio, and electronic formats.

It sends out regular email bulletins to interested parties on a variety of topics.

It has a debating forum on its website. It is entitled *The Current Debate* (Alistair McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University launched this forum, exploring the issue of atheism, with particular reference to the work of Richard Dawkins).

It has a media monitoring service that can be accessed on its website. It picks up and makes available stories and news concerning the issue of the place of faith in society.

#### **4. A Conversation between the Three Organizations**

Careful reflection on these organizations offers insight into the development of religious education curriculum that fosters a public spirituality. The following section is divided under three headings. First, it appreciates and reflects critically on how their spirituality prompts them to participate in the public sphere; second, it explores their particular way of being in the public sphere; and finally, how they educate others into a justice ‘way’ of living out of a religious tradition.

##### **4.A Operative Spirituality**

###### **4.A.1 shared beliefs**

Despite the different religious identities of these three organizations—CORI Justice is Catholic; GBIO is interfaith; Theos is ecumenical Christian—all of them share the belief that the human person has been created in the image and likeness of God. Sheryl Andes, GBIO, puts it this way “We share a fundamental belief in the *Imago Dei*,



we are all created into the life of God and as our birthright we are given power to act – from what we know about God and read in Genesis, it is incumbent upon us to love, create, and act in the world.”<sup>14</sup> Paul Woolley, Theos, adds something that is important to make explicit from a Christian point of view. He says, “Christian theology teaches that human beings are created in the image of a Trinitarian God, Father, Son and Spirit.”<sup>15</sup> This echoes the convictions as laid out in Chapter 3. We are not just created in the image of a solitary God, a single being who has a relationship with us. Rather we are created in the image of a God who is a ‘relationship of self-giving love’ and if we are to reflect this image—to be true to our nature as daughters and sons of this Trinitarian God—we too need to be in life giving relationships, one’s that affirm and enhance our own dignity and that of all other people. This belief is central to the spirituality of CORI Justice. They hold that justice is a harmony which comes from fidelity to right relationships with God, people, institutions, and the environment.<sup>16</sup>

Such a belief grounds and calls each one of these organizations to work in a way that builds relationships in society. They appreciate the importance of good relationships between people at a personal level but they also appreciate the importance of the context for good relationships. This requires attention to and engagement with economic, political, social and cultural structures that foster right relationships. Each organization seeks to improve the quality of public life in society and do so in their own particular ways. Woolley says, “Theos hopes to contribute to the change in the climate of opinion

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<sup>14</sup> In a phone interview with Sheryl Andes on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2008. All quotes from Sheryl Andes come from this interview.

<sup>15</sup> In a phone interview with Paul Woolley on the 14<sup>th</sup> January 2008.

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that in this popular definition, they have included relationships with institutions as one of the essential characteristics of justice. This insight highlights the importance of institutions to the realization of dignity and the need to work for institutions that affirm and enhance well being and not just concentrate on the interpersonal dimension of our relationships.

where Christianity is seen as providing a credible perspective to issues of public concern and public interest.” Theos participates in the public sphere as a think tank, creating space for a Christian worldview to interact with other perspectives in mutually enriching ways. CORI Justice engages more directly with issues of social policy, seeking to improve the quality of life for all through working on economic, social, political and cultural structures in society. GBIO works on social policy issues also but does so through building relationships among its members and developing the necessary leadership to act on shared interests in effective ways.

#### **4.A.2 motivation**

All three are clear about the motivation for their work. The religious motivation comes through most clearly from CORI Justice and Theos. Along with an appreciation for being made in the image of a Triune God—and an attempt to live in a way that reflects this image—these two organizations have a strong sense of the importance of Christian faith to society. The involvement of CORI Justice in this work comes as a response to following the person of Jesus Christ. Sean Healy of CORI Justice says “If you are serious about the Gospel, then you have to be involved, there is a duty. Jesus challenged the powers of his day, constantly and vociferously.”<sup>17</sup> Through the use of the scriptures and Catholic social teaching, CORI Justice carefully discerns the mission of Jesus for the world today, and what that mission requires of them. In a statement on spirituality, CORI Justice says, “As followers of Jesus we are expected to be life bearers and to reduce the obstacles that stifle life. We are to be bearers of ‘good news’” and this

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<sup>17</sup> In a phone interview with Sean Healy on 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2008. All further quotes from Sean Healy came from this interview.

is “a daunting responsibility.”<sup>18</sup> Their knowledge of, and relationship to the person of Jesus Christ requires that they involve themselves in the work of social justice. In that same statement, CORI Justice says, “Engaging in activity to influence public policy and to generate structural change is answering the call to transform society which is a constitutive dimension of the Gospel.”<sup>19</sup>

I point out this sense of call and mission because it is one dimension of the work of Jesus Christ. But there is another dimension that needs more attention. Much as I said about God in Chapter 3, when we think of Jesus as the inspiration, the model and the catalyst of social involvement, we need to be careful not to think of Jesus as some solitary figure, outside of our lives, directing our action to places where God is absent in the world. Rather, it is vital to realize that Jesus helps us understand and experience the presence of God *in* the world. In following Jesus—in working for justice and building relationships—we should assume that we might, through the grace of God, uncover and discover the action of God at work in the world already present, especially in the public sphere. This disposition requires a sacramental imagination.

Many of the people I interviewed in these organizations spoke easily and comfortably of the mandate of the Gospel to work for a better society, to care for those who are poor and build right relationships. They themselves are trying to live in accordance with this demand, as daughters and sons of God. However, what was not so evident on the part of the organizations—but likely all organizations would subscribe to it if it was pointed out—was the attention given to the presence and action of God *in* the work of changing public opinion, social policy, and building relationships. We need to

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<sup>18</sup> Sean Healy S.M.A. and Brigid Reynolds S.M., *Spirituality*, (2008, accessed 1st February 2008); available from <http://www.cori.ie/Justice/Spirituality/45-Spirituality/120-Spirituality>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

realize and expect that these actions can also be revelatory of the presence and action of God – we are not just sent, stepping away from Jesus into a secular world, and then returning to him in some designated holy places. Rather, we need to realize that through our work and presence in the public sphere, and openness to the grace of God, we might uncover the action of God, and discover that the public is a locus of the presence of God. This touches on the importance of the mystical dimension of a public spirituality made in the previous chapter. In it I pointed out that our lives are not just directed by an ‘ought’ but that faith can help us grow in a disposition characterized by an ‘allowing’ or a ‘welcoming’ of something already present in the world. This is not to say that we don’t need the ‘ought’ but it needs to be complemented by an attitude of receptiveness and recognition of what is already there. In this way, we foster an awareness that we are just as much ‘in’ God when we are in the public sphere as when we are in church. The presence of God is not episodic, concerned only with an experience of being sent, holiness, and confined to holy places.

#### **4.A.3 discerning the presence of God in the public**

Relationship building is at the heart of community organizing. This is the foundation on which organizers build an institution that can generate the power necessary for people to act on values such as justice, equality, and social inclusion, in strategic and effective ways. GBIO has been very effective in what it has achieved since its inception in 1996.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See the description of what it has achieved on pages 144-145.

One of the critiques made of faith based organizations is that they use the religious traditions of their member in an instrumental way.<sup>21</sup> The faith tradition is simply used to advance the agenda of the organization and its spiritual convictions and wisdom are not part of the life and method of the movement. Larry Gordon, GBIO, rejects this position. According to him, such a view fundamentally misunderstands the place and value given to relationships and personal formation in faith-based organizing.

To illustrate his point, Gordon gave the example of someone who never considered themselves a public person. After some time in community organization, that person leads a meeting with the local state senator. The meeting takes place around a particular issue that is shared by that leader and a number of other people. The reflection after the meeting is crucial for the leader. It is not just concerned about the meeting and the advancement of the agenda, but with how the participants were transformed by the experience, how they think about themselves differently; for Gordon, this sort of reflection is a religious experience, arising from the very approach employed in their social praxis.

Gordon goes on to imagine another meeting, with the same leader and senator. This time the issue is not something that this leader has any interest in. The challenge now is for the leader to move outside his or her world of interests and into that of the people for whom this issue is very important. To ensure that this will happen, the organizer pushes the leader on how well s/he knows these other people, how well s/he understands their issue and might suggest that there is a need to co-lead the meeting with someone from that constituency. To make things more complicated, perhaps that other

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<sup>21</sup> See Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 187.

person might have a different skin color to the original leader which might require some work so that they can co-lead the meeting. In this sort of work, the leader is invited into a reflective process to realize that this other issue is also a part of public life and that s/he has to enlarge their consciousness and imagination about the interdependence of life. According to Gordon “this sort of engagement begins to offer that person an opportunity to get outside themselves and to begin to imagine himself or herself leading a meeting around both issues.”<sup>22</sup> This political requirement is used as a vehicle through which relationships are built. “Now for me, for Larry, that’s an experience of the divine – that is, when I’m moved into the mixed multitude, connected to them and working on how to make the world a better place concretely.”

This experience reflects Sandra Schneiders description of spirituality “as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”<sup>23</sup> The experience of the GBIO leader described above has these elements. There is a process of having to transcend oneself in coming to know others; it is hoped that it is an integrating experience and one in the service of the common good – which could be the ultimate value. The point is that the political action—the involvement in public life—gives an opportunity for something spiritual, one described by Gordon as an experience of the divine. According to him, it is essential that the effort of trying to change the world out there be married with the experience of trying to change the world inside of ourselves. There ought to be no separation between the social and the spiritual.

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<sup>22</sup> In an interview with Larry Gordon on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2008. All further quotes from Larry Gordon come from this interview.

<sup>23</sup> Schneiders, "Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types," 1.

The ability to recognize the divine in our relationality, particularly in our public relationships, is essential to any public spirituality. It presumes that the public is ‘charged with grace’ and that our lives in public are in-grace. Our task is to discern the presence of this grace and to co-operate with it as best we can, realizing that our ability to co-operate is itself dependent on grace. If people feel that the public sphere is a graceless-waste land, then they will make certain assumptions about it, experience it accordingly, and have their earlier assumptions confirmed. They will presume a lack of compassion and generosity, experience hostility and closure, and consequently, be less inclined for involvement in the future.

Experiencing and discovering grace-in-public can be very difficult. It is often hard to see where people’s dignity is recognized and enhanced. Rather, it is much easier to notice the harm done to people’s sense of themselves, especially in the way we trivialize, dishonor, and disparage one another. The apparent public absence of grace can be very visible. However, while a public spirituality requires a strong sense of being sent and called into the public sphere, it also requires an ability to notice traces of grace where it is not apparent, where it is well hidden and out of plain view. This is what will sustain people’s engagement with the public over the long haul – the gift of a sensibility for the more and recognition of God’s Spirit at work in our lives and in our world.

#### **4.A.4 participation and the common good**

All three organizations have a profound care for the common good. This is an expression of their spirituality; it is what holds them together and enables them to

transcend themselves in the service of something bigger. They are not interested in ‘single issue’ politics but to improve the quality of life for all in society.

They do this in two ways. The first is to help people build relationships that are respectful and life-giving. The work of GBIO has this as its explicit aim to build and sustain relationships within and between its member organizations.<sup>24</sup> This is a huge contribution to civil society, for it generates both bonding and bridging social capital. Society is in great need of both of these but most especially bridging social capital. The work of GBIO helps bring people together from different classes, ethnic identities, races, genders, and nationalities in ways that break down harmful stereotypes and misleading myths. As pointed out in Chapter 1, Daloz et al., in their book, *Common Fire*, said that “constructive engagement with otherness was the single most critical element undergirding commitment to the common good in the lives of the people we studied.”<sup>25</sup> The work of GBIO offers many different opportunities for ‘constructive engagement with otherness’ in ways that are transformational for all concerned. Sheryl Andes says “We believe in diversity, in the sense that people have more in common across race, class, geography. When we get into relationship with one another, we are more alike than we are different.”

The second way these organizations improve the quality of life for all in society is through their concern for society itself and how it is structured, rather than being focused on any one piece of policy or legislation, they all have a sense of the whole. An example

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<sup>24</sup> This is a very difficult and complicated task. Dan Finn, GBIO, spoke about the problems of sustaining involvement in GBIO when issues—like affordable housing, health care and aging with dignity—take time and are without any immediate results. People find it difficult to commit to something if they not have an experience of any tangible and concrete benefits. Consequently, GBIO have had to develop campaigns that are more tangible for their members. Sustaining involvement requires imagination and commitment.

<sup>25</sup> Laurent A. Daloz and others, *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 215.



comes from the work of CORI Justice. In the late 1980s, a structure emerged in Ireland called social partnership (see footnote 5 in this Chapter), consisting of three groups (called pillars), representing the business community, the trade unions, and the farming community. Together with the government, they negotiated and agreed upon three national programs for government. These programs included a consensus on issues such as taxation, economic policy, employment, social welfare, and rural development. However, CORI Justice called attention to the fact that there were large communities and groups not included in that process, e.g. many poor people, unemployed people and women. CORI Justice advocated for participation and inclusion of the excluded in the process. In 1996 a new pillar was added to the social partner structure, called the Community and Voluntary Pillar. It includes organizations that represent many of the communities initially excluded. CORI Justice has been a member of this pillar since 1996 and has negotiated and signed four national agreements, along with the other pillars. The work of CORI Justice in this context helps communities, previously silenced, excluded and ignored to ‘have their say’ and participate in meaningful ways through the social partnership process. CORI Justice contributes to the creation of structures and policies in society that enable everyone to live with dignity and have what is needed to flourish. Concern for the well-being of society as a whole is central to a public spirituality.

## 4.B Approaches to the Public

### 4.B.1 social analysis, credible alternatives and effective pathways

Healy says that there are three dimensions to the work of CORI Justice: accurate social analysis, credible alternatives, and effective pathways in all areas of social policy. He says, “We are very strong about that combination. All of that is strongly linked to social analysis, we can stand by anything we claim, it’s not about ‘I think’ or ‘I feel’ but done on the basis of analysis.”

#### 4.B.1.1 *social analysis*

To engage in the public sphere in a sustained manner—one that is effective and credible—we must be able to ‘see the real’, understand it and communicate it to others in readily accessible ways. Social analysis is vital to this goal. It is described as the “effort to obtain a more complete picture of a social situation by exploring its historical and structural relationships.”<sup>26</sup> A helpful way of doing this, as described in Chapter 2, is to look at four interlocking structures historically and currently. They are the economic, political, cultural, and social structures that organize our shared lives.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the process of social analysis, three questions are very revealing: who makes the decisions, who benefits and who suffers?

In doing any sort of social analysis we must also be cognizant of the fact that we see from ‘somewhere.’ Because of our social location we see through a particular lens,

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<sup>26</sup> Holland and Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> For more information on these structures and their relationship to one another, see Healy and Reynolds, *Social Analysis in the Light of the Gospel*.

one that can both reveal and distort. It is important to realize the causal link between what we see and how that determines our response. For instance, when we look at the reality of homelessness, if we see only people who appear down on their luck, alcoholic and at times hostile to us – we will re-act in a particular way, one that is in keeping with our perception and interpretation. However, if we look at homelessness not so much as a matter of a person being down on their luck but in the context of accommodation provision, mental health care, and the feminization of poverty – our response might be quite different, one that takes account of the structural dimension of this issue as well as the personal.

This emphasis on social analysis is clearly visible in the work of the other two organizations as well – GBIO and Theos. Social analysis is essential to the work of GBIO. It builds relationships among people, who then identify interests and “that leads to research and action” according to Sheryl Andes. GBIO go to a lot of trouble to research the issues that emerge from their members. This is a complex, time consuming, and difficult task. But if their action is to be effective, it must be based on sound evidence and a clear understanding of the issues involved – otherwise, their action will be naïve and unproductive.

Theos depends on good social analysis; it is essential to bring commentary and theological reflection to issues within society in a credible and convincing manner. To do this well, they produce reports and undertake research, participate in debates and organize conferences. If its analysis were not accurate or socially conscious, it could not claim to shape public opinion. Theos would be dismissed by the media and others would

not engage with them. Quite simply, it would not be reliable and as a consequence, could not contribute usefully to the public conversation.

Finally, social analysis should be open to pointing out the affirmative and positive in the public. Alison LeCornu, Theos, says that “Theos is not just a think thank that gives us a prophetic voice in the negative but it also says what is good about society. It is not just about critical reflection but about appreciative enquiry.”<sup>28</sup> This is an important dimension to a public spirituality, especially since it is concerned with discerning the presence and action of God already at work in the public sphere. Pointing to the good, the just, the honorable, the beautiful, and the true in public life is very important. Religious organizations must point to injustice and critique the present reality from the perspective of those who are excluded, but it must also affirm what is ennobling and upbuilding in society as well.

#### *4.B.1.2 credible alternatives*

As Healy, CORI Justice, pointed out at the start of this section, social analysis must be combined with developing credible alternatives to improve social situations. One of the great failures of religious institutions has been their penchant to critique the present system without offering anything in its place. It is one thing to point out the failures but quite another to imagine how things should be or how they might be done better in the future. This is an important dimension of any public spirituality. It is not sufficient to only uncover the injustices in society; a public spirituality seeks to inspire people and organizations to be part of the conversation about how things can be made

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<sup>28</sup> In an interview with Alison LeCornu on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2008. All further quotes from Alison LeCornu come from this interview.

better. Besides social analysis, this requires vision and imagination – dimensions that touch on the affect and desire of the person and are essential to any public spirituality. Nick Spencer, Theos, says that although one organization cannot realistically expect to change the climate of opinion, “we can provide the framework and credibility so that when there are changes happening, we can offer alternatives, ones that are credible and thoughtful, socially responsible, and attractive.”<sup>29</sup>

In proposing alternatives, each organization is saying that society does not have to remain the way it is into the future. All three organizations refuse to accept the status quo. They do not just critique society or the global community and say it should not be like this—which may or may not be empowering for people—but they also say that it does not *have* to be like this, things *can* be different. And this *is* empowering. They provide a vision of how things can and should be. This approach gives people energy and taps into their desires. Vision is something that gives hope and create a desire for change, in both one’s own personal and public life.

In proposing alternatives, implicitly, religious organizations are saying that they have something to offer society. They have a particular view of the human person, what it means to live well together, and what is required for communities to live with dignity and love. Religious communities have long and deep traditions, in which they have wrestled with many of the questions that are asked today about living meaningfully, social justice, our relationship to God, happiness and well-being. In proposing alternatives to negative social arrangements, it bespeaks a confidence in one’s own religious tradition and what it has to offer to wider society. The alternatives that are

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<sup>29</sup> In an interview with Nick Spencer on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2008. All further quotes from Nick Spencer come from this interview.

developed and proposed must be credible. If they are not then the public life of the organization will fail to make a contribution to our common lives.

#### *4.B.1.3 effective pathways*

The third dimension of the schema outlined by CORI Justice is to create and act on effective and credible alternatives. Each organization displayed knowledge and experience of effecting change in society; crafting and implementing social policy; the workings of legislation; identifying the holders of power and how that power can be used to realize the change desired; understanding the value systems at work in the culture and how these shape people's convictions and actions. It is one thing to name the reality, and to say how it could be improved but it is quite another to work for that change in a systematic and strategic way.

Finding and creating effective pathways will necessarily involve working with other organizations who share similar interests. CORI Justice is in a social partnership structure with other members of the community and voluntary sector, farming organizations, trade unions, the government, and the business community. GBIO identified affordable health care as a widely shared interest among its members. It did its research on this issue, identified credible alternatives to the present system and then outlined a strategy to move from the way things are to the way things can be. It was not something they could do alone; so they partnered with the Affordable Care Today Coalition to strengthen and improve their power and chances of success.

Along with the ability to work with other organizations, a public spirituality requires knowing when to be realistic about what is possible in the public sphere. Healy puts it this way,

We need to think of what is attainable in terms of the ideal but the ideal is not always attainable and we have a strong view that the best should not be the enemy of the good. We need to make some progress towards the ideal and we should not give up on one part of the way if we can't get the whole of the good at any one time.

This is a difficult thing to judge and will take a sophisticated knowledge of the political landscape in which one is working for change and a deep care and appreciation for one's particular religious tradition. Spencer, Theos, says that people have to realize that being involved in social change will require some compromise and each of us needs to think about that and confront our own consciences about it; if we are unwilling to compromise then we ought not to be in politics, for politics is the art of the possible. The tension pointed to by Healy and Spencer can be summed up in the difference between realists and idealists. Realists are people who focus on what is true, what is and the way things are now. Idealists pay attention to what should be true and the way things are supposed to be.<sup>30</sup> A public spirituality needs to be realistic and idealistic.

#### **4.B.2 a persuasive style**

All three organizations demonstrate a persuasive style of engagement in the public sphere. Woolley, Theos, says that "there are some that have a radical and aggressive way of engaging in the public sphere, Theos is seeking to engage in a

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<sup>30</sup> See Susan Neiman, "It's the Metaphysics, Stupid," *The Boston Globe*, 28th February 2008.

particular way.” When asked about the kind of style Theos has, Spencer responds in a slightly flippant way, that they “want to have a sane style.” He says that some of the

religious debates are quite shrill and aggressive in the way they are staged. One person’s being prophetic is another person’s being aggressive. We want to be credible and responsible and prepared to listen and affirm other perspectives and our overall style seeks to be reasonable and appealing.

Conversation characterizes the style of all three organizations. They are involved in public, sustained and critical conversations with any number of publics. Healy’s view of the work of CORI Justice is instructive. He says “We offer our ideas and proposals for public discussion, we make a contribution to a particular debate on an issue—adult literacy, poverty, childcare—they are offered as contributions to the debate, there is always a dialogical dimension that is quite substantial.” The dialectical dimension of conversation is evident from what Healy says: “it requires us to be open to change.” All three organizations are open to learning from their participation in the public sphere. There is nothing absolutely dogmatic about their proposals, they make them in good faith. But through conversation, action, and most importantly, reflection on the action, insights are gained and the proposal or action refined in light of new insights. The public engagement of the three organizations respects their interlocutors but it also requires some courage – one’s proposals might be found wanting and in need of change.

In a lecture entitled ‘Education in a Time of HIV/AIDS,’<sup>31</sup> James Keenan reflected on the impact of interlocutors on one’s theology. He gave the example of how, for many years, bio-ethicists were in conversation with doctors who were caring for people living with the HIV/AIDS virus. The doctors’ questions and experience, which were in the realm of the interpersonal, were brought into conversation with a theological

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<sup>31</sup> This talk took place at Boston College on the 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2005.



framework. Four principles emerged that made sense of and guided the doctors experiences and relationships. These were benevolence, non-maleficence, autonomy and justice. When the same bio-ethicists, however, engaged in conversations with public health officials concerned with the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus, this same theological framework was found wanting. These officials had different questions and concerns than the doctors, bringing a new horizon to bio-ethics that was much more concerned with the public dimension of the virus than the personal. The public health officials were concerned with the structural dimension of public health and wanted justice to replace benevolence as the first of the four principles. The experience of the public health officials required the bio-ethicists to return to their sources with these new questions and create a new hermeneutics.

Through participation in the public sphere, people from any tradition expose themselves to this same dynamic. Their hermeneutics might be found wanting and this can be very challenging. Such an engagement will require intellectual honesty, rigor, and a conviction that theology can be improved through engaging with the questions of the day.

But participation in the public sphere requires something more. It requires a humility. According to Healy, CORI Justice,

We are very strong on Merton's view, that you are never actually sure that what you are doing is the right thing, or that you are really on the right road. Merton believed that at the end of the day, the only thing you can be sure of is that your struggle to find the right road is pleasing to God. There is an openness to change and a realization that we don't have all the answers and that we don't have to be absolutely right and so we dialogue all the time.

Within any public spirituality, there has to be a balance between having confidence to work for change in strong and at times forceful ways and the humility to recognize that one does not have all the answers.

### **4.B.3 care about the ambivalent power of religion**

Although only Theos made reference to this point, it is worth mentioning. We need an awareness of the divisiveness of religion. Woolley, Theos, asks the question, “If theology is set to flex its muscles in public, how can we ensure that the public square does not end up looking like a boxing ring?”<sup>32</sup> One is to point out that the ethic at the heart of Christian theology is love of neighbor, most especially the neighbor who is ‘other.’ At its best, Christian theology seeks to unite and not divide. According to Woolley, this is not an ethic that should be barred from public life. Anyone living out of a public spirituality needs to be humbled by how destructive a force religion has been in the world and how much harm—as well as good—it does today. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks refers to it as fire, and people of faith are its guardians. He says that we have often failed before but we cannot afford to fail again.<sup>33</sup>

### **4.B.4 being multi-lingual**

When participating in the public sphere, it is essential to speak in a way that can be understood by one’s conversation partners. All three organizations have this ability.

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Woolley, *Religion Holds Its Own in the Forum of Public Debate*, (25th January 2007, accessed); available from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article2931752.ece>.

<sup>33</sup> See Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, Revised ed. (London; New York: Continuum, 2003), 9-10.

Healy, CORI Justice, says, “It is critically important to speak the language of whoever we are dialoguing with. If we are dealing with government ministers, we speak in a language of social policy, if we are dealing with economists, we speak in an economic language.” It would not be possible for CORI Justice, Theos or GBIO to be in relationship with all the organizations they work with, if they were not able ‘to speak according to the mode of the receiver.’ There is little point in making faith claims about what God wants for those who are poor at a meeting of government ministers. Chapter 2 pointed out that the language used with governments needs to be accessible and reasonable to all citizens, and not just those of one particular faith tradition. However, outside of government, organizations need to find whatever language is most appropriate for any given situation. For instance, Jubilee 2000 became an international movement for debt relief. Much of the language used in that campaign drew on the notion of forgiving debts found in the Hebrew scriptures. It provided a vision that energized people all over the world—those from different faith traditions and without any faith tradition—to act on this issue. Religious language and vision was acceptable in public and made a significant contribution to the issue of debt relief.

#### **4.B.5 exploring the media**

Use of the media is an essential component in the workings of these three organizations. At a personal level, they are all very good communicators, being clear, intelligible, and persuasive. Each organization has a sustained presence in the media. This takes many forms – publications, newspaper coverage, radio, and the internet. All have websites. CORI Justice website is very comprehensive. It provides a great deal of

information as a resource to people working for social change in Ireland and beyond, receiving about 1.8 million visits a year.

A public spirituality requires good communication skills. People need to understand the media and how to use it in a strategic manner. This includes learning about how to place one's message in the public sphere, give interviews on the radio and on the television, write press releases, cultivate relationships with media organizations and individuals, and learn to participate in on-line discussions and conversations.

#### **4.C Educating for a Public Spirituality**

All three organizations have educational opportunities—such as internships, educational programs, leadership training—in which they share their expertise and insight. Their hope is that others learn from their experience and put it into practice in their own lives.

##### **4.C.1 reflection on experience**

Reflection on action is a core practice for GBIO and a means to shaping one's way of being in the world. According to Gordon, "I think the growth occurs when you combine the experience with the reflection on that experience." GBIO does this intentionally with groups and persons. For instance, after a public meeting, the organizer will help the group and the leader to reflect on the experience together. This reflection will focus on the meeting and the work that leads up to the meeting. It will look for insight into how the meeting went, if it was successful or not, the reasons to explain this

outcome, hold people accountable for their part in it, and seek pathways forward in light of the reflection.

The reflection also does more than this, it also has an important personal dimension. Gordon says that it is just as important to find out what happens to those persons who take on public actions. “How are they transformed, altered, and how they think about themselves differently; that requires intentional conversation, both one to one, and collectively about that experience.” For Gordon, such reflection is something that can enlarge people’s sense of themselves and their horizons. In this context, he spoke of the president of GBIO, Herbert Hamilton, an African American Presbyterian. When faced with any issue, Hamilton naturally thinks of how it will impact on the interests of others. He asks himself something like, “what is the interest of the synagogue, the Muslim community, and what is the interest of Fr. Dan Finn (Catholic pastor).” Gordon goes on to say, “Now that is inside of him because of political experience, he was drawn into an experience and there was a context for reflection on that experience – the organizing is about creating an experience in which such reflection on action occurs.” Gordon points to how intentional opportunities for reflection on action enlarge consciousness of care and help people think naturally about those outside their own group. A sense of caring for the public, for the commons is one result of this sort of reflection on public activity.

There are two significant things about the intentionality of reflection in GBIO. First, the reflection is not just about the issue, how it was acted upon and how things might be done better in the future. It is just as concerned about personal formation and how people grow and develop, particularly in regards to leadership. This kind of

formation, which is labor intensive (and often absent in work for social change) seeks to help the person care for the common good. Second, reflection on action helps hold people accountable for their action or lack thereof. One of the assumptions within the culture of GBIO is that we all have responsibility to care for the public. Without reflection, we will not grow in how to act on this responsibility.

#### **4.C.2 theological reflection**

According to Killen and De Beer, theological reflection is a process that puts our experience “into a genuine conversation with our religious heritage”<sup>34</sup> in such a way that praxis is the outcome. Robert L. Kinast puts it a little differently. He says that theological reflection seeks to disclose “the presence of God in people’s experience, a presence that invites them to encounter God where they are and to participate in the divine life which is offered to them there.”<sup>35</sup> All three organizations bring experience into conversation with religious traditions. Theos, like CORI Justice, brings a Christian lens to issues of public interest and acts accordingly. GBIO is a vehicle for faith communities to bring the social significance of their traditions to bear on public policy. But how do these groups teach others to do theological reflection? One of the ways is through modeling it, something that both CORI Justice and Theos do intentionally.

Theological reflection is also resourced through the publication of materials that encourage people do it for themselves. CORI Justice has put resources into this approach. It also organizes theological conversations among people from many different

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<sup>34</sup> Patricia O’Connell Killen and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), viii.

<sup>35</sup> Robert L. Kinast, *What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 3.

disciplines and it sponsors conferences on the interface between issues of spirituality/theology and social engagement.

GBIO have begun to organize clergy retreat days in which theological reflection is a part of the time together. GBIO hopes that this experience will create an appetite in the clergy for theological reflection and “in this way, they are better equipped to do it with their members” says Sheryl Andes. She believes that more could be done regarding theological reflection and that it would be good if every institution could take some initiative to encourage it.

The following is an example of an interfaith theological reflection conducted by GBIO. Recently it brought Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders together for a retreat. Theological reflection played a central part of their gathering. On the first evening, three pieces of scripture were read and reflected upon. One by a Jewish lay woman, the other by a Muslim lay man, and the last by a Christian pastor. The Jewish lay woman used the passage from Jeremiah (29:1-14) on the importance of planting gardens and marrying even though the people were in exile. The Muslim lay man took a text from the Koran about creation and how humankind has been created to be stewards of the world. The Christian pastor used a text from Matthew (3:13-4:11), and reflected upon the baptism of Jesus and his time in the wilderness.

When the three readings and reflections were completed, people (in mixed groups) were asked three questions:

reflect on experiences when you stood for the whole, or  
reflect on your response when others stood for the whole with you or  
tell a story that reflects an experience when those around you did not stand for the whole, when you were isolated and alienated?

When the evening was over, and it included some training on how to conduct one-to-ones, Gordon said that “people felt they had had a religious experience.” When I asked him why, he replied:

For someone who is a Muslim, and is with someone who is Jewish and that person tells about how he or she stood for the whole and when a black Haitian immigrant hears the story of a white middle class Catholic living in the suburbs and they listen to each others stories off the sacred texts they believe in...these stories are, in fact, sacred and when they are held up as sacred, everyone gets to put their sacredness in the mix; that’s church.

That evening is an example of theological reflection, done well between three different faith traditions and of a constructive engagement with otherness. The three different faith traditions were able to explore themes that called people to stand for the whole.

All three organizations bring experience or historical reality into conversation with religious tradition. However, the other element of theological reflection—disclosing the presence and action of God where people are and helping them participate in the divine life offered there—is not to the fore in any of the organizations. This point was echoed by Dan Finn, who said that, “We do not do enough of this” (referring to this kind of theological reflection).<sup>36</sup> He does not believe that GBIO helps its members sufficiently to reflect in a formative way on their own faith life in light of their public experience. He believes more attention could be given to how each religious group might explore more fully their own particular tradition. For the Christians, this would mean coming to know the person of Jesus Christ in a richer and deeper way, coming to recognize the presence of God in their everyday lives. For Finn, the incarnation is key to this. He recounts a story about a four year old telling her mom that when she gives her a

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<sup>36</sup> In an interview with Dan Finn on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2008. All further quotes from Dan Finn come from this interview.



hug, it's not just her giving the hug but it is God as well – Finn says that “we need to have that feeling and take it to another level, for there is great power in that.”

Much of the work of the organizations helps people understand and act on the social and public dimension of religious traditions. These organizations are very clear about the imperative to do justice and live in right relationships with God, others, self, institutions, and creation. Importantly, they help people to live in ways that are in keeping with their own religious identity as daughters and sons of God. They help shape and form spirituality. But there is something missing. It is *also* important for these organizations to disclose the presence and action of God in the public dimension of our lives. Otherwise, people will be confirmed in their sense that God is to be found only in the holy and religious places in society. This belief implies that the public is a dangerous, graceless, and treacherous place, and one that should be avoided whenever possible. These organizations are in a position to help challenge this harmful dichotomy. They have the experience of participating in the public in sustained and critical ways; and are well placed to help people discern the presence of God's grace at work *in* the public and through grace, to respond to it in life-giving ways.

It is essential that people have a sense of God's grace at work in and through them, in and through the world, otherwise a) they can easily take on too much for themselves, b) define success as their own or c) give up entirely – daunted by the magnitude of the problems they face.

### **4.C.3 masters degree in social justice and public policy**

CORI Justice aims to educate people into “a spirituality for social change.” Healy says “This is something that is extremely difficult. There are two levels. At one level we do it ourselves. For a long time we have felt that the best way is for others to see it being done and for them to gradually pick it up.” Given their high visibility in Ireland and abroad, they have indeed modeled a particular ‘way’ of being Christian, public and engaged in social justice work. The value of witness is hard to quantify but anecdotally, the witness of CORI Justice to their own members and to society has been very positive. The other level, according to Healy, is much more difficult.

We try to provide materials for people to use, that is what the books on spirituality do, like the conferences on spirituality as well – resources to help guide people. We have tried a variety of different ways, to be honest, without much success. There are some examples but we are still struggling with it. I think in some ways people have to catch the fire and then try to stay with it and if they want to stay with it, they look for and later realize the need for a spirituality.

One of their successes has been an internship program which they ran for 10 years. That has now been developed into a masters degree in Social Justice and Public Policy.

Bridget O’Keefe, CORI Justice, one of the program graduates, says that it has changed how she approaches her work and that it was very beneficial. “It pointed out things we did not see before and gave us a greater depth and keenness for the work of justice...It forced me to ask deeper questions.”<sup>37</sup> The Masters offers many of the resources needed for a public spirituality mentioned earlier. And while much has to be learned about social policy and working for change, attention is also given to how these subjects interact with the student at a personal level. Bridget O’Keefe says that the program helped her ask questions about the need to be honest with herself, about

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<sup>37</sup> In an interview with Bridget O’Keefe on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 2008.

openness to further growth, her resistance to change and the direction her life is heading in the future. A public spirituality requires that people learn to grow personally in their approach to caring for the public.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.A Operative Spirituality**

Each of these organizations has a keen sense of the call or demand for social justice. This is a strong source of motivation for them. They are familiar with the social implications of their religious traditions and act on them accordingly. They believe in a God that asks for right relationship with others, self, God, institutions, and the whole of creation. For those within the Christian traditions, this is a Trinitarian God. This sense of call by God, through Jesus, in the Spirit, in the context of a faith community, is an important aspect of any public spirituality. However, there is another essential dimension that was not so apparent. It has to do with their discernment of the presence and action of God *in* the public sphere itself. Although individuals made passing reference to it, there was little in the way of organizational structure that seemed to support a ‘sacramental imagination’ for their members or the wider public. I’m not sure if this was something that was just presumed or left to the person themselves to grow into. Either way, it is something that needs very intentionally to be a part of a public spirituality if people are to have an experiential sense of being sustained by God’s grace.

## **5.B Approaches to the Public**

A public spirituality requires the ability to do good social analysis, imagine credible alternatives, and work on effective pathways to move from how things are now to where they can be in the future. Its style is persuasive in character. It seeks to be in a dialectical conversation with one's interlocutors, with sufficient humility, openness, and appreciation for the power of religion in public life. A public spirituality will require an ability to be multi-lingual. It is essential that people know the language of their own religious tradition and that they know how to translate it into other languages when and where appropriate. These public conversations are potentially transformative of all involved. All three organizations use the media to their advantage and have great understanding and appreciation for the importance of the media in communicating their message and influencing social policy. A public spirituality will lead people to become adept at using and participating in all kinds of media of communication and education.

## **5.C Educating for a Public Spirituality**

Such education happens in deliberate and intentional ways. It can take place through sustained, mindful reflection on public action or through participating in a particular degree program at college. It can occur through attending a conference, conversations on the web, being introduced to a particular image and pathway to God that is inclusive of the public dimension of our lives, discussing literature and taking part in workshops. The educational endeavors of the three organizations seek to build relationships, enlarge consciousness and promote social inclusion measures. In educating for a public spirituality, a realistic approach is important. Many organizations within

religious traditions might not foster a public spirituality, however, those who do – are often very effective and influential, sometimes beyond what seems possible given their size, resources and staff. Referring to organizations like CORI Justice, Tony Fahey says that

In earlier decades, massive numbers of church personnel were deployed to deliver social services, but they had little creative impact on thinking about social issues. Today the massive numbers are quickly shrinking, the system of Catholic social services is in decline, and the church itself is on the defensive for its failings in the past. However, the new models of Catholic social action that have been created suggest that smaller numbers, concentrated and deployed at the cutting edge of social policy, can have a substantial impact on the shape of future developments in the field of social justice.<sup>38</sup>

The education process must be of a high standard and equip the student with the desire and capacity to engage in the public sphere in persuasive and effective ways. This will require education in subjects outside of one's religious tradition, such as economics, the arts, sociology, political science and political philosophy. Without some knowledge of these disciplines, the person will be either too shy to venture into the public sphere or once there, be very limited in what to offer. Education for a public spirituality needs to be inter-disciplinary.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter has highlighted some of the constitutive elements of a public spirituality at work in three different organizations. It has drawn attention to the importance of a public spirituality being able to motivate people to care for the public, to have a sense of call and mission to the public *and* to be able to carefully discern the

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<sup>38</sup> Fahey, "The Catholic Church and Social Policy," 162.

presence and action of God in the public. It also pointed out some of the 'approaches' to the public that are essential if one is to be present in an effective and authentic manner. Finally, the chapter lifted up some of the practices and findings that help in educating for a public spirituality. This is where we now turn our attention. How can religious education help towards developing a public spirituality?

## Chapter V

# Shared Christian Praxis: A Model to Educate Religiously for a Public Spirituality

### ***Introduction***

This chapter outlines the purpose and nature of religious education through the lens of a public spirituality. After setting this foundation, it introduces an approach to Christian religious education entitled *Shared Christian Praxis*. This is then shaped—in the light of the earlier chapters—into a process that is suited to and more likely to foster a public spirituality.

### ***1. Educating Religiously...***

To educate a person or a community religiously is to help them come to the “fullness of humanity by opening them up to the Transcendent.”<sup>1</sup> Religious education offers access to the wisdom of particular religious traditions, providing opportunities for participants to appropriate a ‘way’ of being in the world in response to their sense of the Transcendent. This way should infuse the whole person, influencing how they see, understand, judge, act, and relate to the world around them; their religion becomes part of

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Kieran and Anne Hession, *Children, Catholicism and Religious Education* (Dublin: Veritas, 2005), 31.

their ‘being’ and their identity. Religious education shares the faith stories, rituals, beliefs, ethics, attitudes, values, practices, habits, and vision that shape a person’s head, hands, and heart. This can take place in the family, school, or community.

Another function of religious education is to teach participants to take a critical, discerning, and responsible approach to religion. As Chapter 4 pointed out, religion is fire; it is humanizing and healing and at times, it is distorted and destructive. Albert Nolan warns that, “Millions have been tortured, killed, exploited, oppressed, and crushed in the name of God. Wars, conquests, crusades, and inquisitions have been conducted for the greater glory of God. In God’s name heretics and witches have been burnt to death.”<sup>2</sup> Religious education needs to help people think in a critical manner about the power of religion – for good and ill. We must come to see for ourselves the merits of a particular religious tradition, understand and appreciate its history, judge its contribution to what is true and trustworthy, and decide about our own level of involvement. We must be aware of the ambiguity in any religious tradition. There is always a gap between its vision and its realization. At the one time, it can both liberate and oppress. Being aware of this difficulty and engaging with the tension is an important aspect of any religious education process.

This dissertation has argued for the importance of public life for the well-being of the person, the need for people of faith to participate in the public sphere. This concern is part of the Catholic Church’s mission to the world, requiring a particular understanding of God and spirituality to nurture this approach; I have pointed to some of the insights drawn from organizations that embody a public spirituality. Now the question is: how to

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 139.



educate religiously for such a spirituality? When I use to ‘educate religiously’, I am thinking of Christian religious education, which, for the purpose of this dissertation, is located particularly within the Catholic tradition. However, I believe that this discussion will be of interest and use to other Christian and faith traditions.

## **1.A Christian Religious Education**

### **1.A.1 purpose of Christian religious education**

While this dissertation argues for the growth of public spirituality, such an aim is not the sole purpose of Christian religious education. Rather, the aim of Christian religious education is something that is much wider, deeper and all inclusive – it is the reign of God. “[The reign of God] provides the ultimate hermeneutical principle of what to teach from the tradition, the primary guidelines for how to teach it, and the direction of its politics.”<sup>3</sup> It is a symbol that reveals to us what God intends for creation and how God acts in the world. God’s reign appears in the work for “justice and peace, love and freedom, wholeness and fullness of life for all, and in the well-being of creation (shalom), and it symbolizes that God is active in partnership with human agency to effect these universal intentions.”<sup>4</sup> But fundamentally, the reign is a gift from God – and through grace, we are invited to respond and cooperate with this gift. Although God’s reign is already present, it is not fully at hand, and will not be realized until the end of time.

The fullest manifestation of the reign and its catalyst in human history has been revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was the central purpose of

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<sup>3</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

his life. Jesus did not emphasize God as such, but the reign of God. The life of Jesus offers us some insight into its requirements. It is opposed to any sort of domination and promotes loving service (Luke 22:24-27; Luke 12:37). Consequently it fosters economic equity, as inequalities lead to domination that result in unfair privilege (Luke 6:34; Matt 6:24; Mark 10:25; Acts 2:44-45). The reign of God is for those who are poor (Luke 4:18), who are blessed, not because of any particular moral achievement, rather because they are poor (Luke 6:20). The reign requires the full participation of men *and* women (Luke 7:36-50; Luke 10-17; John 4:27). It seeks the reconciliation and inclusion of those who have been excluded due to poverty, sickness, or sinfulness (Mark 2:15-17; Luke 19:1-10). It fosters an enlarging of what is meant by family, one that is inclusive, particularly of the stranger and all those in need (Mark 3:35; Mark 10:29-30).

Jesus' reign was not about tinkering with the old system but about a new way of living altogether in peace and justice. His vision opposed the assumptions and structures of oppression and exclusion. He imagined a world where people would be in harmony with one another, with God, and committed to the wellbeing of all creation. Such a reign shapes the meaning and praxis of a public spirituality.

Another way of describing the reign of God is in terms of a oneness with God, ourselves, others and the whole of creation.<sup>5</sup> Albert Nolan explains that this oneness with *God* allows for an appreciation that we are *in* the mystery of God, and that this mysterious God is intimately close, personal, and loving. To be one with God requires that we love *ourselves*, our whole selves – mind, body, and emotions. This allows us to be one with *other people* – to act on the teaching of Jesus to love God and our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:25-28). We act in response to the love of God, “We love because

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<sup>5</sup> See Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, 137-179.

God first loved us” (1 John 4:19). This oneness with others will only come about when we can identify with them and have a stake in their well-being, just as a parent has a stake in their child’s health or someone in their friend’s happiness. We must also be aware that in loving others, most especially those who are poor, we also love God (Matt 25:31-46). Finally, we are called to a oneness with the *whole of creation*. The God revealed in the life of Jesus holds all things in being, feeds the birds, puts flowers on the fields for clothes, and counts every hair on our heads (Mt 6:26-30; 10:30). Many mystics have experienced this oneness of everything in God. They have a sense of being connected into the seamless web of life through their experience of God. This experience goes to the heart of a public spirituality.

The purpose of Christian religious education is to enable people to recognize, receive, and cooperate with the gift of God’s reign, and to nurture and foster their experience of oneness in the world. This will require intentionally building loving, trusting, and just relationships in our personal and public lives. These relationships cannot thrive on their own. They need structures and systems that foster healthy interaction and promote the growth of human dignity, community, and care for creation.

One of the ways to approach such an endeavor is to nurture and nourish a public spirituality. However, rather than being one type among many, it ought to shape and penetrate the whole curriculum of Christian religious education. This will act as a corrective to the unintentional and disproportionate focus on the personal and interpersonal dimensions of our lives that now dominates so much religion, reflecting the individualizing and privatizing movements within our culture. This is not to say that Christian religious education does not care about the public nor educate people to

participate in meaningful ways in it. Rather, it is a question of emphasis within the curriculum. What weight is given to helping people appreciate their interconnectedness with one another, their oneness, the importance of public life and sense of shared responsibility for it, the doing of social justice, and enhancing the capacity required to participate meaningfully and responsibly in the public sphere?

An equally important aspect of a religion curriculum that fosters a public spirituality is the need to offer participants an understanding and a sense of the presence and action of God in the public realm; God's reign is very much a 'public' affair. The curriculum should help them discern and experience the call of God to become more public in their lives, and through grace, to cultivate the sacramental imagination needed to co-operate with the presence of God in the public sphere.

## **1.A.2 nature of Christian religious education**

In this section, I explore three characteristics of Christian religious education, reflect on what sort of 'knowing' should take place in this process, highlight the importance of educating for responsibility, and the need for Christians to become bilingual.

### *1.A.2.1 transcendent, ontological, and political*

Christian religious education seeks to "nurture to awareness and lived expression the human capacity for the transcendent. In other words, it encourages people to interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world in ways that faithfully reflect what

they perceive as ultimate value.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of Christian religious education, this will be in relation to the God revealed through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, tradition, and experience but most centrally by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the indwelling of His Spirit and through participation in a community of faith.

It is in the nature of the educational process to attend to the identity and development of the person. “It engages what is most deeply human and is, we hope, a humanizing affair.”<sup>7</sup> It seeks to shape the way a person is in relationship with God, themselves, others, institutions, and the whole of creation. It is not just interested in a particular aspect of the person, rather, it is interested in their very ‘being.’ It wants the person to make the Christian faith their own, to embrace, and absorb it. The ontological element of Christian religious education is a holistic affair, seeking to shape the head, hands, and heart of people as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Along with the transcendent and ontological nature of Christian religious education, there is a political dimension. Groome contends that “the essential characteristic of all education is that it is *a political activity*.”<sup>8</sup> For Groome, the word ‘political’ has the sense of helping citizens craft a shared and public life. Since the reign of God is the purpose of Christian religious education, it is not hard to see how it is a political endeavor. This reign or ‘oneness’ requires transformation in the heart of the person, in how they understand and act towards others, God, institutions, themselves and especially those who are poor. It also requires changes in how our societies and the world are organized, in order to be places where the whole of creation can flourish. This

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<sup>6</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.

can only be achieved if we “become partners with God’s Spirit at work with, and through, us. In other words, we do not effect liberation, justice, authentic growth, and wholeness; but God does, as Paul reminds us in 1 Cor. 3:5-11.”<sup>9</sup> Our responsibility is to participate in covenant with God and by God’s grace in the realization of God’s reign – ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’

### 1.A.2.2 *what does it mean to know?*

These following questions, asked by the German theologian Johan Baptist Metz, illustrates the importance of a knowing that leads to transformation.

Are we Christians in this country really changing our hearts, or do we just believe in a change of heart, and under the cloak of belief in a change of heart, remain the same? Are we disciples or do we just believe in discipleship, continue in our old ways, the same old ways? Do we love, or do we believe in love, and under the cloak of belief in love, remain the same old egoists and conformists? Do we share the suffering of others, or do we just believe in sharing with them and remain, under the cloak of a belief in ‘sympathy’, remain as apathetic as ever.<sup>10</sup>

Metz’s challenge about really changing our hearts, becoming disciples, loving others and sharing in their suffering asks questions about our understanding of the educational process itself. According to Mark Heim, education has taken two forms in religious traditions. One focuses on ‘knowing about’ a religion, where the content and information of a particular tradition is privileged. The other is ‘knowing how’ to practice the

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel S. Schipani, "Educating for Social Transformation," in *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning*, ed. Jack L. Seymour (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 26.

<sup>10</sup> Johannes Baptist Metz, "Messianic or "Bourgeois" Religion?" in *Faith and the Future, Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity*, ed. Johannes Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 19.

tradition's patterns of life.<sup>11</sup> He is concerned with what can be learned *from* the tradition *for* life. These two dimensions—knowing about and learning from—have not always lived well together. In the West, there has been a strong emphasis on ‘knowing about’ – content has been privileged over practice. This is contrary to the intention of religious sources, for they “clearly contemplate some definitive insight or fundamental transformation in the lives of practioners who use them.”<sup>12</sup> For Heim, “a key question for theological literacy in our current situation revolves around the integration of these two dimensions, ‘knowing about’ and ‘knowing how.’”<sup>13</sup>

In using this phrase, ‘educating religiously,’ I intend the best of catechetical education and religious education, both are essential and act symbiotically when educating in faith.<sup>14</sup> A way of fusing the ‘knowing about’ and ‘knowing how’<sup>15</sup> takes place when the content of educating religiously is “fashioned and taught as a wisdom for life.”<sup>16</sup> The use of the word wisdom touches on the importance of the ontological shift in education. Wisdom is concerned with the whole person—their reason, memories and imagination, their relationships and behavior; wisdom is about being open to learning from sources that promote life and trustworthy ways of living in the world, for oneself, others, and the whole of creation.

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<sup>11</sup> S. Mark Heim, "Renewing Ways of Life: The Shape of Theological Education," in *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Rodney L. Petersen with Nancy M. Rourke (Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 55.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56. This theme is thoughtfully explored in Thomas H. Groome, "Wisdom for Life: The Horizon of Theological Literacy," in *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> See Thomas H. Groome, "Total Catechesis/Religious Education: A Vision for Now and Always," in *Horizons and Hopes: The Future of Religious Education*, ed. Thomas H. Groome and Harold Daly Horell (New York: Paulist Press, 2003). In order to get around a false separation between catechetical and religious education, he has coined the phrase ‘catechetical education.’

<sup>15</sup> Another way of describing the ‘knowing how’ dimension could be ‘learning from;’ the advantage of this is that it prevents too much emphasis being placed on pragmatism by stressing a more holistic approach to learning.

<sup>16</sup> Groome, "Wisdom for Life: The Horizon of Theological Literacy," 361.

A spiritual wisdom for life can emerge from informing, forming and transforming “Christian persons and communities as apprentices to Jesus for God’s reign in the world.”<sup>17</sup> Educating religiously should inform persons and communities about the whole Christian story, making accessible the wisdom that is a part of this tradition. It needs to lift up the scriptures, traditions, beliefs, ways of worshiping, caring, and everyday practices in ways that make sense to people’s own experience, and at the same time, promote a critical consciousness, one that helps people be mindful of the power of religious belief in the world today. Finally, people need to examine carefully and reflect in a deliberate manner on their faith, so that they ‘can come to see for themselves’ what this tradition means for their own lives.

As well as having good information that influences one’s head, hands, and heart, to educate religiously, one is hoping that the “Christian faith should be a whole way of life reflected in everything that Christians do.”<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the Christian worldview is not one among others that a person might hold; it is the central one through which someone interprets everything else. Personal formation is at the heart of this education process. It aims to shape the commitments, convictions, perspectives and assumptions that people have about life and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. This can only be done in the context of a community.

Groome uses the term ‘transformation’ as part of the educative process to “capture the lifelong nature of Christian conversation, that it is a journey more than an achievement, a dynamic process rather than a static state.”<sup>19</sup> We spend our whole lives trying to live in oneness with God, ourselves, others, institutions, and the whole of

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<sup>17</sup> Groome, "Total Catechesis/Religious Education: A Vision for Now and Always," 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 8.



creation. Finding a balance and a harmony between these dimensions of existence requires sustained attention over the course of our lives.

While there are three elements in the process of knowing—forming, informing and transforming—there are also three distinct dimensions of where the knowing takes place. There is a cognitive, affective, and behavioral level in all knowing, including knowing a religious tradition.

The cognitive level refers to how people think and use their minds in coming to knowledge about anything. This involves the use of their reason, imagination, and memories in conversation with any text. Critical cognition is essential if people are “to make inherited beliefs their own and have personal belief conviction about the truth that is in them.”<sup>20</sup> It is essential that what is being studied comes to make sense to people and they appreciate it as agents of their own knowing. An intellectual coherence is required to appropriate a religious tradition; otherwise it will not be known in any meaningful way.

People also come to know through the affective and relational dimension of their lives. Belonging to a Christian community can foster a personal relationship with the God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such a relationship is not only known about in one’s head but also experienced and known in one’s heart. It becomes part of who we are and how we live in the world. Our relationship to God shapes other relationships, just as these other relationships may reveal something of God’s loving presence and action in the world. We come to know through attention and reflection to our feelings – what it is that we trust and desire, fear and apprehend. The

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<sup>20</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 19.

‘felt sense’ of the world around us can reveal much of what we know and how we come to know.

Along with thinking and feeling, we also come to know through ‘doing’ something, through our actions, and behavior. Often we think we need to fully understand a practice—learn about it—before we go and do it. However, it is in the doing of something, further understanding and insight can emerge, especially where there is good reflection on the action. This is a critical element in the Christian tradition – faith is something to be done, to be lived, and practiced. “Faith without works is as dead as a body without breath” (James 2:26). When educating religiously, there must be opportunity for action, and most especially, reflection in the action – this is where learning and wisdom will emerge.

### *1.A.2.3 educating for responsibility*

One of the striking things about the world we live in, is that for all the suffering, heartache, violence, fear, premature death, hunger, oppression and discrimination, very few people have any sense of responsibility for the pain of others. In many ways, we are disconnected from any of the negative consequences of our action or inaction. We don’t appreciate or have a felt-sense of the interconnectedness or oneness of our lives. Living out of a public spirituality requires a growing sensibility to the implications and consequences for our actions or inactions on others, society, and our planet. We naturally care about the cost of our actions on those we love, our families, and friends. The more distant the relationship, the less we see, or perhaps care to see how our actions impact on the life of others and our planet. Max Weber has written about the importance of taking

responsibility for the consequences of our actions, whether they are intended or unintended.<sup>21</sup> He distinguishes between an ethic of conviction, which lays great emphasis on the rightness of a cause with less concern for its consequences, and an ethics of responsibility, which places great importance on taking responsibility for one's own actions, without trying to shift the blame to someone else. He says,

I find it immeasurably moving when a mature human being...who feels the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his actions with his entire soul and who acts in harmony with an ethics of responsibility reaches the point where he says, 'Here I stand, I can do no other.' This is authentically human and cannot fail to move us.<sup>22</sup>

One of the ways of developing such a stance is through the development of a narrative imagination, as described by Martha Nussbaum. She draws attention to the importance of the arts in education and how people's imaginations can be fed in such a way that they come to appreciate their common humanity.<sup>23</sup> For instance, literature can help us see and understand, even taste and feel, and appreciate the lives of others in their complexity and commonality. It can help us see the inside of their lives, in such a way that compassion is evoked. When there is compassion for others, especially those who are suffering, there is a desire to understand the cause of their pain; this desire is what helps someone become aware of their responsibility for how things are in the world. It will not be enough to think ourselves into this sort of place, for right action does not necessarily follow from good thinking; we will need to feel our connection with others,

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<sup>21</sup> This point is also made by John Dewey. He says that reflection on our experience should help us take responsibility for the future consequences that arise out of our present actions, see John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), 146.

<sup>22</sup> Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures: 'Science as a Vocation' 'Politics as a Vocation'*, ed. David Owen (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 92.

<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, 88.

and desire a caring relationship with them. Cultivating compassion in relationships through the arts can foster a much needed ethics of responsibility.

#### *1.A.2.4 at the intersection of the wall*

Walter Brueggemann offers a helpful image around which to imagine and critique a curriculum that seeks to nourish and nurture a public spirituality. He draws attention to the way that the Israelites, when attacked by the Assyrians, went to the wall of the fortress, and there negotiated with their enemy. While at the wall, the Israelites did not speak in Hebrew, rather they spoke Aramaic. This was the language of international diplomacy and social policy. The language behind the wall was different. For the Israelites it was Hebrew, the language of their faith and the one that shaped their whole identity. Brueggemann says,

My urging is that church education must be bilingual, nurturing people to know the language to speak on the wall in the presence of the imperial negotiators and to speak the language behind the wall in a community of faith where a different set of assumptions, a different perception of the world, a different epistemology are at work.<sup>24</sup>

The language behind the wall—the language of faith—offers an alternative view of reality that can interact with other perspectives brought to the wall. Also, the experience at the wall can offer helpful and timely critiques of the community behind the wall. In this way, the conversation is dialogical and potentially transformative. The conversation at the wall can only be effective if the language behind the wall is fostered and nurtured, otherwise there is nothing to offer when at the wall. According to Brueggemann, the shaping of imagination behind the wall is essential. It is there that the ‘night work’ of

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic: 2 Kings 18-19," in *Education for Citizenship and Discipleship*, ed. Mary C. Boys (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 6.

dreaming and visioning, “of remembering and hoping, of caring and fearing, of compassion and passion” is done.<sup>25</sup> This is the task of religious education. But, according to Brueggemann, so also is the learning of “the language of policy formation.”<sup>26</sup> The implication for educating towards a public spirituality is that both languages need to be fostered.

My contention is that Christian religious education places great emphasis on teaching the language behind the wall, with less attention given to learning the language of policy formation. Participants must go elsewhere to educate themselves in this language; it is not generally part of the curriculum in Christian religious education. The thesis of this whole dissertation is that this should change – Christian religious education needs to teach both languages.

Jack Seymour suggests that Christian religious education happens at the intersection of these two languages. It should look both ways: toward the faith community and toward the world.<sup>27</sup> Locating religious education at such an intersection is very helpful in designing curriculum, and as a lens through which to evaluate the balance in the curriculum between these two strands.

This dissertation argues that Christian religious education should foster and nurture a public spirituality. This is in keeping with the purpose and nature of Christian religious education and such an approach will act as a corrective to the overemphasis on the private and individual dimension of life. In the next section, I outline an approach in Christian religious education that can educate towards a public spirituality.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>27</sup> Jack L. Seymour, Margaret Ann Crain, and Joseph V. Crockett, *Educating Christians: The Intersection of Meaning, Learning, and Vocation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 121.

## **2. A Shared Christian Praxis Approach**

This section explores the meaning of A Shared Christian Praxis Approach as developed by Thomas H. Groome and it outlines a way to make this approach more suited to educating for a public spirituality.

### **2.A Meaning of Shared Christian Praxis**

Shared Christian praxis is both a process and a paradigm of one approach to Christian religious education. It is employed to great effect all over the world in religiously educating people and communities toward a wisdom for life lived in Christian faith. It has been the standard approach to Christian religious education in the United States for over twenty five years. Some of the major publishers for Catholic grade school religious education use this model, such as Sadlier, Silver Burdett and Resource of Christian Living. Faith communities as wide ranging as Unitarian Church of America and the Baptist Church use it in their national curricula. This approach has been adopted by the Catholic Church in Australia, Canada, and Ireland. Beyond English speaking countries, there are religion curricula in Lithuania, Sweden and Korea that employ a shared Christian praxis approach in their own countries.<sup>28</sup>

Shared Christian praxis is a dense description of an approach to religious education that needs to be explored a little more deeply before we can proceed. *Praxis* refers to “purposeful human activity that holds in dialectical unity both theory and

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<sup>28</sup> See Amalee Meehan, "Paradise Regained: Teaching Science from a Christian Standpoint in a Postmodern Age," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 59, no. 4 (2007): 278-279.

practice, critical reflection and historical engagement.”<sup>29</sup> It is vital that participants—persons-in-community—in Christian religious education become conscious and mindful of their praxis, what it is that they are doing, how they reflect on what they are doing, and how they imagine alternatives to what they are doing. Then a *Christian Story and Vision* is made accessible to the participants. There are many stories within the Story and visions within the Vision; Christianity is marked by plurality and ambiguity.<sup>30</sup> However, when Groome uses Story he is referring to “the living tradition of the Christian community before us and around us (the church) as it takes historical expression in a myriad of different forms, all of which constitute ‘the Christian Story.’”<sup>31</sup> It refers to the faith life of the Christian community as expressed in scriptures, traditions, creeds, sacraments, spiritualities, liturgies, art, governance, the sanctification of time and so on.<sup>32</sup> Vision, according to Groome, refers ultimately to the reign of God; it is God’s intentions for the whole of creation. “Vision is a metaphor for all that the Story means for and expects of people’s lives—the demands and responsibilities, hopes and promises that Christian faith signifies for adherents.”<sup>33</sup> It refers to the economic, political, social, and cultural significance of Christian Story, offering truth, ethical principles, virtues, and a vision to sustain and energize people as they work in partnership with God for “justice,

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<sup>29</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 136.

<sup>30</sup> Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, x.

<sup>31</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 139. Groome goes on to say that this Christian Story includes “scriptures, traditions, and liturgies; creeds dogmas, doctrines, and theologies; sacraments and rituals, symbols, myths, gestures, and religious language patterns; spiritualities, values, laws, and expected life-styles; songs and music, dance and drama; art, artefacts, and architecture; memories of holy people, the sanctification of time and celebration of holy times, the appreciation of holy places; community structures and forms of governance; and so on” (139).

<sup>32</sup> See *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

love and freedom, wholeness and fullness of life for all.”<sup>34</sup> Christian Story and Vision are inextricably bound together.

The shared praxis approach is one of “mutual partnership, active participation, and dialogue with oneself, with others, with God, and with Story/Vision of Christian faith,”<sup>35</sup> hence the use of the word *shared*. The process is also *shared* in that it invites people to integrate their lives in the world with Christian Story and Vision, merging the two into lived Christian faith. Since Christian faith is radically communal, religious education ought to reflect this in the way it educates others.

## **2.B Outline of Shared Christian Praxis**

Within shared Christian praxis, there is a two way dynamic—a process of dialectical hermeneutics—between present praxis and Story/Vision. The process begins with expression and reflection on some aspect of the participant’s praxis. There are three dimensions to this reflection. A person or community can use critical reason, analytical memory, and/or creative imagination on their praxis and this will lead to an affirmation, rejection, or an invitation to move beyond some aspect of present praxis. The process then moves to giving access to Christian Story/Vision, and in much the same way, a hermeneutic of retrieval, suspicion, and/or creativity is at work in interpreting Christian faith.<sup>36</sup> Participants are then invited to interpret their present praxis in the light of Christian Story/Vision. Since this is a dialectical process, Christian Story/Vision is itself interpreted in the light of present praxis. Finally, participants are invited to make their

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>36</sup> See Ibid., 145.



own judgments and decisions about their life in light of this process. This 'shared praxis' approach is characterized by a number of movements. They are:

- engagement*: creating personal interest and activity engaging all participants;
- 1, *expression*: inviting people to be attentive to and express – somehow – present praxis;
- 2, *reflection*: encouraging people to reflect critically for themselves on their praxis – personally and socially – to question and probe, to reason, remember and imagine alternatives;
- 3, *access*: enabling or lending people 'ready access' to Story and Vision of the Christian faith;
- 4, *appropriation*: encouraging participants to integrate Life and Faith, to 'see for themselves' to 'make the Faith their own';
- 5, *decision*: inviting decision making – cognitive, affective or behavioral, personal or communal, etc., - choosing a life response.<sup>37</sup>

To put it at its most basic, Groome says, "I often condense the whole approach of *shared Christian praxis* into the simple phrase of 'bringing life to Faith, and Faith to life.'"<sup>38</sup>

Faith refers to Christian Story/Vision, life and reflection on it, is synonymous with praxis.

The dialectic between these two sources of wisdom calls for integration, "so that the faith people profess and the lives they lead become, by God's grace, integrated in their heads, hearts, and hands—becomes the ethic by which they live."<sup>39</sup> Groome's hope is that a

shared Christian praxis approach helps participants to develop the disposition to integrate their lives with their Faith and their Faith into their lives on an ongoing basis. For him, to know one's faith is not a cognitive activity alone—too much emphasis has been placed on this in the past, resulting in a harmful dichotomy between theory and praxis<sup>40</sup>—

knowing must embrace "ontology and people's whole way of 'being' as human beings in

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<sup>37</sup> See O'Connell, "Religious Education and the Public Sphere," 398.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas H. Groome, *Truth Betrayed: Culumny against Thomas Groome by Eamonn Keane*, (2006, accessed 1st February 2008); available from <http://www.bc.edu/schools/stm/irepm/community/facstaff/tgroome.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Groome, "Wisdom for Life: The Horizon of Theological Literacy."

the world.”<sup>41</sup> Christian religious education ought to shape the person’s identity and agency. Within such an approach, it is not sufficient to know *about* justice without becoming more just, to know *about* the importance of compassion without becoming more compassionate. Shared Christian praxis unites ‘knowing’ with ‘being’ in a way that engages and forms the whole person-in-community. This is an essential dimension of educating for a public spirituality.

## 2.C Critiques

Shared Christian praxis seeks to foster a ‘public’ faith, one that is “socially and politically responsible rather than focused exclusively on sacral concerns. Christian faith demands that its claimants join the public discourse and the political struggle for a better world.”<sup>42</sup> Groome appreciates the public significance of Christian faith and believes that a shared Christian praxis offers a way for Christian faith to be in conversation with the wider world. Mary C. Boys says that Groome’s shared praxis approach is to the forefront of the “commitment to pass on the faith in such a way that the social order is changed.”<sup>43</sup> Although Don S. Browning would acknowledge that this approach is indeed to the forefront, he does not believe it is adequate to the task of Christians bringing their faith convictions into the public forum.<sup>44</sup> Browning appreciates the critical, dialectical, ethical, and public dimension of Groome’s approach. He is not convinced, however, that

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<sup>41</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>43</sup> Mary C. Boys, "Religious Education: A Map of the Field," in *Education for Citizenship and Discipleship*, ed. Mary C. Boys (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1987), 123.

<sup>44</sup> See Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 222.

it goes far enough. It does not center itself sufficiently in theological ethics, and Groome's writing about love and justice "are not fine tuned enough."<sup>45</sup> The five movements of a shared praxis approach "cannot become usable, especially on more complex praxis issues in the public world of citizenship, unless they are infused with a more discernible ethic."<sup>46</sup>

Browning suggests five dimensions to such an ethic:

- 1) the visional or metaphysical dimension (what sort of world are we living in),
- 2) the obligational dimension (raises normative questions concerning what we should do),
- 3) the tendency-need dimension (what are some of the needs and nonmoral values that human beings, because of their nature, seek to satisfy?),
- 4) an environmental-social dimension (what is the present cultural, sociological, or ecological context and what constraints does it place on our action?),
- 5) the rule-role dimension (what rules and roles should be in place in the ethics of our everyday lives?).<sup>47</sup>

However, Groome argues persuasively that Browning's five dimensions are, at least implicitly, honored in the shared praxis approach. He responds that the 'visional' dimension is reflected in the overarching Vision of God's reign; the 'obligational' level can be placed in the third movement with its emphasis on Christian Story and Vision and the demands it makes on our lives; the 'tendency-need' dimension is reflected in how the participants bring their action to expression in movement 1; the 'contextual' dimension is taken care of in the critical reflection of movement 2; and the 'rule-role' level is present in movement 5, with its emphasis on decision making.<sup>48</sup>

My own critique of shared praxis is that it does not necessarily lead a person or community, where appropriate, to bring their faith into the public sphere – where it can

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<sup>45</sup> Don S. Browning, "Religious Education as Growth in Practical Theological Reflection and Action," in *Education for Citizenship and Discipleship*, ed. Mary C. Boys (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 145.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, 71.

<sup>48</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 508. See note 1

work for justice and promote social inclusion; it does not inevitably prompt the desires of participants to care for the common good and it does not automatically help participants to discern the self-disclosure of God in their public lives. Although Groome himself would educate for these things, and believes that shared praxis ought to foster them – the method itself, when used by others, may not do so. Much will depend on the ability and interest of the educator and the context and concerns of the participants.

My concern is particularly with movements 2, 3, and 4. Movement 2 reflects on praxis through the use of reason, memory, and imagination. It is essential that good social analysis be employed in this movement so that a thick description<sup>49</sup> of the praxis can emerge, especially concerning the public dimension of whatever is being reflected upon. When this is not the case, there is every danger that values from the prevailing culture that privilege the private individual and autonomous self will go unnoticed, and anecdote, personal experience, and narrow psychological analysis will dominant the reflection.

Movement 3 offers ready access to Christian Story/Vision. But once again, if this is shaped too much by the values and interests of the dominant culture, it too might lift up aspects of Christian tradition that reinforce a solitary and independent view of human existence. And when the reflection on present action and Christian Story/Vision—as described above—are brought into a dialectical conversation with one another in movement 4, they might reinforce privatized views of the person. The dialectic between

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<sup>49</sup> A thick description refers to the context, discourse, and interpretation of an issue or issues. Clifford Geertz gives the example of a wink. To describe this action without the context only offers a thin description. A thick description emerges through an understanding of how the actor, audience, and larger community understand and give meaning to the action of a wink – the context is critical to offering a thick description of anything. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

them will have been constrained by the limited nature of the reflection in movement 2 and the narrow access to Christian Story/Vision in movement 3. Hence the decisions that emerge in movement 5 are unlikely to enlarge the experience of oneness, awareness of social responsibility, or promote action in the public sphere for the reign of God.

In this process, much will depend on the willingness and ability of the educator to help the participants to gather thick descriptions of reality, become aware of their own assumptions and predispositions in how they approach and interpret their lives, offer access to Christian Story and Vision that fosters care for the common good and a desire to participate in the public sphere, promote a critical conversation between these two sources of wisdom that will lead to personal appropriation of the Christian faith in ways that encourage responsibility and action for justice in the public sphere.

## **2.D Shared Christian Praxis for a Public Spirituality**

Shared Christian praxis outlines an approach to Christian religious education. In what follows, I craft this approach into a style that is more likely to lead to a public spirituality. This can be done directly or indirectly. It is possible to craft a curriculum with the specific intention of educating for a public spirituality. However, educating for a public spirituality should not be limited to a class or module in a religious education program it should infuse the whole curriculum. The intent to nurture a public spirituality needs to be a part of every dimension of Christian religious education, regardless of the theme being taught, present in all the content and the process that informs, forms, and transforms the character of the participants.

### 2.D.1 focusing activity

The primary function of the focusing activity is “to turn people to their present praxis.”<sup>50</sup> This is done with the introduction of a generative theme that will be sustained throughout the core curriculum. The theme is used as a prism through which the participants can reflect on their own life in the world; therefore it needs to capture their attention and engage their interest. It can be concerned with their own lives directly, the lives of others, or an issue in wider society. The theme can be a question, a concept, a belief, an event – but whatever it is, it has to matter to the participants and connect with their lives. In this way, they begin to have a shared sense of the curriculum and a readiness to engage its generative theme.

The importance of turning to the praxis of the participants is that “they can encounter, recognize, and appropriate God’s ongoing self-disclosure in their existential lives.”<sup>51</sup> This is something missing from the reflection on the three organizations in the previous chapter. Such an approach will require being mindful and discerning about what goes on in their everyday lives, what it is that they care about, the relationships they are a part of, the things they do, how they feel, what they think, where they live, the society and culture that mediates their lives, and so on. Turning participants towards their lives in the world through the use of a generative theme nurtures their capacity to respond—by the grace of God—to the self-communication of God in their everyday lives, both personal and public.

Another reason to turn to the praxis of participants is the belief that learning happens through reflection on experience. When the experience of students is not taken

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<sup>50</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 159.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

into account, the curriculum will inevitably move towards a banking model of education, one that treats students as passive objects. A shared praxis approach views students as agents and subjects, believing that there is much to be learned through bringing one's life and reflection on it into conversation with other sources of wisdom, in a sustained and critical way.<sup>52</sup> Good education happens when people turn to their lives in a reflective manner. John Dewey says that "education is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experiences."<sup>53</sup> The experience of participants is honored in this approach and viewed as a source and means of potential wisdom.

The focusing activity should create an environment where there is participation, partnership, and dialogue among participants. These elements are essential to good learning, and are reflective of a pedagogy that aims to improve the quality of our public lives. Thus values like the common good, having the say, right relationships, and justice all need to be part of the educational process itself, if they are to be a part of people's own public lives.

### **2.D.2 movement 1 naming/expressing 'present action'**

The intent in this movement is for participants to give expression to some aspect of present praxis that is elicited by the generative theme. The expression can be concerned with something of their own lives, the lives of others, or some wider issue. An honest response to the theme is essential and it can take many forms. Participants can express their attitudes, sentiments, feelings toward it, what they see are some of the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., Chapter 3.

<sup>53</sup> Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education.*, 89-90.

underlying values and meanings contained in it, why it is important, why they care about it, their relationship to it, how it came about, their present involvement in the theme, and their assessment or commitment to it, and so on.<sup>54</sup> These expressions can be represented in many different ways, such as writing, speaking, miming, dancing, etc. It is important that the participants become aware of what they do or think or feel about the aspect of their lives that is lifted up by the generative theme. By putting some dimension of their experience ‘out there’ in movement 1, they are then in a position to stand back from it and look at in a critical and reflective manner in movement 2.

Groome makes the very important point that when participants reflect on their own praxis or that of society, too fine a distinction must not be drawn between these two aspects. “Personal and social praxis are woven together as warp and woof in the fabric of our ‘being’ and historically are never separate.”<sup>55</sup> Even at this early stage in the process, it will be helpful to assist the participants, through questions, to begin to make connections between the personal and the public dimension of their lives, and to appreciate the interconnectedness of what is being reflected upon. This will be done in a more systematic manner in movement 2.

Fostering expression of one’s praxis is an essential dimension of our humanity.<sup>56</sup> People need to have their say, to find their own voice to describe their world, their place in it, and how they imagine things should be. This was central to the work of Paulo Freire as revealed in his emphasis on the process of conscientization. He believed that it was essential for people to name the reality of their own lives and not have the naming

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<sup>54</sup> See Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 175.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>56</sup> Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), 21,49.



done for them by others. He created opportunities for people to critically understand and name the tensions, contradictions, fears, doubts, hope and deferred dreams of their lives.<sup>57</sup> This naming is the first step to reshaping reality and the world. Dialogue in a community of learners is essential to this task.<sup>58</sup> When people give expression to their praxis in this movement, they are in fact beginning to see if their understandings are dependable, if their presuppositions and assumptions are valid, and if what they believe is trustworthy. Participation in a community that requires expression of present praxis and fosters dialogue will help participants get a more accurate and honest understanding of their present praxis and their own consciousness of it. All of this is essential if they are to be agents of social and cultural change.

### **2.D.3 movement 2 critical reflection on present action**

This movement facilitates critical reflection on what was expressed as present action in movement 1. It invites a thorough and comprehensive—personal, economic, political, cultural and social—understanding of present praxis and fosters a critical consciousness in each of the participants. This consciousness seeks to uncover and reveal the personal, public, and structural sources for the present social situation, and was essential to the work of CORI Justice, Theos, and GBIO.

In order to engage the public sphere in a meaningful and persuasive manner, participants will need the help of social analysis, personal narrative, and a public language.

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<sup>57</sup> See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 11.

<sup>58</sup> For reflection on the nature and importance of dialogue in emancipatory education see *Ibid.*, 87-124.

### 2.D.3.1 a) social analysis

It is not possible to contribute to the public sphere in a sustained and meaningful way without a reasonably sophisticated and clear understanding of the issues one cares about. Groome says if social analysis is neglected, then critical reflection can “readily become a narrow psychological analysis of ourselves or others that tends to ‘blame the victims’ in society.”<sup>59</sup> Social analysis is one way to ‘see the real’ and is absolutely essential for a public spirituality. The following is one approach to social analysis, in which the structures of society are uncovered and examined.<sup>60</sup>

*history:* every issue and situation takes place in a historical context; appreciation of this fact helps widen perspectives and allow imaginations to envision new possibilities. A historical perspective undermines a fatalistic view of the present and the impression that the status quo is a given. It can also uncover subversive memories buried in the past that offer sources for hope, justice, and peace. Some helpful questions are: what are some of the major developments that this situation has gone through – local, regional, national, international? Who are some of the figures that have shaped this situation and why are they important? Are there memories that need to be recovered?

*economic:* economic structures concern the distribution of resources in a family, community, country, or the world. These resources include things like people, education, money, buildings, food, workforce, oil, relationships, and so on. A key question regarding this structure is: how does our society distribute its resources, how has it done so and how should it in the future?

*political:* political structures concern the use of power in our lives. Power is used to organize the distribution of resources in society. It is important to notice where power lies in a society and how it operates both formally and informally – is it transparent and accountable, how can it be created and applied strategically to effect change? How has it been used and how should it be used in the future?

*cultural:* cultural structures are concerned with meaning. If the present distribution of resources and political structures are to be sustainable, then they must make sense to the population. The cultural structure includes the values,

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<sup>59</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 201.

<sup>60</sup> This is adopted from the work of Healy and Reynolds, *Social Analysis in the Light of the Gospel*, Holland and Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*.

assumptions, prevailing views, myths, ideologies, and beliefs that shape everything in society. The questions that need attention: how is meaning organized in society? How has it been organized and how should it be organized in the future?

*social*: social structures concern relationships in society. The specific arrangement of the economic, political and cultural structures in any situation gives rise to particular relationships in society. These are shaped by beliefs and views about ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, race, sexuality, etc. Some useful questions are: how are relationships organized in this society, how were they organized and how should they be organized in the future? One's place or location in society, in turn, shapes the cultural, political, and economic structures – they all in turn pressure and influence one another.

### 2.D.3.1 b) a map of the context

Given that this dissertation is concerned with the wellbeing of the public, when appropriate, some direct attention to this dimension will be important. It can take the form of a map of one's praxis. Depending on the issue being explored, it can be useful to analyze it from the point of view of civil society – what is its relationship and place in civil society, name some of the mediating institutions that are connected with it – what is their relationship to the issue, what are some of its public manifestations and how is it connected to the public sphere? What is its relationship to the state, how is the government involved, is it the federal or local government that has a claim to this issue, in what sorts of ways? What is the relationship of the market to this issue, how does the culture of the marketplace impact on it? Locating the issue within the three dimensions of society—civil, state, market—can help participants understand it better and so make an adequate response in faith and thus a public spirituality more likely.

### 2.D.3.2 personal narrative

While social analysis is essential, it is very important that one's personal narrative be part of the whole process of coming to see the real and acting in a transformative manner in the public sphere. It is not possible to be objective and value free about one's analysis and so it is vital that the participants become conscious of their social location, their place in society, and how that shapes what they see and how they make sense of what they see. They need to be aware of the assumptions, prejudices, loyalties, interests, and values that shape how they interpret the world around them; basically, it is important to reflect on the adequacy and dependability of their interpretative lens. Does it lead to a care for the public, the common good, and a desire to act in the public sphere towards the reign of God? In social analysis, the participants are asked to think about the reasons for the way things are and to think about why they think as they do. They need to become conscious of their consciousness. One way to do this is to invite participants to connect some dimension of the analysis with stories from their own life. The more particular these stories, the more illustrative they become of why one thinks and feels and acts in a certain way.

Social analysis is about seeing the real, but this dimension of movement 2 is also concerned with letting oneself be seen by the real and changed in the process. It is about personal transformation and learning from experience. Jack Mezirow says that learning "is understood as the process of using prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide for future action."<sup>61</sup> It involves being open to changing our taken-for-granted frames of reference so that they

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<sup>61</sup> Jack Mezirow, "Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory," in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, ed. Jack Mezirow and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 8.

are more in keeping with what we discover in our analysis and reflection on our own consciousness of our lives in the world. It helps the participants become aware of their social embeddedness and to explore how their interests are served by their taken-for-granted assumptions about the world around them. This kind of awareness encourages a social response and the possibility of action towards a more inclusive approach to how one makes meaning and acts toward others.<sup>62</sup>

Attention to personal narrative, in the context of critical reflection and a community of dialogue, allows participants to appreciate the interconnectedness of their lives and how they are part of larger systems. It is hoped that through careful reflection, an ethic of responsibility can emerge where participants become conscious of the likely consequences of their actions and take responsibility for them, even for the unintended consequences. This combination of social analysis and personal narrative is very important, and it will be task of the educator to find ways to weave them together in a way that is transformative for people in the public realm.

### 2.D.3.3 public language and social change

Earlier in this Chapter, Brueggemann pointed to need for Christians to be bilingual. This is an essential characteristic of a public spirituality; Christians need to be familiar with the language behind the wall and conversant in the language at the wall. In

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<sup>62</sup> This sort of transformation can happen through: “a disorientating dilemma, self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame, a critical assessment of assumptions, recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared, exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action, planning a course of action, acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans, provisional trying of new roles, building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and a reinterpretation into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective” in *Ibid.*, 24.

movement 2, participants ought to learn ways to communicate in the public sphere (an understanding of the public sphere itself will also be necessary). Doing social analysis is an important dimension of this, but attention to the style of communication and the need to be persuasive will also be necessary. Participants will need experience communicating in the public sphere and the opportunity to reflect on this with others.

In order to participate in an effective manner in the public sphere, participants will also require an appreciation of how social change occurs, otherwise their efforts might be misguided and counterproductive. When appropriate to the participants and the praxis expressed in movement 1, some exploration of this will prove useful.

I have outlined some of the features that are important in movement 2. It will be up to the judgment of the educator and where fitting, of the group, to select what pieces to explore in some detail. It is not possible to do it all in any one teaching/learning event. But it is hoped that over time and with consistent use, participation in this process will allow social analysis, personal narrative, and public language and social change to become part of the consciousness of the participants, part of their interpretative framework, so that involvement in the public sphere for the reign of God becomes a natural and accepted commitment for them – in this way, they will begin to live out of a public spirituality.

#### **2.D.4 movement 3 making accessible Christian story and vision**

This movement gives ready access to dimensions of Christian Story and Vision that are appropriate and relevant to the generative theme as it has been expressed and

reflected upon in movements 1 and 2. The educator must decide, in the light of the generative theme and what participants expressed in the opening movements, *what* to make accessible and *how* to make it accessible. S/he must be cognizant of the fact that making anything available is a process of interpretation. It is not possible to pass on a text from Christian Story and Vision without some sort of interpretation being at work. For instance, when a particular text is chosen, it necessarily leaves aside others, and in its offering to the participants, it will be given a particular meaning and significance.

According to Groome, the educator has two responsibilities in this movement:

(a) to honor the texts of Christian faith in their own right with interpretations appropriate to the tradition and (b) to propose explanations and applications that respond adequately to the praxis of participants and with a view to appropriation and decision making in movements 4 and 5.<sup>63</sup>

In order that people engage with these texts in an appropriate manner, Groome offers 9 guidelines that are very helpful for the educator:

1. place the reign of God at the center of your consciousness as the constant ‘first criterion’ that guides all interpretation and explanation of Christian Story/Vision;  
*then ask yourself:*
2. where am I coming from, and what am I bringing to this text?
3. how do I take account of the stories/visions of participants in my interpretation?
4. what life-giving truth and values does this expression of Christian faith mediate to our lives?
5. are there possible distortions in the ‘dominant’ interpretations and use of this text? Does it hold ‘dangerous memories’ that can call in question and offer new life to the present?
6. what new and creative possibilities can or should I propose from the text to this context to encourage Christian commitment?
7. is my explanation in continuity with what is central to and constitutive of Christian Story?
8. is my explanation likely to encourage these participants to live for God’s reign?
9. does my explanation reflect the teaching/learning of the ‘church’ and respond adequately to the stories/visions of participants in this learning community?<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 227.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

Since the interest of this dissertation is developing a public spirituality in participants, the educator is to bring a ‘public spirituality’ consciousness/intentionality to interpret every symbol of Christian faith – so that it promotes how we teach Trinity, Incarnation, Revelation, etc. Also, Christian Story/Vision should be raised up in ways that can be used ‘at the wall’ as well as within the community of faith itself. It is hoped that such an approach will foster a desire, a concern, and a willingness to participate in the public sphere.

#### **2.D.5 movement 4 dialectical hermeneutics to appropriate Story/Vision to participants stories and visions**

In this movement, the position of the participants that has emerged through reflection and expression is placed into dialectical hermeneutics with Christian Story/Vision.<sup>65</sup> The conversation between these two sources of wisdom is characterized by the revised, critical, correlational method of theology as described in Chapter 2. This movement intends a transformational encounter for both sources. For the participants, there are three questions:

1. In what ways does this symbol of Christian faith affirm present praxis and help us recognize its truth and values?
2. In what ways is present praxis questioned and called into judgment by it?
3. How does this Story call us beyond present praxis to live more faithfully into the Vision of God’s reign?<sup>66</sup>

And since this is a correlational method, there are three questions posed to Christian Story and Vision:

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<sup>65</sup> See Ibid., 249.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 251.



1. What do we recognize as true and valuable in this symbol of Christian faith?
2. What do we find problematic or perhaps refuse in the version made available to us?
3. What do we need to reformulate in our understanding of this Story to live more faithfully into the Vision of God's reign?<sup>67</sup>

A central hope in this movement is that the participants will come to a critical appropriation of their Christian faith, appreciating and integrating what Christian Story and Vision has to offer in their lives and the life of the world. This may not always be something comfortable or consoling; it can also be very demanding and challenging, requiring shifts in assumptions, attitudes, and behavior. The process requires dialogue among the participants so that they can reflect on the dependability of what they are coming to see for themselves. This movement also needs to provide space for participants to attend to their own interiority, to pause and reflect on what they are feeling, thinking, discerning, and intuiting in response to Christian Story and Vision. And should ready them for engagement in the public sphere as people of Christian faith – a public spirituality.

#### 2.D.5.1 theological reflection

A theological assumption in this dissertation is that God is disclosing God's self to people in their personal and public lives. Groome says, "My claim here is that the more deeply we move into a truly critical consciousness of our lives in the world, the more likely we are to uncover God's revelation therein of how we are to live as a people of God."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 197.

Where appropriate, it is important to help people discern the action and presence of God in what they have brought to expression in movement 1 and 2. This needs to be done in a thoughtful, careful, and gentle manner. It will help the participants to focus on their actual ‘experience’ or ‘sense’ of God, rather than on an idea they have ‘about’ God. This can be a difficult thing to do with a group and it should not be surprising that some will be unable to name their experience of God. This can be for a variety of good reasons and needs to be respected. However, it will be helpful if the educator can probe a little and see if the reason for not experiencing or having a sense of God in the public dimension of one’s life is that the person or group just could not ‘imagine’ God as being present or active ‘in’ the world. It may be the case that they have been socialized into understanding God as present and confined to designated holy places—e.g. churches—in a given community or society. Some push back against this view is necessary in developing a public spirituality.

Theological reflection is important because it helps participants to discern and experience God working and present in the public realm of their lives, and that this discovery will allow them, through grace, to cooperate more fully with God’s Spirit in the public sphere.<sup>69</sup>

### **2.D.6 movement 5 decision/response for lived Christian faith**

What are the implications for the participants of bringing their life to Faith and their Faith to their life? Movement 5 creates opportunities for participants to wonder and imagine about the decisions that emerge for them in this process. A decision might come

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<sup>69</sup> For good sources on theological reflection see Killen and De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Kinast, *What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection?*

to mind that requires change to one's assumptions, thinking, emotion, beliefs, convictions, attitudes, or behavior; it could have implications on a personal, interpersonal, public, or socio-political level; and it might involve an individual or a whole community. The intent of this movement is that participants make decisions about what to do as a result of this process but they are also invited to make decisions about who to become through this teaching/learning event also. These character decisions have many dimensions, intellectual, moral, religious, and social. They are all aspects of the person that require attention in the long process of conversion into a public spirituality.

The educator is responsible for helping participants make reasonable and feasible decisions for themselves. S/he should help them imagine the likely consequences of their decisions, to see if they are in continuity with Christian Story and Vision. When appropriate, given the interest of this dissertation, s/he should also encourage and foster decisions that may lead to participation in the public sphere as an expression of Christian faith. When there are some participants who want to participate in the public sphere, perhaps for the first time or others who want to become more involved, the educator should find ways to resource their interest. They will have done the necessary work through the dialectical conversation between social analysis and Christian Story and Vision to name the reality, imagine credible alternative but now need to focus on effective pathways and strategies to realize their vision. They may also need some assistance in becoming comfortable and effective in using the media, and finding ways to be contemplatives in action. Where these things are not part of the curriculum in religious education, the educator should find ways for the participants to access the necessary learning for themselves.

Finally, it is important to always remember our need of grace. Groome puts it well, he says, “Remember that making a decision for lived Christian faith and acting on it always requires the grace of God. We can never choose or act faithfully by our own efforts alone. Even with the best efforts as religious educators, only the presence and power of the befriending Spirit can ‘give the increase’ (see 1 Cor 3:6).”<sup>70</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the nature and purpose of Christian religious education, highlighting its public character and social responsibility. Using a shared praxis approach, it has crafted a way to do religious education that privileges the fostering of a public spirituality. And it has argued that attention to cultivating a public spirituality needs to be part of the whole curriculum of religious education, its content and process, not confined to a module or moment in the wider teaching/learning event but a dimension of whatever is being taught and learned.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 278-279.

<sup>71</sup> Don Browning offers an interesting model of bringing Faith to life. At the end of a course he taught on practical theology, he assigned the students a paper. In it, they had to identify an issue they cared about. They needed to offer a thick description of this issue, interviewing someone outside the college who was involved with this issue. They had to outline their own connection with it, why they cared, their pre-understandings and assumptions. Then they selected two theological texts that served as guides to the witness of the Christian classics to this issue and summarize their arguments. This allowed the student to bring the issue into a critical conversation with the texts and come to some judgments for themselves as a result of this encounter. Then, and this is where the project got its distinctly public character. The students were to write their conclusions for the people they interviewed at the beginning of this process and they were to go and communicate these with that person. This ensured that the students had to become bilingual. Imagine if this were the case in all aspects of religious education, in Christology, ethics, systematics, history – if the students had to bring life to Faith and Faith to life in practical and very real situations. This would change the imaginations, the consciousness and the practice of the students and the educators and it would foster a public spirituality. See Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, 72-74.

## Chapter 6

### Deep Convictions and Their Significance

#### **1. Deep Convictions**

One of the deep convictions at the heart of this dissertation is that Christians must learn to bring the wisdom of their tradition into the public sphere in sustained, conversational, and persuasive ways. This ought to be a natural expression of Christian faith and part of everyday life. It must not be left to the professionals or ‘experts;’ rather it needs to shape the imagination, the understanding, and the practice of ordinary Christians. They need to appreciate how a healthy public life is essential to their well-being, the interests of others, and the integrity of creation; recognize how they are embedded in webs of interdependent relationships; learn how to take responsibility for their interaction with others and creation; act in ways that contribute to the common good, and as part of a Christian community, recognize, receive, and cooperate with the reign of God active in the public sphere of society. Such Christian faith is integral to what it means to live out of a public spirituality.

#### **1.A. Seeing the Real**

All of the organizations explored in Chapter 4 displayed a desire and an ability to see and understand the economic, political, cultural, and social context in which they

worked. This was an essential part of their approach and was the foundation on which they built their public engagement; without such ‘seeing the real,’ they would not be credible and their action would be superficial and short lived.

Christian religious education must help people to develop the interest and capacity to be able to look at the world in ways that reveal the historical and structural dimensions of reality. Such a consciousness helps the Christian person and/or community get beyond the immediate and pressing issues of a situation and move below the surface to address the roots of the issue. Social analysis is an essential tool in this process. Its aim is to foster the agency of the person and community, and allow them to act in a more strategic and effective manner on what it is that they care about, and to fulfill the social responsibility of Christian faith.

Social analysis requires careful analytical remembering and reasoning (the imagining will come later, in light of the conversation with Christian tradition), examining the historical, economic, political, cultural, and social structures of a given issue. But it requires more than such analysis. It is important that the narrative of those involved is placed in conversation with the analytical remembering and reasoning. Much will be gained by helping the participants discover why they care about a particular issue – what is it in their story that leads them to this involvement, what kind of person they want to become, and what is there that might hinder, deepen, and/or illuminate their commitment to this public issue in the future. But that is only one side of this approach. Having looked analytically and personally *at* a particular issue of concern, they need to look at themselves through the lens of this issue. This will involve bringing to consciousness one’s own assumptions, prejudices, awareness of social location,

unreflected habits and practices, and responsibility for the issue. It is one thing to act on the world and another to be in a living relationship with the world. This second part—self-awareness—fosters such reciprocity. In working to change something in the world, the person or community must be open to change themselves. This can happen when they are found wanting and challenged about some aspect of their attitude, emotion, or action. While social analysis involves seeing the real and being seen by the real, it also involves seeing ‘the more’ in the real; to see what might ordinarily go unnoticed, such as the resilience and hope of a people, acts of kindness in the face of hostility, along with forgotten habits of forgiveness and reconciliation in a people.

### **1.B Christian Tradition**

To educate for a public spirituality, it is essential that participants come to see that God is present and active in every aspect of life, including the public sphere. Imaginatively, it might help to think of the public sphere as *in* God (see Figure 2 in Chapter 3). This is an important corrective to the harmful dualism between the sacred and secular that so permeates much of Christian life today. A public spirituality—anchored in a relationship with God in Christ and through the Spirit, as lived in a Christian community for the world—appreciates the graced nature of the public dimension of life. It presupposes the presence of God’s purposeful, creative, and transforming Spirit in every aspect of life, including the impersonal, contested, and diverse public sphere. The fostering of a sacramental imagination is vital and will allow participants to 1) imagine that God is at work in the public, 2) believe it is possible to

encounter God there, 3) through God's grace, experience and celebrate the embrace of God in the ordinary and 4) and respond in appropriate faith filled ways.

For such an imagination to grow in the person or community, a particular approach will be necessary of religious education in the Christian tradition – one that lifts up the public significance of this faith, countering the overemphasis on personal and interpersonal relationships. This needs to take place throughout the whole curriculum. Regardless of what is being taught, the Scriptures or tradition, revelation or dogma, the social meaning of Christian faith needs to be uncovered and brought to the attention and understanding of the participants. They need to come to see for themselves the 'wisdom for life' that is integral to Christian tradition, how it can enhance the public dimension of society and promote a culture for the common good of all.

Such an approach acts as a corrective to the view for the many Christians in which the sacred is tied to designated holy places, rituals, and people – such as the parish church, Sunday mass, and the clergy. The secular refers to the ordinary dimension of our lives, everything outside the sacred – our work, role of government, participation in civil society, recreation, etc. In such a framework, the former is thought to name the place for encounter with God and the latter points to the absence of God. But more than the absence of God, the secular is the place where one's faith will be put to work. It is much easier to imagine the action of God in the personal dimension of life but the public—given its impersonality and lack of intimacy—is the place one should just pass through on the way to safe, personal, and holy places. A public spirituality rejects this view.



## ***2. Conversation between Experience and Christian Tradition***

A religious education curriculum that seeks to foster a public spirituality requires a back-and-forth movement between one's best understanding of an issue and Christian Story and Tradition. This movement can be characterized as a conversation, which implies the possible transformation of either source. On the one hand, bringing sources from within Christian tradition can affirm, critique, and/or require a moving beyond present understandings and practices. On the other, bringing one's interests, understandings and/or practices to bear on Christian tradition might reveal something true and trustworthy, problematic and/or the need for some new understanding or expression of Christian tradition itself. This sort of conversation aims to be mutually beneficial to both sources—people's public lives and Christian sources.

Bringing these two realms into conversation creates a possibility for the participants to interpret their lives in light of a Christian tradition that fosters a public spirituality. Such an interpretation will help them discern the presence and action of God in the public—asking 'Did not our hearts burn within us?' (Luke 24:32)—and create a desire in them to bring their faith identity and the wisdom of the Christian tradition to bear on issues of public and common concern. This must be done in ways that are persuasive, intelligent, respectful, thoughtful, and with an openness to learning from one's interlocutors.

The conversation between these two sources ought to evoke within people a vision of how things should be, one that is in keeping with the reign of God – for without a vision, the people perish (Prov. 29:18). This vision can be a horizon of significance against which to make judgements about the quality of life today and be source for the

changes required to make the world more in keeping with the vision of God's reign. Such an approach is one that gives hope and is a source of energy for the work that is required to move the world from where it is today to where it can be in the future as God's reign is realized more faithfully.

### **3. Action**

A public spirituality comes into being through action. This dissertation pointed out three styles of action: conversational, prophetic, and juridical. Although all three have strengths, complement one another, and make a contribution to the public dimension of life, the conversational approach is favored here. A conversational approach, because it fosters persuasion, reciprocity, and respect, is not a soft or easy option. It will stand its ground when necessary, and be strategic in working for social change and the common good.

When involved in the public sphere, it is important to appreciate the difference between making something visible and making something public. Because something is made visible—an issue is brought to the attention of a community or the government publishes a piece of legislation—it does not necessarily mean that it is understood; visibility though needed does not always lead to comprehension and change. Whereas to make something public, presupposes that one's best efforts have gone into making it intelligible to others. In a multicultural and pluralistic society, making something public will require being multi-lingual. It is incumbent on religious educators to help their students speak in a number of different languages. Without this ability, people of faith

will be locked into their sectarian world while living in a culture that speaks another language, and this will inevitably lead to a dualistic mode of life.

One of the reasons for the success of the three organizations studied in Chapter 4 is their capacity in the area of communications and media. They use many different kinds of media to communicate their message to different audiences. This experience and expertise allows them to participate effectively in the public sphere. A public spirituality fosters the capacity for good communication and the ability to participate well in the public sphere. The style of participation that emerges from a public spirituality is one that pays attention to and acts on the change required in society but it also cares for the quality of the public sphere itself – its inclusivity, fairness, openness to sustained conversation, and contribution to the common good. The public sphere is not just a means to an end, it is vital that the mode of participation both advances one’s agenda and at the same time enhances the quality of the sphere itself.

#### **4. *Mary Immaculate College*<sup>1</sup>**

Shortly, I begin a new appointment as a faculty person at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I will be teaching religious education to students wishing to become elementary school teachers. Religious education is part of the curriculum in most elementary schools in Ireland and is therefore a required part of the curriculum for student teachers in the College. In this next section, I outline my hopes to implement

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Immaculate College is a Catholic college, founded in 1898. Up to 40% of Ireland’s elementary school teachers study there and it is the liberal arts wing of Limerick University. It has about 3,000 students.

some of my deep convictions about educating for a public spirituality and how they might be realized in this new context.

Ireland has changed radically in the last 50 years. A process of secularization has differentiated the church from the state and made clear a boundary line between religious and political institutions. The taken-for-grantedness of Catholic faith is over; to be a Christian person or community of faith requires intentionality and deliberate choice in the face of multiple ways of life. Ireland has prospered greatly in the last 20 years. Although having one of the strongest economies in the world, about 18.5 per cent of its population is at risk of poverty.<sup>2</sup> It has also become—within a short period of time—a multicultural society, with about 14 per cent of its population been foreign born.<sup>3</sup> Issues such as sustainability, social inclusion, and funding for public education all need attention. These are some of the contextual factors that need to be taken into consideration when shaping religious education curriculum for a public spirituality.

At a basic level, I hope to ensure that there is a public dimension to the whole religious education curriculum in the College. It should permeate every subject taught; whether it is the Incarnation, Revelation, the Trinity, Christology, history, Christian tradition, ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, or spirituality – the public significance of all these subjects needs to be lifted up and explored with the students.<sup>4</sup> It will not be sufficient to have a class on the public implications of Christianity on its own – rather, it has to filter through and shape the whole course of studies, whatever it may be. It needs

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<sup>2</sup> See Sean Healy S.M.A. and Brigid Reynolds S.M., *Annual Socio-Economic Review 2007*, (2007, accessed 21st March 2008); available from [http://www.cori.ie/images/pdf/aser/ase\\_review07.pdf](http://www.cori.ie/images/pdf/aser/ase_review07.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Olivia Kelly, "Census Shows Dramatic Rise in Non-Irish Population," *Irish Times*, August 8th 2007.

<sup>4</sup> While this is my hope for Mary Immaculate College, it is also my hope for the religious education curriculum taught in schools throughout the country.

to be a part of the “what, why, where, how, when and who of religious education;”<sup>5</sup> this includes the teachers, the culture of the department, and of the College itself.

Whatever I teach, I hope to engage the lives and imagination of all the students, so that they become aware and mindful of their own spirituality<sup>6</sup> and bring it into conversation with the wisdom of the Christian tradition—with particular attention paid to its public significance—in such a way that learning can take place for us all. Although this is not a class in catechetics, I hope that I can teach from Christian tradition in a manner that is life-giving for all concerned. For the Catholics, that they appropriate their faith in new and challenging ways; for students who believe without belonging, that the Christian faith prompt new questions and insights into what it means to live life to the full (John 10:10); for students from other Christian and faith traditions, that they come to appreciate the value of Catholicism, while deepening their understanding of their own traditions; and for students who are agnostic or atheist, that the experience of bringing their lives into conversation with another horizon of significance offer up new insight and meaning for them and how they live in the world.

It is my hope that students will come to appreciate the importance of religious traditions in society. Since the particular context is Ireland, I hope that students will come to see for themselves, through the lens of critical consciousness, the particular contribution that Catholicism made and makes to Irish society. It is important that they appreciate the location of religious traditions in civil society and the essential role that civil society plays in our relationship to the state and the market.

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<sup>5</sup> See Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Given the compulsory nature of this course for students who wish to teach in Catholic elementary schools, there will be a range of students in the class and they will have different spiritualities and draw from different sources to nourish their spiritualities.

I mentioned in the last chapter how Don Browning asked his students to write part of their theology papers for people outside the college. In this exercise, the students had to translate their theological language into one that could be understood by someone outside the academy. They had to find a way to communicate the insights that emerged for them from the conversation between their lives and Christian tradition. I would like to find ways for students at Mary Immaculate College to become bilingual in their studies, so that they can move between the language of a Christian community and that of public life.

I hope that students will develop a critical consciousness of the world around them, a new understanding of the importance of public life, an ability to do social analysis, their own way of bringing life experience into conversation with Faith and Faith into conversation with their life experience<sup>7</sup> in ways that lead to transformation of their heads, hands, and hearts. This will require attention to their imagination and the use of story-telling.

Given the differentiation between church and state, the new pluralism in Ireland, and the demise of the taken-for-grantedness of Christian faith, students need to become articulate in what it means to be Christian today. It is one thing for them to intuit for themselves its significance, to have a ‘felt sense’ of its importance in the life of the person and society, but where and when appropriate, students also need to be able to communicate this in public and persuasive ways. This aim will shape how I craft a curriculum that fosters appropriation, active participation, and a capacity for public communication.

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<sup>7</sup> This is a phrase used by Thomas H. Groome.

Ireland is a new place today, rapidly changing and provoking new questions about what is worthwhile and how to live satisfying lives in sustainable ways. Christians need to be a part of the conversation—through the spoken word, symbols and practices—that shapes the imagination, identity, and action of a people. Such conversations needs to take place at all levels: from the home to the government, the football pitch to the Vincent de Paul Society, the pub to the office, the school to the church, voluntary organizations to trade unions and Ireland to the EU and the rest of the world. Religious education has a significant part to play in fostering the motivation, stirring the imagination, and resourcing the capacity of participants to take their place in such conversations. In short, religious education in a rapidly changing Ireland needs to cultivate a public spirituality. Through the promotion of future Irish religious educators, I look forward to playing a vital role in this work.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Descriptive**

What does your organization do in practice?

What does your organization understand by the word ‘public’ and who is (are) your public(s)?

### **Reflection on Praxis**

What is your organization trying to achieve? Why?

What are some of your best hopes for the organization?

What are some of its best practices? Why?

### **Faith Dimension**

What is the theological basis for this work?

What are some of the Stories and/or Vision—from your tradition—that influences the organization?

What do you understand by spirituality?

How would you describe the spirituality that shapes your organization?

### **Critique/Conversation**

Where do you think there is a strong correspondence between the work of the organization and the spiritual tradition that it draws upon? Why? What is the effect of this correspondence on the organization and its work?

Where is there less of a correspondence? Why? How does this influence the life of the organization?

### **Decision**

What are some of the plans in your organization for the foreseeable future?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This schema is based on a shared praxis approach. For more information on these movements see Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 133-336.



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