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MONEY, SEX AND POWER: AN EXPLORATION OF SOME CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE PUBLIC WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

Pamela K. Brubaker

As a professor and practitioner of Christian ethics, I am well aware of the controversial character of some issues in the public witness of the church, particularly those having to do with sex and money. Beverly W. Harrison claims that “all basic theological and moral questions are about power-in-relationship” (55). Thus we cannot talk about the public witness of the church without also talking about power.

I will first discuss some issues around the public witness of the church and then turn to the vocation of Lutheran colleges. I will explore two controversial issues in the church’s public witness—homosexuality and economic life—and the challenges they present for church and college.

Part One: Public Witness of the Church

When I speak of the public witness of the church, I am thinking primarily of the prophetic voice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the ecumenical movement on social issues and public policy. This is sometimes called the social witness of the church, to contrast it with a more evangelical witness aimed toward personal conversion. Issues of power permeate this witness: Who has authority to speak for the church? Who decides what will be said? How does the church use its voice and power within the public arena? As you may know, these issues are fiercely contested.

There are those both within and without the churches who object to the church speaking on matters of public policy. Some within the church do not see matters of politics and economics as part of the “core vision” of Christianity. I understand this to be the position of our colleague Robert Benne. Writing in the volume *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, he contends that only in special times on special issues (which he does not specify) should the church stand for or against particular public policy issues. I see this as a conservative objection to a broad public witness of the church—the “core vision” of the church is to be preserved.

A more liberal objection is rooted in the Enlightenment understanding of public and private. In this view, religion, like the family, became a domain excluded from the purview of the public. As Elizabeth Bounds points

out, this mutes the voice of religion within the public arena and circumvents attention to power relations within the church. She concludes that mainstream Christian ethics “has used the privatization of religion as a shield against the possibility of publicly contested morality,” assuming “the capacity ... to separate reality neatly—(a privatized) faith from social life, politics, and consequently, from issues of power” (16). There are, though, increasing numbers of liberal and conservative Christians who enter the public arena to contest social and ethical issues.

This political activism, particularly of religious conservatives, has led some to claim that legally religious people should not speak on public matters. They appeal to the two religion clauses of the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment, the second of which became interpreted as “the separation of church and state,” to support this position. In other words, they interpret the establishment clause in a way that privatizes religion. This interpretation is not persuasive to me. Although I do not personally agree with many of the religious right’s positions or tactics, I believe that the religious liberty clause, as well as other First Amendment rights like freedom of speech, permit religious believers to participate in public debate.

However, there are valid concerns about the public role of religion. The imposition of particular religious beliefs on the body politic is, in my judgment, a violation of religious liberty. The question about how the church uses its power is pertinent at this point. Does it attempt to impose its beliefs or to persuade people of the rightness of its positions?¹ On the one hand, religious liberty gives religious people the right to speak; but on the other hand, it protects us from an imposition of religious beliefs.

In *Religion in Public Life*, Ron Thiemann articulates a credible place for religious traditions in public discourse.

Insofar as democratic societies are historical, they will remain fallible in their grasp and exemplification of democratic ideals. From time to time these societies need to be called to account by reference to a higher standard of justice than that to which they ordinarily give allegiance. Religious traditions are often the

source for those standards, and religious discourse will often be the vehicle for both critique and renewal (88).

He concludes that when religious traditions are used in this way, “they become part of the proper public discourse of democratic societies.”² Bishop Hanson’s statement against a preemptive war with Iraq is an excellent example of this.

In her discussion of *Religion, Theology, and American Public Life*, Linell Cady contends that for theologians “to achieve a public form of argumentation,” they must respect the Enlightenment distinction between open inquiry and dogmatic citation and work to combat the authoritarian traces that linger on in contemporary theology.”³ She also insists that “the impossible pretensions to neutrality and universality that underlie the Enlightenment understanding of public, and the public exercise of reason” (64) must be unmasked.

Cady thus shares the communitarian and postmodern critique of certain forms of liberalism. However, both she and Thiemann are working to reform liberalism. They do not take the communitarian turn some other theologians advocate. Elizabeth Bounds cautions against the appeal of communitarian thinkers like Richard Neuhaus and Stanley Hauerwas, who “in their criticism of liberalism, throw out valuable parts of the liberal Protestant heritage: commitments to public participation, justice, and critical reflection on inherited traditions” (118).

Bounds calls for “new forms of Christian citizenship, emphasizing our responsibilities to the entire community, nation, and world, and the necessity of acting humbly as one among many to bring about such changes in this world community” (119). Cady suggests that “commitment to a global community” requires an identity for both individuals and societies that reflects “a dual allegiance to both a particular history within which identity and meaning have been rooted and the global order which remains to be fully actualized” (160). This turn to notions of citizenship can also be a turn to the vocation of the colleges.⁴

Part Two: Vocation of the Colleges

I believe that a primary purpose of liberal arts colleges is to educate for citizenship in a democratic society, what I call “critical citizenship.” Church-related colleges, I believe, share in this responsibility. In addition to the scholarly disciplines, they bring the resources of Christian faith to this task. Marcia Bunge points out that

there is a synergy between the emphasis church-related colleges place on questions of religion and ethics and the current concern within the discipline of religious studies (see Plaskow, 534) to connect the knowledge and insight from religious traditions “to the real problems of society”(3).

In his study of models of church-related colleges, Richard Hughes states that in a Lutheran approach, “the task of the Christian scholar ... is not to impose on the world—or on the material that he or she studies—a distinctly “Christian worldview,” as in the Reformed model. “Rather, the Christian scholar’s task is to study the world as it is and then to bring that world into dialogue with the Christian vision of redemption and grace.” Hughes believes that “this theological vision is the great strength of Lutheran higher education for it enables Lutherans to take religious and cultural pluralism with a seriousness that often escapes other Christian traditions” (6-7).⁵

Some ground the Lutheran approach to higher education in the dialectic between faith and reason characteristic of the Lutheran tradition (Brubaker). Others ground the Lutheran approach in what is called the “two kingdoms” or “two governances” doctrine (Solberg, in Hughes, 76). Note that in speaking of governance we are again speaking about power, particularly power-in-relationship.

Darrell Jodock contends that this teaching grounds the characteristic of serving the community and educating its leaders. This characteristic is not distinctive to a college related to the Lutheran tradition, but its grounding is (15). The first governance is rooted in the gospel—God’s mercy and forgiveness—and the goal is personal reconciliation. The second is exercised through social structures “to bring order and justice to the world.” College education is focused primarily on this second form of governance. According to Jodock, “Its purpose is to enable young men and women to discern what makes for justice and what preserves and enhances human dignity” (18).

In his introduction to Lutheran higher education, Ernie Simmons claims that “Lutheran identity is forged ... in the dialectical tension” of what he calls “ecumenical confessionalism.” The ecumenical side can discourage “denominational ideology” by keeping the community mindful of the presence and value of other theological and denominational perspectives, “thus affirming diversity on our campuses.” The confessionalism side maintains the value of affiliation “by affirming that in the intellectual arena it is preferable to be self-conscious about one’s commitments, not assume such discussion is

value-free.” He insists that “confessionalism as a dynamic theological expression does not seek imposed doctrinal uniformity but rather a lively and healthy confessional dialogue between traditions” (23).

I would contend that the public witness of the churches is also shaped in dialogue between religious traditions as well as social and natural sciences. This is the case, for instance, in the development of the social statements of the ELCA. Committees that draft these statements for the consideration of the churchwide assembly include academics whose expertise is in the area under study—the environment, economic life, the death penalty, for instance—as well as theologians and ethicists. Although these statements are primarily for use in the public witness of the church, I think that they can be a useful resource in education for critical citizenship (Brubaker). It is important to remember, though, that the colleges have distinct roles and responsibilities. What then, should be the relationship between the public witness of the church and the colleges? I think that an exploration of some specific issues can help clarify this.

Part Three: Sexuality Debates

A particularly difficult issue in relation to the public witness of the church—and the vocation of the colleges—is the issue of homosexuality. The ELCA, like most other mainline Protestant denominations, is deeply divided on this issue. Much is at stake for both sides—the authority and interpretation of scripture, the “core” or “heart” of Christian faith. The debate reveals the tension between the generally conservative role of religion in society and the continually reforming character professed by Protestantism.

This issue is one where money, sex, and power sometimes come together in unsettling ways. For instance, some members of the church constituency may threaten to withhold donations if certain topics are discussed on campus. Or the administration may reconsider whether the Gay Men’s Chorus should hold their concert in the Campus Chapel, the usual venue for concerts, for fear of donor backlash.

I want to speak about some situations that have arisen at California Lutheran University (CLU), as illustrative of the difficulties. (You may want to discuss what’s happening on your campus in small groups.) This spring we had some sharply worded letters to our student newspaper asking how a “Christian” college could permit a “Harmony Week” sponsored by the campus Gay-Straight Alliance. Although uncomfortable, this

challenge from some conservative students has been useful in helping us think about what it means to be a university “rooted in the Lutheran tradition of Christian faith,” as our mission statement declares. Since its founding in 1959, CLU has come to understand that “The Lutheran tradition cherishes education, faith and freedom of inquiry and encourages the noblest expression of Christian values. The University welcomes students of all beliefs and provides them the opportunity to explore religious issues as part of their formal education and to do so in the spirit of openness, reason and tolerance” (Wold and Swanson, in Hughes, 121). In this matter, I think it can reasonably be claimed that by hosting Harmony Week, the college is acting in a matter consistent with the public witness of the ELCA of non-discrimination against gays and lesbians and the expectation of colleges just articulated.

A few years ago, though, there was an episode in which the college seemed to some to be acting against the public witness—or at least the policies—of the church. This incident was prompted by the participation of Bishop Paul Egertson in the ordination of Anita Hill. As some of you may know, ELCA policy—like that of most other mainline Protestant denominations—limits ordination to celibate gays or lesbians. Hill, a self-identified lesbian, is in a long-term, committed relationship. After trying to change denominational policy, her congregation in St. Paul, Minnesota voted unanimously to ordain her.

The ordination service received heavy media coverage. Newspapers in Los Angeles gave front-page coverage to Egertson’s participation in the service and eventual resignation as bishop because of it, noting that he would return to his teaching position at CLU. President Luedtke wrote an eloquent opinion piece, published in the *Los Angeles Times*, responding to those who asked why the college would permit him to teach. Luedtke described the beginnings of the Lutheran denomination “in the fearless intellectual and spiritual discourse of the German university.” He declared that “church-related colleges and universities are not the church” but that “they provide extraordinary forums for nailing theses to the wall and using both faith and reason to interpret not only written texts but also the physical and human world that is revealed to us daily in all its beauty and complexity.” He identified four expectations of church-related colleges and universities, including “that the theological and social positions of the parent church be made known to members of the community ... [and that] within these contexts, the most rigorous, bold and unfettered debate be encouraged in all matters of faith and reason” (Luedtke).

I endorse this view of the relationship between the colleges and the public witness of the church.

There are other issues related to sexuality, such as the availability of condoms on campus or co-habitation in dorm rooms, which are perhaps more difficult for colleges related to the ELCA than those related to more fundamentalist traditions. The challenge is to determine what policies and practices take account of the realities of campus life and “enable young men and women to discern what makes for justice and what preserves and enhances human dignity?” in the words of Jodock.

Part Four: Economic Globalization

One might conclude from the focus on issues of sexuality in the churches that this is the primary focus of scripture, the primary source for Lutheran (and most Christian traditions’) theology and ethics. However, economics—wealth and poverty—receives much more consideration in scripture. The privatizing of religion discussed earlier is one reason for this discrepancy. Ethicist Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to point out that although different values may be held in what may be called the micro-habitus of family, “the macro-habitus of consumptive, competitive, materialist hedonism has severely restricted the moral vision of all Western nations and peoples and constricted our capacity to grapple effectively with global problems of hunger, poverty, and environmental destruction” (59). In other words, our “culture” shapes the lens through which we read scripture.

Some think that churches do not have the expertise to speak on political and economic issues. Others think that these issues are not issues of faith, but extensions, at best, distractions, at worse. Karen Bloomquist, Lutheran theologian and ethicist currently working with Lutheran World Federation, writes that an issue of faith is clearly at stake ... “given the all-pervasive neo-liberal logic”—which prioritizes economic growth and profit—“that undergirds and directs economic globalization as a totalizing system...” (494).

Some mainline Protestant churches, among others, have begun to address these economic issues. For instance, one of the ELCA social statements is on economic life. It articulates a principle and vision of “sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all.” The Lutheran World Federation is engaging economic globalization as a communion and ecumenically with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches, among others. These different traditions approach this

issue from particular theological perspectives, but have discovered common principles: “What we share in common is the quest for greater solidarity, love, compassion, and justice in the face of enormous power inequities” (Communique).

An example of ecumenical public witness growing out of this joint work is a letter The World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the Council of European Churches sent to the World Trade Organization and the Ministers of Trade from its member countries when they met in Cancun last fall for “the development round.” This letter is an example of raising standards of justice grounded in religious traditions, upheld by Thiemann as appropriate. It begins by pointing out that “the ecumenical community’s understanding of “trade and development” is rooted in spiritual, moral and ethical perspectives.” It then asks questions to evaluate WTO agreements: “Are they just and fair—especially to the vulnerable and impoverished? For these, we believe, God has expressed a preferential option. Do the agreements support right relationships between North and South, between producers and consumers, and between the powerful and the powerless? Are they friendly to God’s creation? Do they enhance and not diminish the planet’s capacity to sustain and nurture present as well as future generations of humankind and all other life forms? Do they affirm human dignity and care for life in all its richness and diversity?” A statement of principle follows: “international trade agreements should first and foremost respect, value and uphold the sacred nature of all life,” followed by a critique of “the economic agendas of some governments, especially Northern governments, [that] seem to be largely driven by corporate interests at the expense of economic justice.”

Not surprisingly, this analysis is controversial—particularly for many Christians in the global north who may work in transnational corporations or benefit in other ways from the current workings of the global economy. Karen Bloomquist suggests that if the global economy is a matter of faith, it presents an enormous challenge to churches. That is “to nurture people in the Christian faith in comprehensive ways that empower them to resist the logic and assumptions [economic growth and profit] underlying economic globalization” (494).

In what ways is this also a challenge to our colleges? Like sexuality, this is an issue subject to “rigorous, bold unfettered debate” (Luedtke). We also need “to make known” the ELCA and LWF positions on economic life. I think that perhaps more is asked if we are to be

accountable to our responsibility to educate for critical citizenship, or to use Jodock's words again, "enable young men and women to discern what makes for justice and what preserves and enhances human dignity." Given the hegemony of the neo-liberal model, it is crucial that students are encouraged to question its underlying assumptions—for instance, that the market should be the primary arbiter of value.

A few programs at CLU seem to me to be possible models; there may be others at your colleges. Our School of Business is striving to be a "business school with a conscience." One of its programs is a Center for Leadership and Values. A recent speaker in the Center's lecture series, jointly sponsored by the Religion and Political Science departments, was a union organizer from Mexico. She raised important concerns about worker justice in transnational corporations.

Some students, though, begrudge any questioning of "business as usual." A few openly confess that they only came to college because this is the route to an upper-middle class lifestyle. I see this response as a materialist challenge to the vocation of the colleges. It could also be described as a form of economic fundamentalism. Like religious fundamentalism, it resists the spirit of critical inquiry at the heart of liberal arts education.

Conclusion

Both religious and economic fundamentalism present

serious challenges to education for critical citizenship. We tend, I think, to be more aware of the harm of the intolerance inherent in religious fundamentalism. However, neo-liberalism—a form of economic fundamentalism, challenges the basis of the public witness of the church—love of neighbor. F.A. Hayek, the "father of neo-liberalism," rejects the Christian ethic of neighbor-love as "unfit and unworkable in modern societies, for such an ethic is only a tribal, anti-commercial, and anti-capitalist ethic that poses a grave threat to civilization."⁶

In contrast to this interpretation, Lutheran theologian and ethicist Larry Rasmussen contends that the church's universal vision and conviction is of "the necessary, full inclusion of the excluded, on egalitarian terms." Universalism and egalitarianism are both "assertions of faith itself, whether or not they also have secular grounds." These assertions are "the converging Christian ground for one of the lasting moral achievements of modernity itself—universal human rights" (148-9).

As a practicing Christian ethicist, I affirm Rasmussen's interpretation. As a professor of Christian ethics, I encourage critical inquiry into and unfettered debate about this ethic, these two interpretations—and others. Along with Thiemann, I want these arguments—religious, moral, and political—to be governed by public accessibility, moral integrity, but most of all, mutual respect (140).

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Notes

¹ Benne has a very useful discussion of these questions in his article entitled "The Church and Politics: Hot and Cool Connections."

² Thiemann makes the case that "Arguments that arise from religious beliefs or religiously based moral premises can meet the criteria of plausibility that should govern all public speech and action in a liberal democracy" (140).

³ Cady helpfully articulates the relation of public theology and religious traditions: "public theology draws upon the resources of a particular religious tradition to establish a deeper sense of a common public life that demands commitment and nurturing in order to enhance human life and flourishing for both the self and the wider society. Through this task, which it executes in the spirit of open inquiry, it contributes to the ideological and practical reconfiguration of the public realm, thereby witnessing to the understanding that 'faith in God cannot become incarnate except in a universal community in which all walls of partition have been broken down'" (169). This understanding is particularly useful, in my judgment, in that it expresses a confessional form of witness which is not hegemonic in its intention.

⁴ Thiemann's notion of "pluralist citizen" (113) is useful. See also Michael Brint's insightful discussion of cosmopolitan, culturalist/communitarian, and post-modern individualist perspectives on identity and culture.

⁵ In my judgment, this is the Lutheran vision at its best. However, actually sharing power with faculty from diverse backgrounds can be a more difficult challenge than embracing pluralism.

⁶ I am drawing on the work of Yoon-Jae Chang, whose Union Theological Seminary dissertation, *God and political economy: A critical appraisal of the late twentieth-century theological responses to capitalism, socialism, and ecology* (2003), included a section on Hayek. I am quoting from Chang's paper, which elaborates on Hayek's views, and is listed above.