PROCLAMATION AS DIALOGUE: TRANSITION IN THE CHURCH–WORLD RELATIONSHIP

JAMES GERARD MCEVOY

Vatican II’s Gaudium et spes sees the church–world relationship in dialogical terms. This article argues that conceiving the church–world relationship as a dialogue is an important element in the council’s recognition of what Charles Taylor calls the “modern social imaginary.” The article defends the council’s view of dialogue against the argument that contemporary Western views of dialogue are inherently relativist. It concludes by investigating the rich implications of this dialogical view for the church’s primary task of proclamation.

IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF Vatican II’s Gaudium et spes, the concept of dialogue emerged as a means of expressing a new understanding of the Roman Catholic Church’s relationship with the world.1 Pope Paul VI was keen to ensure that the concept found a prominent place in the council’s document on the church–world relationship.2 The word “dia-

1 To date the finest study of the redactional process of Gaudium et spes is Giovanni Turbanti, Un concilio per il mondo moderno: La redazione della costituzione pastorale “Gaudium et spes” del Vaticano II (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000). Also essential for interpreting the document and its history is Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak, eds., History of Vatican II, 5 vols. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995–2006).

ship with the world. 6 Despite its significance in Gaudium et spes, however, this concept has not yet achieved widespread acceptance either in the practice of the Church’s leadership or among theologians. It does not yet provide the background understanding or frame of reference within which all church leaders understand their task of proclaiming the gospel or within which theologians spell out the church-world relationship.

The primary aim of this article is to show that the concept of dialogue, richly conceived, can shed light on the Church’s task of proclaiming the gospel today. The first section shows that the council’s embrace of the notion of dialogue is an important element in its move away from a view of the church-world relationship that had held for almost a millennium but had become unworkable. My argument in this section and beyond is heavily indebted to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor’s evaluation of modernity.

In recent decades, several theologians have argued that the concept of dialogue is unsuitable for conceiving of the Church’s relationship with the world because they believe that relativism has so strongly influenced Western culture that contemporary views of dialogue are intrinsically relativist. David Schindler, for example, discussing the notion of dialogue that he sees broadly at work in the United States, contends that “on a liberal understanding . . . dialogue cannot but be construed as an exchange that is first (logically) between discrete individuals, each of whom first (logically) constructs the truth for himself or herself.” 7 This is a critical issue since, if a relativist understanding of dialogue dominated contemporary self-understanding, it would be difficult for the Church to envisage its fundamental task in dialogical terms. My second section examines these competing stances on the concept of dialogue.


By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.\textsuperscript{11}

A social imaginary, then, is not a theory, but the broad set of background understandings out of which a society functions. Modern Social Imaginaries is Taylor's account of the background and often unarticulated set of understandings that make sense of contemporary institutions and practices.

In this first strand of my argument, I want to show that, with the promulgation of Gaudium et spes, Vatican II finally recognized the social forms that constitute modernity and as a result reenvisioned the church-world relationship in dialogical terms. I will sketch the broad outline of Taylor's understanding of the modern social imaginary before showing how modern self-understandings were accepted in Gaudium et spes. The council's recognition of modern social forms cannot be interpreted as an uncritical embrace of modernity: Gaudium et spes offers strong challenges to the modern world. Yet it is in this new context that the move to a dialogical view of the church-world relationship can be best understood.

The cultural change that swept the West between the 16th and 19th centuries radically reshaped governments, economies, and whole societies. Prior to this, most premodern societies understood themselves as set in a hierarchical order that reflected the hierarchy in the cosmos.\textsuperscript{12} Scholars have variously explored the shift into the modern period, but Taylor argues that at the heart of the modern worldview is an ethic at work, which he calls the order of mutual benefit. In his account of the modern moral order, individuals, who are now not embedded in a hierarchical order, come together and through the pursuit of their own legitimate individual goals serve to benefit the good of the whole.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries 23.
\textsuperscript{12} See ibid., chap. 1.
inary, i.e., a transformation of the background understanding of what it means to exist socially. This transformation was a shift from society and government conceived of as hierarchically ordered since some primitive time to a society and government brought about through the action of the people. The path to popular sovereignty varied greatly in the American, French, and English cases and resulted in different forms and expressions. But in each case it involved “inventing the people” as a new collective agency. 

Although the development of the modern social imaginary meant a shift away from a hierarchical conception of society, it was not motivated by a rejection of God. Some of the most influential theorists of the new social order saw that order as designed by God, with everything working together for God’s purpose. Indeed, Taylor shows that particularly in the American and British cases, the transformed notion of the self-governing people had Christian roots. However, the shift from a hierarchical worldview opened the question of the grounding of our common action and allowed the possibility of nontheistic responses.

Barring a couple of brief exceptions, the Roman Catholic Church of the 19th century approached the emerging worldview from the perspective of the hierarchical understanding—often called the Christendom model—that had dominated the previous eight centuries. Arising in the middle of the 11th century, the intensified project of Christendom was a conscious effort to bring the whole of humanity under the law of Christ. Taylor summarizes the central idea of the Christendom project as the attempt to foster “a civilization where the structures, institutions, and culture were all supposed to reflect the Christian nature of society.” Essential to its effectiveness was the church’s strong relationship with the state. In the first

19 See ibid., chap. 8.
20 Taylor, ibid. 143. The quotation within the quotation is from E. S. Morgan, Inventing the People (New York: Norton, 1988).
22 Taylor, “Closed World Structures” 63–64.
sion that the nexus between government and the Church had been severed irrevocably. In his encyclical on the Christian constitution of states, *Immortale Dei* (1885), Leo argues that it was only because the Church had been established in the West that states were able to bear “fruits important beyond all expectation.” For Leo XIII, as for Gregory XVI and Pius IX, the evils of 19th-century societies could be remedied only if the authority of the Church was accepted by all. Leo’s recognition of democracy, while adhering to a belief in the Church’s directive role in the state, is commonly referred to as his thesis/hypothesis distinction. Here the thesis is the ideal situation where Catholicism is recognized as the established true religion, and the hypothesis is a pragmatic compromise in a pluralist context.

John Courtney Murray’s detailed analysis of Leo’s view of the church-state relationship shows that the pope’s partial recognition of democracy as a valid form of government was facilitated by his appropriation of Thomist thought, and particularly the Thomistic distinction between the natural and the supernatural orders, with the natural order understood to be relatively independent. On the other hand, Murray demonstrates that Leo’s rejection of modernity was propelled by his polemical cast of mind. The pope understood issues of church and state within his special problematic, “the sectarian Liberal aggression against the historic integrity of the so-called Catholic nation.” For Leo, the separation of church and state was not simply a new social arrangement; it was, in Murray’s words, “inextricably linked to the allegedly universal principles of sectarian Liberalism”—individual conscience and popular sovereignty understood as a rejection of God. While the Vatican’s struggles with the French and Italian leadership of the time would explain Leo’s polemic, it leaves open the question of whether his special problematic accurately accounted for modernity. What is important for my purposes here is that Leo’s partial acceptance of democracy does not represent a recognition of the modern social imaginary.

33 Ibid. 90.
34 Ibid. 52.
have made the economy an effective instrument to make better provision for the increased needs of the human family.\textsuperscript{40}

Yet in accepting the modern economy, the council did not embrace it uncritically; thus the document identifies a range of socioeconomic difficulties, including the increasing gap between rich and poor and the relationship between labor and capital. Principles are proposed to aid states in addressing these difficulties.

Second, \textit{Gaudium et spes} unambiguously recognizes the value of popular sovereignty:

It is entirely in accord with human nature that political and juridical structures be devised which will increasingly and without discrimination provide all citizens with the genuine opportunity of taking a free and active share in establishing the juridical foundations of the political community, in determining the form of government and the functions and purposes of its various institutions, and in the election of the government. (\textit{GS} no. 75)

The council recognized that democracy has profoundly transformed societies for the good: it has grown from a deep awareness of human dignity and better protects the rights of the person especially in public life than did the regimes it succeeded. Such recognition of popular sovereignty can only mean that church and government operate in separate spheres, independently of each other. In the council’s words: “By virtue of its commission and competence the church is not identified in any way with political society or bound to any political system” (\textit{GS} no. 76). These words unequivocally express a move away from the Church’s directive role in the state that the papacy had advocated throughout the 19th century.

While popular sovereignty and the modern economy are extensively discussed in \textit{Gaudium et spes}, the third element of the modern social imaginary, namely, the public sphere, does not receive a detailed analysis. Nonetheless its operation is assumed. The growing significance of the media in contemporary culture is noted (\textit{GS} no. 6), and the role that citizens play in the development of culture is discussed. Citizens are “the architects and authors of the culture of their own community” (\textit{GS} no. 55), the document states, and this responsibility includes believers, who are called to “collaborate with all others in building a world of more human construction” (\textit{GS} no. 57).

In summary, through the promulgation of \textit{Gaudium et spes} the Church abandoned its attachment to the worldview of Christendom, including its once privileged relationship to the state. What had changed, however, was

\textsuperscript{40} Vatican II, \textit{Gaudium et spes}, in \textit{Decrees of the Ecumenical Council}, ed. Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990) no. 63. Subsequent references to \textit{Gaudium et spes} (\textit{GS}) will be placed in parentheses in the text.
Such openness to the various languages of the day will enable the Church to faithfully proclaim the message of the gospel in each culture. "This adaptation in preaching the revealed word," the council declares, "should remain the law of all evangelization" (GS no. 44). In sum, the type of dialogue envisaged in Gaudium et spes could be put in these terms: the Church, founded in the gospel, responds to the desires and struggles of this age, while listening for the voice of the Spirit in the world.

The theme of dialogue is recapitulated in the conclusion of Gaudium et spes: "In virtue of its mission to spread the light of the gospel’s message over the entire globe, and to bring all people of whatever nation, race or culture together into the one Spirit, the church comes to be a sign of that kinship which makes genuine dialogue possible and vigorous" (GS no. 92). The paragraph continues with a discussion about dialogue within the Church, in ecumenical settings, and among all who believe in God:

The wish for such conversations, undertaken solely out of love for the truth and with all due prudence, excludes nobody. ... Since God our Father is the origin and destiny of all things, we are all called to be sisters and brothers. Therefore, in our common human and divine vocation we can and should work together without violence and deceit, and in true peace, to build the world. (GS no. 92)

**DIALOGUE CONTESTED**

Speaking of the church-world relationship in terms of dialogue has strong appeal today since the notion of dialogue emphasizes the personal agency of individuals as they strive to make sense of their lives. If the journey of the believer did not involve an ongoing process of personal appropriation through exploration and questioning, one would wonder whether the result could be called faith in any worthwhile sense. This understanding of the personal journey of faith has implications for the Church’s conception of its task of proclamation: the Church’s proclamation of the gospel must engage with the self-understanding of individuals, aiming to persuade minds and hearts. It is hardly surprising, then, in a culture in which personal agency is so highly prized, that Gaudium et spes adopted the concept of dialogue as a means of articulating the church-world relationship.

There is a further reason for dialogue being an appropriate concept with which to understand the Church’s role of proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth. From its earliest days the Christian community has spoken about Jesus of Nazareth as the Word of God addressed to humanity.

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41 In my third section I will show that proclamation in wider settings—to a congregation, society, or culture—also requires the Church to engage with the worldview (including what Taylor calls the social imaginary) of the addressees.
right to define their lives on their own terms. In this view, then, dialogue
does not aim to bring partners to a common mind but rather aims to create
a tolerant society. After surveying Catholic teaching on dialogue since the
1960s, Dulles argues that because truth is acknowledged as the norm and
goal of dialogue in the classical and personalist approaches, these offer a
more appropriate understanding for the Church’s dialogue intramurally, in
ecumenical and interfaith settings, and with the world.

In a more sustained discussion of the concept of dialogue in Roman
Catholic theology, David Schindler’s primary concern is also the effect of
liberal understandings of the self and society (what he terms American
liberalism) on Catholic views of dialogue.⁴⁵ Responding to a statement by
the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin on the Catholic Common Ground
Project, Schindler criticizes what he believes is the notion of dialogue
assumed in that statement. My interest here is not in the specific issue of
Bernardin’s statement, but in the disagreement about what is taken to be
dialogue. Schindler contends that in contemporary America, dialogue and
truth are assumed to exist in inverse relationship: that open dialogue
requires participants to set aside metaphysical or religious commitments.⁴⁶
With substantive commitments off the agenda, dialogue becomes the pure-
ly procedural or formal exercise of establishing an arrangement with which
all parties can live.

For Schindler, this procedural understanding does not do justice to what
takes place in dialogue, particularly within the Church.⁴⁷ As I noted above,
the person of Jesus Christ—God’s Word spoken to humanity—is central to
a Christian understanding of dialogue. Dialogue within the Church, and
between the Church and the world, is necessarily related to Christ’s life
as revelatory of both God and of what it is to be fully human. Dialogue
leads believers into the mystery of his life, expressed in the community of
the Church. In Schindler’s words, “The fundamental mission of every

⁴⁶ The most celebrated articulation of this stance is that of John Rawls, who
argues that although citizens may find it hard to conceive of themselves “apart
from certain religious, philosophical, and moral commitments, or from certain
enduring attachments and loyalties,” these commitments should be bracketed for
political purposes. He argues that in liberal societies we cannot hope to agree on
such controversial issues and by bracketing them ensure that the institutional
life of society remains free from controversy. See John Rawls, Political Liberalism
(New York: Columbia University, 1993) 31. A fine rebuttal of Rawls’s argument is
found in Michael J. Sandel, “Political Liberalism,” in Public Philosophy: Essays on
Morality in Politics (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2005) 211–47.
⁴⁷ Schindler’s immediate concern in this article is dialogue within the Roman
Catholic Church, but in a later article he points out the significance of his argument
for the Church’s dialogue with the world (“Institution and Charism: The Missions
self-understanding among others, this would call for a different view of both the culture and its relationship with the gospel.

In his extensive study of the modern identity, Charles Taylor identifies two strands of a slide toward subjectivism in the West. First, at the level of popular culture, Taylor sees a slide toward self-centered forms of what he calls the ethic of authenticity. Second, he sees this slide in popular culture strengthened by a subjectivist turn in the thought of Nietzsche and a group of influential 20th-century thinkers whom Nietzsche inspired, particularly Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

One of the primary tasks that Taylor undertakes in Sources of the Self is to trace the connections between contemporary senses of the self and moral visions, that is, between identity and the good. These moral visions are often obscured in contemporary moral and political theory, but he argues that we cannot make sense of the modern identity outside its relationship to moral sources. In his Massey lectures (1991), published outside Canada as The Ethics of Authenticity, Taylor explores one understanding of the self dominant today—the ethic of authenticity. He maintains that this ethic is particular to modernity and has roots both in Enlightenment thought, influenced by Descartes and Locke, and also in Romanticism influenced by writers such as Rousseau. What characterizes this moral ideal is the conviction that “there is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this understanding gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me.” This is certainly a commendable moral ideal; it is hard to imagine that it could be seen in any other way. It allows, at a cultural level, for Augustine’s conviction that the surest path to God leads within, urging the believer to find God in the intimacy of self-presence.

In part 1 of Sources of the Self, while reflecting on the broad sweep of modern moral theory, Taylor argues that we come to understand ourselves only against a background of things that have value (what he terms “horizons of significance”) and through significant relationships within a defining community. Our sense of identity is, therefore, neither free-floating nor simply an instinctive response to realities we find attractive. Detached from horizons of significance and identity-defining relationships, human identity would be meaningless. Of course, this understanding does not mean that a person’s sense of self is imposed from outside: it is necessarily personally chosen and realized against a background of meaning and

50 See particularly Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1991), chap. 6; and Taylor, Sources of the Self, passim but particularly chaps. 1–4 and 25.
51 Taylor, Ethics of Authenticity 28–29, emphasis original.
that this view is influential and often simply assumed does not mean that it gives a coherent account of the human person in society; nor does it mean that it gives the best account of the way in which liberal societies actually function.

Taylor engages at length with this reading of liberalism, offering responses at both the philosophical and political levels. While he recognizes the equality of citizens in a liberal society, he argues that the liberal neutrality view is based on a deficient ontology, since it regards society as a collection of isolated individuals who are random, detached choosers.\textsuperscript{56} In Taylor’s words, this is an atomist ontology: “a vision of society as in some sense constituted by individuals for the fulfillment of ends which were primarily individual.”\textsuperscript{57} Yet, as already indicated above, humans are intrinsically communal: we come to a sense of self within horizons of significance and within a defining community. In brief, Taylor argues that at the philosophical level the theory of liberal neutrality gives an adequate account neither of the human person in society nor of the functioning of liberal politics. Modern liberal societies can function only because citizens have a strong sense of identification with the enterprise; that is, there must be a strong sense of common good. The stance of liberal neutrality does not acknowledge the dimension of our common life. In Taylor’s view, only republican or communitarian understandings of liberalism give an adequate account of this dimension of social and political life.\textsuperscript{58}

So, what of my question about the part played by subjectivist understandings in liberal culture? How deeply have they affected this age? At the level of popular culture, the ethic of authenticity can certainly descend into subjectivist forms. But in the light of Taylor’s argument about the structure of the modern identity, these subjectivist forms must be seen as debased expressions of a moral ideal. To judge the ethic of authenticity as


\textsuperscript{57} Taylor, “Atomism” 187. Dworkin’s stance of “liberal neutrality” differs greatly from the trenchant atomism of Robert Nozick and other libertarians who regard the free market as ultimately just and argue against any state intervention in the market; see Robert Nozick, \textit{Anarchy, State, and Utopia} (New York: Basic, 1974). Nonetheless, Dworkin shares the atomist mode of thought of much contemporary liberalism, regarding institutional structures simply as in the nature of collective instruments. No strong sense of the common good is at work here; see Taylor, “Cross-Purposes” 186–89.

ought not most perspicuously to be described as something that takes place in us, but rather better as our connecting up to the larger order in which we are placed." Yet unlike in Plato's time, it will make very little sense to engage in dialogue in order to reveal his theory of Forms as the best account of reality. Neither will appealing to the worldview of Christendom make much sense: several centuries have elapsed since this has been the commonly accepted background understanding of reality. There is now no commonly accepted horizon of significance in which all concur: we live in a pluralist age. So, coming to the truth of the gospel will be the result of a personal quest. In each instance the journey of faith will lead individuals through an examination of their own frameworks of meaning to discover the Word who dwells among us. Schindler frequently reminds his readers that the path to finding the meaning of one's life in Jesus Christ and his living memory in the Church is a very particular path for which Jesus' life provides the horizon of significance and defining relationship.

PROCLAMATION AS DIALOGUE

Thus far I have argued that the promulgation of Gaudium et spes marked a major transition in the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of its relationship with the world. When the bishops recognized the social forms that characterize modernity, they set aside the worldview of Christendom which had shaped the Church for almost a millennium. In the process of coming to terms with the new social imaginary, they sketched the broad lines of a new view of the church-world relationship using dialogue as their primary metaphor. The bishops imagined the Church in conversation both with individuals and cultures, leading them to discover the fundamental truth of their existence in the gospel. Yet understanding the Church's task in dialogical terms does not commit it to the relativism influencing Western culture: that is my argument in the second section of this article. In fact, it is only through dialogue that believers can lead interlocutors to reflect on the frameworks of meaning that shape their lives and consider Jesus' way of self-giving love as that which is ultimately valuable.

Yet perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. I have yet to examine the concept of dialogue more fully in order to explore what it means to understand proclamation in dialogical terms. To address these two issues, I turn first to Hans-Georg Gadamer's work on the concept of dialogue, Truth and Method. Gadamer's magnum opus is a study of the nature of understanding in the human sciences. He argues that the method of the natural sciences, which aims toward a detached, scientific grasp of an object, cannot do justice to the type of understanding involved in the human sciences. Gadamer examines

59 Taylor, Sources of the Self 123. 60 Gadamer, Truth and Method.
However, Gadamer's perspective on dialogue is not without its critics. I pointed out above that in *Truth and Method* he focuses on the kind of understanding involved in interpreting works of art, texts, and history. In an important study, Richard Bernstein, although deeply appreciative of Gadamer's contribution to hermeneutics, has argued that Gadamer's focus has meant that he has not done justice to the kind of dialogue required in social and political settings. Gadamer's philosophic hermeneutics," observes Bernstein, "is virtually silent on the complex issues concerning domination and power." Bernstein turns to the work of Jürgen Habermas for a view of dialogue that he believes is capable of overcoming inequalities of power and other ruptures in the social space.

Habermas's major work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, weaves together three fundamental strands of argument: the nature of reason as communicative action, a theory of society as lifeworld and system, and a theory of modernity. Within the constraints of this essay I cannot give an account of the breadth and richness of that work and cannot even discuss the full dimensions of Habermas's discourse ethics. But following Taylor, I want to point out that Habermas's discourse ethics contains a significant flaw that seriously compromises the type of dialogue required in social and political settings. In addition, I will argue that Gadamer's notion of dialogue has a greater ability to deal with the reality of social and political life than Bernstein allows. I will then turn to an essay in which Taylor explores the implications of Gadamer's view of dialogue for social life.

A pivotal argument in Habermas's theory of communicative action is that only questions of what it is right to do, not questions of what it is good to be, can be determined by discourse ethics. And in settling questions of

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66 Ibid. 156.
In an essay marking Gadamer's 100th birthday, Taylor shows that Gadamer's notion of dialogue not only applies to the understanding of texts, works of art, and history, but also informs dialogue in social and political life. He identifies three basic, interrelated features of Gadamer's concept of dialogue, which I will sketch so as to reflect on their relevance for a dialogical understanding of proclamation. The three features of Gadamer's concept of dialogue identified by Taylor are dialogue as bilateral, party-dependent, and involving the conversation partners in revising goals.

The first feature that Taylor identifies in Gadamer's dialogical view—understanding as bilateral—distinguishes it from the unilateral methods of the natural sciences that strive for an explanation of the object under investigation, an explanation that will not require further revision. In the human sciences, this kind of knowledge is neither possible nor desirable, as Taylor points out: "Gadamer does not believe that the kind of knowledge that yields complete intellectual control over the object is attainable, even in principle, in human affairs." In the human sciences, including the study of other societies and cultures, the student necessarily responds to the perspective and self-understanding of those being studied, and the goal of the study is a kind of transformation in mutual understanding rather than detached, objective description. From the point of view of this first feature, then, dialogue requires engagement with the self-understanding of the other, whether an individual, a group, or a culture. Here, the power of Gadamer's image of the back and forth of conversation is clear: without the perspective of the other, there is no dialogue. In some cases, such as the study of ancient cultures, those studied will not be able to answer for themselves, the student will have to work toward her best account. However, the goal remains: to understand others on their own terms.

Regarding the second feature of Gadamer's dialogical view—understanding as party-dependent—Taylor points out that understanding in the human sciences will vary with different interlocutors and certainly with different cultures. He offers as an example: the language we arrive at to express our understanding of one culture may be entirely inappropriate for another culture. And further, the account will vary not only with the culture studied, but also with the inquirer: a student with a different background or from a later era may be able to offer a better, richer account of a particular reality than a student from this culture at this time. This party-dependent feature means that in every dialogue the inquirer will have to attend not only to the self-understanding of the other but also to his own path toward the other. Understanding the other will engage the student in a process of clarifying his assumptions or prejudices and finding the most suitable language for giving the best account of the other.

76 Taylor, "Understanding the Other." 77 Ibid. 281.
The second feature of Gadamer's dialogical view—dialogue as party-dependent—also has important implications for the proclamation of the gospel. Proclaiming the gospel will not only involve the believer in presenting the gospel message to his interlocutor in the language most suitable for the hearer; it will also involve the believer in a process of self-questioning, in order to come to a deeper, clearer understanding of the significance of the gospel in this new context. The believer's task of constantly clarifying his understanding of the other will be an essential aspect of proclamation. Without entering into the self-understanding of the other, the believer would have little idea about the significance of the gospel for the other's life. In the case of proclamation to an individual, entering his perspective will obviously be a personal matter, accomplished in conversation. In the more general case, when addressing an audience, congregation, or society, for example, proclamation will involve the believer in exploring what Taylor terms the social imaginary of the addressees—that is, the background understanding of social surroundings that makes their common life possible. Here the conversation will take a range of forms, including individual and group interaction along with a study of the history, culture and society of the addressees. In both the individual and general cases the journey will be one of increasing clarity for the believer, allowing him to grow in understanding of the other on the other's terms.

The third feature of Gadamer's view of dialogue—revising goals—challenges those who proclaim the gospel. From a dialogical perspective, proclaimers must deeply value both what they bear and whom they address. To preach the gospel is to make a discovery. It means, as we have already seen, that the believer will come to a clearer understanding of the other's difference and will in turn understand herself anew. But it also means that in that process the believer will discover that God is at work in the other in ways that she had not previously known. When understood as dialogue, the task of proclamation will necessarily lead the proclaimer into a deeper knowledge of God through encounter with the other. The dialogical perspective again contrasts with that of Christendom: proclamation no longer means making over the other in the image of the gospel and canon law; it means coming to a fuller knowledge of God through encounter with the other.

When understood in this rich sense, a dialogical view of proclamation has much to commend it. First, God is recognized as the ultimate truth of human life; thus proclamation does not fall victim to contemporary subjectivism and relativism. Indeed, this conception accounts well for the incomprehensible truth of God's existence since it articulates the way in which both the addressee and the proclaimer are led more fully into the truth of God's presence through the proclamation event. Second, a dialogical view of proclamation better explains the act of proclamation in a culture in which the Church no longer has a directive role and in which the dignity
alternative to Christ, nor does he fill a sort of void which is sometimes suggested as existing between Christ and the Logos. Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions serves as a preparation for the Gospel and can only be understood in reference to Christ, the Word who took flesh by the power of the Spirit “so that as perfectly human he would save all human beings and sum up all things.” (RM no. 29)

The relationship identified here between Word and Spirit has implications for proclamation.

A believer dedicated to proclaiming the word of God cannot ignore the presence of the Spirit in the other. Attentiveness to the action of the Spirit must be an integral aspect of proclamation. Such attentiveness will not only provide insight into the terms in which the gospel might make sense to the other, just as importantly it will be a revelatory event for the believer. In D’Costa’s words, it will “bring the church more truthfully into the presence of the triune God.”

For the believer, then, the task of proclamation is truly a dialogue: he gives voice to the gospel of Jesus Christ yet in that very act, and prior to it, is addressed by the Spirit. In this context, Taylor’s slogan, “no understanding the other without a changed understanding of self,” takes on a theological hue. Proclamation means being open to encounter God’s Spirit at work in the other. Although it is true that the believer can discern the action of the Spirit only in the light of God’s word, it is also true that the Spirit will surprise.

Such an understanding of proclamation is a world away from the structural understanding that dominated the period of Christendom. From the perspective of dialogue, the other is not seen as there to be extrinsically shaped by the gospel; rather the gospel is offered to the other so that the other might find that it makes best sense of life, even enabling her to recognize the Spirit at work. This is the force of my argument in the first section of this article that the move from Christendom to dialogue should be understood in the context of a shift in the social imaginary. In this new context, dialogue is not one activity among others in the Church’s missionary task (the listening that precedes talking/telling/proclaiming). Through attention to the Spirit of God at work in the other, the dialogical mode of proclamation will help the Church to grow in love of both God and neighbor.

85 Ibid. 115.
86 D’Costa makes the related point that after Vatican II, understanding dialogue as one element of the task of proclamation is confused: “I would like to suggest that the often cited distinctions between mission, dialogue, and inculturation are fluid and unhelpful. This is because if the church must learn another language as its first language, if it is to engage in dialogue and mission, then both activities are intrinsically related. In any engagement, even the act of understanding, questions and criticism as well as affirmation will surface. In this sense, mission is impossible without dialogue, and vice versa” (ibid. 131).