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Reclaiming the Secular: Developing Dialogic Skills for a Post-Secular Society

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Abstract

This research paper addresses secularization from both political and religious perspectives. One of its manifestations in the political sphere is that of globalization that can lead to alienation within society; and in the United Kingdom this is exemplified by Brexit. Within the religious sphere secularization is usually couched in oppositional terms. This paper reclaims the original use of the word secular as envisaged in a three realms' model of society comprising profane, sacred and secular realms. The secular realm acts as a buffer between the profane and sacred realms and in this neutral, public sphere the power of reason prevails. An educational starting point for such creation is pedagogy and through linguistic, psychological and cultural analysis, this paper identifies the development of reasoning through the dialogic skills of building consensus (cumulative talk) and constructive criticism (exploratory talk). Sixty-five students from a varied background of UK secondary schools have participated in the development of these dialogic skills.

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... I consider essential for facing the present moment: constructive dialogue ... When leaders in various fields ask me for advice, my response is always the same: dialogue, dialogue, dialogue. (Pope Francis, 2013)

1. Introduction

These are turbulent times of division within Europe. The land of my birth, Scotland, faces imminent wrenching from the European Union; and this, at the hands of our neighbors. The Church of my faith, Roman Catholic, is being led by a Pope, Francis, whose papacy furthers division with almost every utterance (e.g., Cunningham, 2018). A root cause of these maladies is secularization. Within European society it takes the form of globalization; and within the United Kingdom (UK) this leads to an alienation that gives birth to a rise of the ‘Little Englander’ mentality and Brexit. Within the Catholic faith, secularization spawns the heresy of modernism. What can be done? A solution is proffered above by the ‘modernist’ Pope Francis namely, ‘dialogue, dialogue, dialogue’. Heeding this ecclesiastical advice, this paper contends that the development of dialogic skills within the classroom can be a seedbed for the creation of a post-secular society that heals divisions.

2. Secularization

The claim that we live in a secular age is made in the opening words of Charles Taylor’s magnum opus, *A Secular Age*; and for this assertion he has a wealth of scholarly support (e.g., Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, & VanAntwerpen, 2011; Mendieta & van Antwerpen, 2011; Parker & Reader, 2016; Schuller, 2006; Williams, 2012). Indeed, such as Stoeckl (2015, p. 1) confidently asserts that “European societies are secularized societies” whilst in a discussion of American society, Moreland (2012) holds that,

... most people have little or no understanding of a Christian way of seeing the world, nor is a Christian worldview an important participant in the way we as a society frame and debate issues in the public square. Three of the major centers of influence in our culture – the university, the media, and the

government – are largely devoid of serious religious discussion. (p. 27)

In order to re-create the prevailing Western societies from secular to post-secular in which the public sphere is marked by ‘serious religious discussion’, it is helpful to visit the concept of a ‘Three realms’ model of society’ as envisaged by Robert Markus.

3. Three Realms’ Model

According to Markus (2006, pp. 5-6) there arose in early Christianity an understanding that society comprises three realms namely the sacred, the profane, and the secular; and these he defines as follows:

- a) *Sacred* – “... will be roughly coextensive with the sphere of Christian religious belief, practices, institutions and cult” e.g., participating in mass, attending Bible studies class, etc.
- b) *Profane* – “... will be close to what has to be rejected in the surrounding culture, practices, institutions...” e.g., abortion, pornography, etc.
- c) *Secular* – “... does not have such connotations of radical opposition to the sacred; it is more neutral, capable of being accepted or adapted ...” e.g., attending school, discussion in a pub, etc.

The boundaries between these realms are held to be flexible but, notably, the secular realm has a crucial function to “... resist any hostile takeover of this middle ground between sacred and profane ...” (Markus, 2006, p. 37). Arguably, Western societies have struggled to maintain this neutrality of the secular realm. Post-Constantine and through the era of Christendom the sacred realm prospered and the profane realm declined. This Christian ‘victory’ was achieved at the expense of the secular realm failing with regard to its function of preserving neutrality; since it had become so suffused with Christian values that, in Europe, it was virtually impossible not to profess belief in God.

Post-Enlightenment however, the situation reversed as the secular realm became a public space “... emptied of God or of any reference to ultimate reality” (Taylor, 2007, p. 2). Again, Western societies failed to uphold the role of

the secular realm with respect to neutrality as it has become overwhelmed with some liberal values. This steady and growing removal of religion's influence upon the public sphere, and the consequent loss of neutrality within the secular realm, provoked a lament from Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI that "Secularism is no longer that element of neutrality, which opens up space for freedom for all" (Johnston & Petre, 2004). The losses of influence have also instigated widespread debate within Christian circles as how best to react and, broadly speaking, within the largest Christian tradition of the Catholic Church there has arisen two differing movements in response to aggressive secularism: namely, Augustinian Thomism and Whig Thomism. As Rowland (2005) explains,

There are thus two different readings of modernity and with that, two different readings of how the Church should engage the contemporary world. While the Whigs want the Church to accommodate the culture of modernity, the Augustinians favor a much more critical stance.

4. Two Thomisms

Augustinian Thomism decries the collapse of the neutrality of the secular realm and asserts that the Catholic Church must work to overthrow the liberal values which pervade the secular realm. The perception of Augustinian Thomists such as George Weigel (2013) is that the Catholic Church should be on a war footing since the environment has become toxic. In response to this toxicity, Weigel (2013) proposes a form of evangelical Catholicism "... that will equip the Church for its evangelical responsibilities in a time of great challenge". Church communities will be radically renewed as they prepare themselves to re-propose Catholicism to the world (Mallon, 2014). Nonetheless, this approach commits the Catholic Church to separating from the secular realm and so, temporarily at least, the three realms' model would not be fully functioning; since a barrier would be erected between the sacred and secular realms. Moreover, the Augustinian Thomist desire to retreat from the secular realm for the purpose of renewal may not fully take into account the ingrained secularism prevalent within the West. Indeed, as Casanova (2011, p. 67) contends: "... people

are not simply religiously 'unmusical' but are actually closed to any form of transcendence beyond the purely secular immanent frame". Given this lack of 'musicality' and closure to the transcendent, then the prospects for a successful re-evangelization of the West appears to be slim.

A different approach, but with a similarly unsatisfactory outcome, is proposed by Whig Thomism. Like their Augustinian counterparts, the Whig Thomists accept that the neutrality of the secular realm has been overcome by liberal values. However, rather than retreating from the secular realm, the Whig Thomists seek to work with the prevailing liberal values and to Christianize them. For example, a chief proponent of this view Novak (1991) makes the point that free markets depend upon liberal, democratic values that are generated from Christian sources. Indeed, as Stark (2005, p. 76) contends "... Western democracy owe(s) its essential intellectual origins and legitimacy to Christian ideals, not to any Greco-Roman legacy. It all began with the New Testament".

However, according to Rowland (2003, p. 159), this admixture of values has resulted in a process of 'heretical reconstruction' or 'secular parody', whereby "... a divine directive to 'love your neighbor' has been transmuted into 'tolerance'". Seeking the good of others seems incomprehensible to people who have been acculturated through liberal values to allow others to do as they wish. So, granting acculturation through liberal values that are a secular parody of Christian values, the prospects for a successful transformation of the secular realm also appear to be slim.

5. Creating a Post-Secular Society

Since it would appear that neither Whig transformation nor Augustinian retreat from the secular realm are likely to succeed – is it not timely for the Catholic Church to rethink her approach to the secular realm? For the Church has continually rethought her strategies for evangelization when confronted with "... transformations of culture — the fall of the Roman Empire, the Enlightenment, industrialization, democratization, globalization ..." (Glendon, 2001). Perhaps now, argues Glendon (2001), "what may be required ... is nothing less than a large-scale reappraisal and

renewal of the educational apostolate of the Church". What might be at the heart of such a renewed educational apostolate? Should the Catholic Church not view the secular realm as *a neglected friend*? In the same fashion that one would wish such a friend restored to former good standing; should not the Church wish the secular realm to be restored to a state of 'neutrality which opens up space for freedom for all'? After all, this was the original understanding of the role of the secular realm.

6. Liberal Alliance

In expending her energies to fortify and restore the secular realm, the Church would not be without support, since some influential liberal thinkers' express similar desires. As understood in the classic liberal tradition, the liberal secular realm is pluralist, tolerant, and neutral with regard to religion. However, there has since arisen another form of liberalism that promotes the flourishing of secular humanist objectives (Appleby, 2011); and this more 'virulent' liberalism has promoted a process of secularization determined to squeeze religion out of the public sphere and to privatize entirely religious belief (Willimon, 2017).

Somewhat surprisingly, this belittling of the role of religion in the public sphere has attracted criticism from no less a figure than Jurgen Habermas, regarded as "... the personification of liberal, individual, and secular thinking" (Schuller, 2006). In a revision of his earlier thinking and writings, Habermas (2006) now argues for a *post-secular society* in which he envisions that:

The neutrality of the state authority on questions of world views guarantees the same ethical freedom to every citizen ... When secularized citizens act in their role as citizens of the state, they must not deny in principle that religious images of the world have the potential to express truth. Nor must they refuse their believing fellow citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates. (p. 15)

Habermas' vision is of a post-secular society in which religion returns to a renewed public sphere in which religious imagery and language are freely used. Other eminent liberal theorists

have also revised their views of religion in the public sphere e.g., John Rawls who accepts in a late work "... that religiously motivated arguments should be accepted as publicly valid ..." (Calhoun, 2011, p. 78). To re-create the secular realm such that we have a post-secular society - is this not a legitimate aim for evangelization - a worthy educational apostolate?

Such a vision appears to be supported by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who comments "what, then, ought we to do? ... I am in broad agreement with Jurgen Habermas' remarks about a post-secular society, about the willingness to learn from each other, and about self-limitation on both sides" (Ratzinger, 2006, p. 77).

From a Christian perspective, this vision of a post-secular society is a clear improvement upon the situation today. That religion should have a valid role in the public sphere and that religious imagery and language might be freely expressed and regarded as potentially true: such developments are to be welcomed. Moreover, there is a realistic prospect of success; rather than 'tilting at windmills' *Don Quixote* style to re-evangelize the secular realm; and instead of a Herculean cleansing of the *Augean Stables* to transform the secular into the sacred: there is offered here a clear-headed alliance between the Catholic Church and classic liberal thinkers to create a genuinely post-secular society.

But for such an alliance, there is a price to be paid: self-limitation. The Catholic Church will need to recognize that a post-secular society will not be a form of Constantinian or mediaeval Christendom; rather it will be a *pluralist* Christendom "... within whose walls unbelievers live together and share in the same temporal good" (Maritain, 1938, p. 166). In such a just society both liberals and Christians will "... take seriously each other's contributions to controversial subjects in the public debate" (Habermas, 2006, p. 47). At present, the Church's views may be afforded serious recognition with regard to private matters of personal morality such as abortion, divorce, same-sex relationships, etc. However, in the public sphere discussions concerning technological and medical advances are dominated by economic, political, sociological, and especially scientific voices (Smith, 2008). For a theological voice to be taken seriously in

the public sphere, then self-limitation seems a price worth paying.

7. Principle of Self-Limitation

If the secular realm in three realms' model of a post-secular society is one in which the public sphere of debate is marked by self-limitation, then the liberal traditions will need to accept the principle of self-limitation in two areas. They will need to disavow advocacy of secularist ideologies that contend religion should be banished from the public sphere; and also secularization ideologies in which religion is held to be a purely private matter. Hence, for those from the classic liberal traditions the principle of self-limitation imposes the restriction of accepting *political liberalism* and discarding *comprehensive liberalism*. As advocated by John Locke, political liberalism envisioned a society in which persons from diverse traditions altered their ways of thinking and acting in response to conversations with others: this took place in an environment supported by the values of freedom and tolerance. However, these values gradually became reified as ends in themselves and, as a result, political liberalism was superseded by a comprehensive liberalism that aims to maximize autonomy and tolerance (Wright, 2013). And so, comprehensive liberalism then paved the way for various secularisms and for secularization. In order, therefore, to successfully create a post-secular society, it is necessary that those from the classic liberal tradition return to political liberalism and cease pursuit of comprehensive liberalism.

For her part, the Catholic Church will require to impose upon herself the self-limitation of not making "... a direct appeal to the absolute, a transcendent notion of ultimate truth, [as this] is a step outside the bounds of reasoned public discourse" (Calhoun et al., 2011, p. 19). With respect to the creation of a post-secular society, the admission price for the Catholic Church to influence public life is the imposition of a vow of silence regarding transcendent, revealed knowledge; and a focus on human reasoning. The Catholic Church should be comfortable with this principle of self-limitation since, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, 39) makes clear,

In defending the ability of human reason to know God, the Church is expressing her confidence in the possibility of speaking about him to all men and with all men, and therefore of dialogue with other religions, with philosophy and science, as well as with unbelievers and atheists.

Limiting debate within public sphere to the use of human reason – and so excluding supernatural faith – is an appropriate educational apostolate for the Church. As Saint Thomas Aquinas affirms, "both the light of reason and the light of faith come from God... hence there can be no contradiction between them" (Pope Saint John Paul II., 1998). And so, from a Catholic perspective, this proposal for creating a post-secular society founded on the use of human reason can be described as *Thomist*. Fittingly, given Aquinas' background, it can also be portrayed as *Dominican*: how so?

8. A Dominican Thomist Approach

As an alternative to the Augustinian Thomist and Whig Thomist approaches that seek to retreat from or transform the secular realm, a third Dominican Thomist approach is proposed. This approach seeks a three realms' model of society whereby the Catholic Church, in alliance with the classic liberal tradition, aims to strengthen the neutrality of the secular realm and, in so doing, create a genuinely post-secular society. Such an approach can be termed Thomist in that this alliance is founded on a shared avowal of the powers of human reasoning. It can also bear the appellation 'Dominican' for two reasons. Firstly, this three realms' model of society is predicated upon the times of the Early Church and, as such, it resembles the theological movement of *ressourcement*, which was in essence a return to tradition i.e., "[t]he primary exponents of *ressourcement* ... were a small group of French Dominicans of the faculty of Le Saulchoir in Paris..." established in the late 1930s (Kaslyn, 2013, p. 307). Secondly, in his discussion of the Dominican Order, Drane (1988, p. 71) comments that it "has constantly been true to its vocation as the organ of popularizing truth. It has borrowed from the spirit of the age to supply the wants of the age".

What are the wants of this secular age? And what is its spirit?

Perhaps it is Taylor (2007, p. 9) who comes closest to capturing the wants and spirit of the secular age when he speaks of "... the power of cool, disengaged reason, capable of contemplating the world and human life without illusion, and of acting lucidly for the best in the interest of human flourishing". The wants of this age, as of every age, concern human flourishing. But in the secular age the answers are found neither in philosophical theories, nor moral codes, nor religious devotions: the answer is to be found in human reasoning. In this secular age it is not the supernatural which inspires awe: it is reason. And so a Dominican Thomist response to this want for human flourishing in a secular age would be to borrow from the spirit of the age: human reason.

This accord over human reason – this Dominican Thomist alliance between the Catholic and classic liberal traditions – comes at a propitious time as liberal thinkers have gone into overdrive as they reconsider secularity within the context of globalization (e.g., Bhargava, 2011; Calhoun et al., 2011; Stepan, 2011). Given this ferment of activity and the resultant reconceptualization of secularity on the part of liberal thinkers, and given Pope Francis' welcoming approach to atheists (Brown, 2013), this seems a good time for the Catholic Church to build an alliance with liberalism in the creation of a post-secular society. But where to begin?

9. Pedagogy

An appropriate educational starting point is *pedagogy*, which is a relationship between classroom practices and wider society that is recognized as performing a "... crucial role in the process of social reproduction i.e. the process whereby a society reproduces itself over time and so maintains its identity across the generations..." (Carr, 1993, p. 6). However, pedagogies need not only be concerned with social reproduction and preservation of society's status quo, since, "... (as) mainsprings of schooling. They can serve ... as levers of social production. They can be in the vanguard of social change ..." (Hamilton, 1990, p. 55)

Pedagogy as social production is required for the creation of a post-secular society. However, working in partnership with classic liberalism to achieve this social change requires a high degree of sensitivity from the Catholic Church, since "... education is commonly prized as both the heir and the custodian of liberal principles" (Conroy & Davis, 2008, p. 188). The Church should tread softly.

Whilst treading carefully with respect to pedagogy, the Church should note the advice of Gearon (2013, p. 104) that there is a fundamental or 'incommensurable' difference between pedagogies "... related to the religious life ... [and those] ... more closely related to secularity". That is to say, for pedagogy as social production, rather than confessional pedagogy, it may be advisable to fashion pedagogy that "... arise(s) from bringing religion and education into a relationship within the context of a secular education system serving the needs and interests of ... a diversely plural society" (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 15). The UK's world of religious education (RE) is rich with pedagogies that have arisen in response to the issues and difficulties posed by secularity and pluralism (e.g., Blaylock, 2004; Gearon, 2013; Grimmitt, 2000): but which pedagogy fulfils Habermas' (2006) vision of a post-secular society?

Habermas (2006) envisages a post-secular society in which religious language and images have the potential to express truth. Not only do such language and images have a legitimate place within public debates, Habermas (2006, pp. 51-52) also has an expectation that "... the secularized citizens play their part in the endeavors to translate relevant contributions from the religious language into a language that is accessible to the public as a whole". This clearly entails dialogue between those with faith and those without faith; and a genuine commitment to understand each other. Indeed, it implies that each side must collaborate to produce a common language. Which RE pedagogies are best suited to this task?

First, it calls to mind critical realism, an approach which regards itself as a "... theology concerned with questions of ultimate truth ..." (Wright, 2000, p. 172). This critical pedagogy creates intelligent conversations between the horizon of the students and the horizons of

religion; and these conversations are concerned with questions of ultimate truth. Second, it resonates with the proposal of Castelli (2012) for an RE faith dialogue pedagogy that develops students' skills in articulating their own beliefs whilst responding to others' belief systems. Specifically, Dominican Thomist pedagogy should therefore be characterized by students conversing intelligently about ultimate truth claims through analysis of arguments and evidence. In so doing, they might develop their own belief systems in response to the beliefs of others. Notably, a Dominican Thomist pedagogy commits Catholic educators to an unusually open and dialogic approach to RE classroom practices. A fundamental question then arises: 'how commensurate is this critical, dialogic pedagogy with the teachings of the Catholic Church?'

10. The Catholic Church and Dialogue

In the modern world, the Catholic Church is confident about dialogue with those of other faiths and of no faith (de Lubac, 1995); and actively encourages it. As Pope Francis (2013, p. 34) tells us in his first encyclical letter, "... the security of faith sets us on a journey; it enables witness and dialogue with all". And his predecessor Pope Saint John Paul II (1990) set down the marker for such a journey in dialogue with his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*,

Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity ... Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretense or close-mindedness, but with truth, humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side. There must be no abandonment of principles nor false irenicism, but instead a witness given and received for mutual advancement. (p. 56)

This is a robust understanding of dialogue in which there is no suing for a false peace. Parties to dialogue, Catholic and non-Catholic, are instructed to remain true to their beliefs and to engage frankly with each other. At the heart of such dialogue is a common pursuit of truth. As

the Church's Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) makes clear,

Truth ... is to be sought in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which people explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth ... (Pope Saint Paul VI, 1965, p. 3)

A strongly dialogic approach to discovering truth is particularly well reflected within the Church's teaching concerning education. Crucially, there is here a moral imperative to take into account the needs of *all* students, as emphasized by the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) (1982, Para.14) with its assertion that, "Catholic educators ... must have the greatest respect for those students who are not Catholic. They should be open at all times to authentic dialogue...".

This openness to 'authentic dialogue' indicates that the educational context cannot be one that operates on 'tactical concerns or self-interest' as alluded to by Pope Saint John Paul II above. If the purpose of the dialogue is simply to convert non-Catholics, then it would be inauthentic or 'a form of manipulation' (Baum, 2000). To be truly authentic the Catholic students have to engage in

... *respectful dialogue* [emphasis added] with those who do not yet accept the Gospel. Believers can profit from this dialogue by learning to appreciate better 'those elements of truth and grace which are found among peoples, and which are, as it were, a secret presence of God'. (CCC, 856)

Through participation in authentic and respectful dialogue, Catholic students can benefit from discovering 'elements of truth and grace' within their peers. Given that the Church encourages and upholds authentic, respectful dialogue in pursuit of the truth, and in the hope that she accepts the self-limitation of human reasoning, how might such a Dominican Thomist pedagogy manifest itself in the classroom?

11. Reasoning - Cumulative Talk and Exploratory Talk

The heart of Dominican Thomist pedagogy is to be found in reasoning and dialogue. In the classroom, reasoning can be developed through the acquisition and honing of the dialogic skills of cumulative talk and exploratory talk (Mercer, 1995). Reasoning is made visible as students try to create trust and achieve consensus through cumulative talk in which they "... build positively but uncritically on what the other has said" (p. 104). This is a pre-requisite to exploratory talk in which the students "... engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas". (Mercer, 1995, p. 104)

The development of such reasoning, through the dialogic skills of cumulative talk and exploratory talk, was undertaken by twenty students at a Scottish city-center secondary school as part of a small-scale action research study (Luby, 2014). It is noteworthy that, despite the small sample size, the findings are statistically significant; providing some evidence that a beginning had been made that is indicative of possibility of Dominican Thomist pedagogy. A more recent study (Luby, 2019) involved sixty-five students from ten secondary schools across the UK sited primarily in the East Midlands and South Yorkshire regions. The ten secondary schools from this opportunity sample represent the three most common types of schools – academies, comprehensives, and faith schools. There is a spread of locations for the schools across four types of city, town, semi-rural, and rural but the sample does skew towards the lower end of the spectrum with regard to attainment levels. The opportunity sample also skews towards schools that have catchment areas containing neighborhoods of deprivation. Overall, though, there is a broad representation of school types, attainment levels and locations such as to afford a fair degree of robustness to the research findings.

The sixty-five students took part in paired conversations that were recorded and transcribed for analysis with regard to the dialogic skills of consensus building through cumulative talk; and constructive criticism through exploratory talk. A leading project with respect to developing such dialogic skills for students is *Thinking Together* based at the

Faculty of Education, Cambridge University; and the project's foundational book is Mercer's *The Guided Construction of Knowledge: Talk Amongst Teachers and Learners*. In this work Mercer (1995, p. 104) indicates that students' dialogic skill of cumulative talk whereby they "... build positively but uncritically on what the other has said" is "... characterized by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations" (see Extract 1 below).

Extract 1

Cumulative talk – linguistic analysis

Robbie: Definitely! Do you ... would you agree with me that ... I don't feel like ... I do believe in evolution as well as God like creating animals but I do believe they also evolved into what we have today. Would you agree with that?

Jamie: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Totally agree! That's pretty sound.

Robbie: Cool! Pretty sound indeed. Um ... yeah ... I also think stuff that's read in the Bible is not fully meant to be taken entirely literally like the story of Adam and Eve and stuff.

Jamie: Yeah I think some people take that too literally and people are up in arms about evolution and Adam and Eve and how it's all wrong but I think it's more symbolic than it is literal.

Robbie: Definitely! Yeah that's what it is ...

In this example from Luby (2014, p. 63), cumulative talk is demonstrated by Jamie confirming Robbie's belief in God-guided evolution. Also, there is both repetition and confirmation with regard to a literal understanding of the Adam and Eve story. Indeed, some elaboration is offered by Jamie with the introduction of symbolism; and this is confirmed by Robbie. This sharing of ideas and information and joint decision-making helps to establish trust; and "trust is an essential component ... particularly when students are challenging their own and others' world-views" (Pierce & Gilles, 2008, p. 43). So, the development of trust within cumulative talk appears to be a necessary pre-requisite for exploratory talk in which the students "...

engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas" (Mercer, 1995, p. 104).

Exploratory talk, though, is more than just a robust form of dialogue at the linguistic level: it gets to the very heart of Dominican Thomist post-secular pedagogy that is characterized by intelligent conversations about ultimate truth claims. And, as Mercer (1995) suggests, this can be demonstrated through three levels of analysis – *linguistic, psychological and cultural*.

12. Linguistic Analytical Level

At a *linguistic level*, exploratory talk satisfies the demand for robust student conversations that will promote 'speech acts' such as assertions, challenges, explanations, requests, etc. At this level, exploratory talk is typified by "statements and suggestions [being] offered for joint consideration [and] these may be challenged and counter-challenged, but challenges are justified and alternative hypotheses are offered" (Mercer, 1995, p. 104) (see Extract 2 below).

Extract 2

Exploratory talk – linguistic analysis

Douglas: Well I might disagree with you there because I think that um ... humans are the cause of sin because God gave us freewill, he didn't want to control us otherwise we'd be like robots.

Craig: *Uh huh.*

Douglas: And that wouldn't give us any freedom at all, we'll always be good and God gave us freewill to choose what is right but obviously humans didn't choose that way, they didn't the right way and they've become selfish, like Eve tricking Adam into eating that apple which caused him to sin against God, and that obviously angered God and I think for me I think that's because of sin, humans are the cause of sin.

Craig: *Yeah, I'd agree that humans are the cause of sin and no doubt our sort of freewill, if we have it. We often choose the wrong path and, again the Adam and Eve story is a fantastic way of illustrating society, and how people sin*

and what effect it can have. But, again, I think these stories need to be taken with a pinch of salt; and that they are in my opinion nothing more than stories. But you can still read into them as much as you can read into many sorts of novels and literature; which of course we know they aren't true stories. But we can still appreciate the moral values that they give us such as to name a few, The Lord of the Flies and Animal Farm, that many of us studied in English um ... that's my point of view with regards to that.

Douglas: Well I think the stories could be pretty accurate because they've been passed on with the Bible and the Catholic Church; they've been passed on ever since Jesus came into this world as a form of God and even before that in the Old Testament (Reprinted from Luby, 2014, pp. 63-64).

In this example, exploratory talk is evidenced by Douglas, who offers a view on the relationship between humanity, freewill and sin. This view is challenged by Craig who justifies his criticism by countering that Douglas holds a too literal understanding of the Creation story. Instead, Craig moots an alternative hypothesis in which the Creation story is regarded more like a novel that contains important moral truths. In response, Douglas counter-challenges this view with an appeal to the authority of the Bible and Tradition.

13. Psychological Analytical Level

This paper has discussed the spirit of this secular age and, in particular, identified from Charles Taylor's *magnum opus* that this spirit is 'the power of cool, disengaged reason'. It is an accord about human reason that would enable a Dominican Thomist alliance between the Catholic and classic liberal traditions to fortify the secular realm in the creation of a post-secular society. Tellingly, exploratory talk is central to human reasoning as affirmed by Mercer (1995),

Exploratory talk foregrounds reasoning [emphasis added]. Its ground rules require that the views of all participants are sought and considered, that proposals are explicitly stated and evaluated, and

that explicit agreement precedes decisions and actions. Both cumulative and exploratory talk seem to be aimed at the achievement of consensus ... In cumulative talk ... ideas and information are certainly shared and joint decisions may be reached ... Exploratory talk, by incorporating both conflict and the open sharing of ideas represents the more 'visible' pursuit of rational consensus through conversation. (p. 105)

We witness the beginnings of such formation in human reasoning in the above conversation between Douglas and Craig through their exemplification of the attributes of 'conflict' and 'the open sharing of ideas'. Moreover, their 'visible pursuit of rational consensus' is based on 'ground rules' that not only derive implicitly from their friendship; but also explicitly from a prompt sheet that each reads prior to their conversation (Luby, 2012, p. 40). Recognition that these ground rules have influenced Douglas and Craig's conversation is evidenced by:

- (a) Douglas clearly stating his disagreement at the outset and telling Craig that he wishes him to think about humans being the cause of sin; and
- (b) Craig initially indicating his agreement with Douglas's idea but then explaining why he thinks differently about the Creation story.

At the heart of these paired conversations is the creation of a 'safe space' as commended by the Commission on Religious Education (CORE) (2017),

The phrase 'a safe space to discuss difference', ... was the most often quoted single phrase across the evidence gathering sessions ... This is not 'safe' in the sense of 'sanitized' but rather a space where people can talk – agree and disagree – freely about the contentious issues raised by worldviews. (p. 26)

This 'safe space' within the classroom is analogous to the secular realm within a post-secular society: both act as a neutral zone for the discussion of worldviews. Given then, that for pedagogy, the classroom is a microcosm of society; it is timely to consider the third, cultural level of analysis.

14. Cultural Analytical Level

Drawing upon a threefold model of society comprising profane, sacred and secular realms, the argument being outlined within this paper is that the Catholic Church and other Christians should ally with those from the classic liberal tradition in order to strengthen the secular realm. In the past this realm has proved weak and porous such that it has been overwhelmed by values emanating from the sacred realm in the pre-Enlightenment era; and by values emanating from the profane realm in the post-Enlightenment era. It is in the interest of both parties, Catholic and liberal, to create a post-secular society with a fortified secular realm that will enable all people from different faith and non-faith backgrounds to contribute confidently to the public sphere. In order to do so each party will be required to impose upon itself the principle of self-limitation. With such an agreement in place, then both parties can seek to create a post-secular society that bears the hallmark of a public sphere dignified by debate that is founded on human reasoning. Dignified debate founded upon human reasoning is not an everyday occurrence within the public sphere: a cursory examination of the media attests to this. Such exemplary behavior needs to be learned; and the beginnings of such behavior can be learned in the classroom; and the evidence from Luby (2019) clearly supports this claim (e.g., no less than fifty-two of the sixty-two paired conversations are rated high quality or mid-quality).

15. Concluding Remarks

This paper argues for a model of society comprising three realms - sacred, secular, and profane. Within this three realms' model, the secular realm has a particularly important role to perform, namely that of a boundary between the sacred and profane realms. Said boundaries, though, are not fixed as they permit an exchange of ideas and concepts across the three realms. Historically, the secular realm has not been fully functioning and an argument is constructed for liberals and Christians to form an alliance through adopting the principle of self-limitation as mooted by Jurgen Habermas and Pope Emeritus Benedict. Such an alliance can strengthen the secular realm in the creation of a post-secular society that is pluralist and tolerant and enables its citizens to contribute to

the public sphere. In order that citizens might create such a society, from a pedagogical perspective, they require to develop their human reasoning through acquisition of the dialogic skills of cumulative talk and exploratory talk. Some recent research findings regarding these two types of talk have been analyzed at linguistic, psychological, and cultural levels, and these findings offer promise.

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