

The Church and the Public Sphere

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IF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH wants to be a credible, substantive and influential institution in Irish society into the future, it must engage in the public sphere in a consistent, persuasive and articulate way. It is no longer the dominant institution it once was in Irish society. It is not possible for the Church to communicate through the media in an uncontested fashion anymore. It cannot assume shared values and world views in Irish society any longer. The role and relationship of the Catholic Church to the state and rest of society is changing rapidly in Ireland.

As a result of these changes, some claim that the Catholic Church will become another member of civil society. It will become a powerful interest group, along with others, such as trade unions, the GAA, and Focus Ireland. However, there are others that claim that the Churches are more than simply special interest groups in civil society. They claim that the identity and function of the Churches also 'play a major role in helping to create and maintain a mature democratic society.'¹ Both of these options require the Catholic Church to participate in a new way, in a new context. If it is not to become some sort of 'sectarian oddity', restricted to the private sphere of life, and without concern for the public dimension of the Gospel, it must place far greater emphasis on dialogue, debate and discussion in the public sphere. These are the qualities that are essential to civil society and a functioning democracy.

The public sphere is described by Jürgen Habermas as 'a body of

1. Tom Inglis, 'Understanding Religion and Politics,' in *Religion and Politics: East-West Contrasts from Contemporary Europe*, ed. T. Inglis, Z. Mach, and R. Mazanek (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 200), p. 6.

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'private persons' assembled to discuss matters of 'public concern' or 'common interest'.² It is a metaphor for thinking about how information and ideas circulate in society. It is where people can come to agreement or consensus about common issues and decide what is to be done in the future. As described by Habermas, the public sphere ought to be characterized by rational critical discourse and wide participation, despite inequality and differences among contributors. At any given time, there are communities of discourse operating in the public sphere who are concerned with issues that impact on the well-being of individuals and society. Focus Ireland, immigration organisations, and residents' associations are examples of groups that seek to inform, form, and transform public opinion. This, in turn, shapes the culture and policy of our society, which, in a back and forth movement, also shape public opinion.

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It is important to realize that the public sphere is not a neutral place, offering easy access for everyone, regardless of status and identity. Historically, it has privileged the male voice and excluded issues of 'private' concern. It has not been inclusive of alternative voices, and it expected – unrealistically – that it could bracket out differences in identity, treating everyone as if they are the same. Anyone participating in the public sphere today needs to take these issues into consideration.

It might be more useful to think not just of one public sphere but of a multiplicity of publics discussing ideas and beliefs among themselves before bringing them into a wider public forum. Immigration organizations might organize among themselves sustained, critical conversations about issues such as inter-culturalism, employment and integration. Having gone as far as they can on their own, they then might broaden out what they have been thinking to a wider public and try to

2. Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 112.

shape national public opinion. Then they might bring the wisdom from this experience back to their own constituency.

The public sphere is distinct from both the market and the state. Thus it is free to be critical of either or both, to create the kind of room needed for the citizen to flourish between the pressure of the market and the encroachment of the state.

However, it does not work like this in practice. A great number of public sphere conversations occur in the media. As large segments of these are owned by business and are run as businesses, the fear is that, as commercial interests, they seek to shape public opinion for their own ends rather than report how the public is dealing with issues it cares about.

There is also a fear that the quality of the public sphere is suffering in that people today are more interested in passive consumption than participation in public discourse.³ Some think public opinion is manipulated by mass media; others

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believe it is shaped by wide, inclusive, and critical participation in issues of common interest. There is a stark question to be faced: Is the public sphere characterized by trivialization, commercial interests, and

the use of spectacle, or it is a vibrant, life-giving, wide-ranging counterweight to the market and the state? There are no easy answers. But the public sphere (made up of countless publics) is essential for a thriving democratic society.

In essence, the public sphere can be thought of as the articulation and critical engagement with the ideas and thinking of civil society. If the Catholic Church maintains its distance from the public sphere, a great source of wisdom and insight into how people can live meaningful lives in the twenty-first century will be lost to Irish society. But – just as important – the Catholic Church has much to learn about how people can live well and justly from its own participation in the public sphere. It needs to listen well, avoiding any sense of smugness and

3. See Craig J. Calhoun, 'Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere,' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992).

comfort in believing that it has the whole truth and if others want it, all they need to do is come and ask. Participation in ongoing, respectful, open dialogue in the public sphere can be a great source of learning and enrichment for all concerned.

FAITH TO LIFE AND LIFE TO FAITH

But how should the Churches bring faith into the public sphere? In what follows, I will direct my attention to people of faith rather than to the Church as institution. Most 'people of God' have what can be called 'theological fragments' – described by Duncan Forrester as elements that illuminate and 'challenge some aspects of the conventional wisdom, and contribute to the building of just communities in which people may flourish in mutuality and hope.'⁴

Theological fragments are the bits and pieces of Christian faith that are part and parcel of the world-view of people and communities throughout the country. For instance, someone might have a particular belief about the importance of helping people who are marginalized. Part of the reason for this belief may be their appropriation of the story of the Good Samaritan. Heard repeatedly over the years, it has become part of their imagination. It shapes how they treat people who are marginalized in some way. Others may have theological fragments that appreciate the value of social justice because of their understanding of Catholic social teaching. Some may have fragments that recognize the importance of hospitality and welcome as essential qualities for being followers of Jesus Christ, and others, due to a belief in the Incarnation, always seek to respect the dignity of other people regardless of status, sex, ethnicity or colour.

Whatever these fragments may be, many are hesitant to bring them into the public sphere. There are many reasons for this. They might have a sense of inadequacy and fearfulness, of not having the whole story, and a desire to know more theology before talking about it in the public sphere. So, the person waits or takes more classes in aspects of theology – and 'then' perhaps feels ready to become a little more public with their faith.

4. Duncan B. Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, ed. Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. i.

The problem with such an approach is that the person might never actually get round to becoming involved in the conversation between faith and life in anything other than the classroom. And in so doing, they overlook the fact that faith can be discovered and learned in conversation with others.

Clearly, one needs to know something to begin the conversation; but it is in the exchange, in the questions, and the other points of view, that deeper understanding and/or further questions about faith arise. Bringing faith into the public realm – even if one does not feel adequate to the task, or have an academic background – can actually be a way of learning more from and about one's faith. The 'how' of this involvement is crucial, and more will be said about that later.

Although people's own understanding and appreciation of the wisdom in their faith traditions may grow through continuous, reflective conversation in the public sphere, this is not the reason it is done. Quite simply, faith is brought into the public sphere to advance the reign of God. And it is hoped that by participating in the public sphere, by articulating the economic, political, social and cultural implications of the Christian tradition, the public sphere itself is strengthened and the capacity of all to flourish is improved.

FUNCTIONS OF THEOLOGICAL FRAGMENTS

One of the functions of bringing theological fragments into public life is to provide the public with alternative visions 'of what is desirable and possible, to stimulate deliberation about them, provide a re-examination of premises and values, and thus to broaden the range of political responses and deepen society's understanding of itself.'⁵

In the book, *Fullness of Faith: the Public Significance of Theology*, even the chapter headings are illustrative of the connection between faith and public life: Original Sin and the Myth of Self-Interest; The Trinity and Human Rights; Grace and a Consistent Ethic of Life; Creation and an Environmental Ethic; Incarnation and Patriotism, and The Communion of Saints and an Ethic of Solidarity. In this book, Michael

5. Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology*, Isaac Hecker Studies in Religion and American Culture (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 23.

and Kenneth Himes strive to uncover and communicate the 'socially significant meanings of Christian symbols and tradition.'⁶ The effort here is to bring the wisdom of the Christian tradition into public conversation to 'contribute to the well being of society.'⁷ It is about bringing life to faith and faith to life in an ongoing manner.

There are different ways of doing this, all depending on the constituency. When faith is being brought to public life, it must be articulated in such a way that others outside the particular faith tradition can appreciate the reasoning for a believer's vision and point of view. This sort of explanation and public conversation should not be seen as some sort of imposition of one's tradition on others. Rather, it should be seen as the enriching of public life by making space for religious traditions that 'continue to shape the imagination and form the convictions of millions.'⁸ Consequently, for theological fragments to have any impact on social policy and public opinion, the 'how' of this involvement is a key consideration. And that is what I would like to explore now.

MOVEMENT BACK AND FORTH

I propose to do this by looking at how the philosophers John Rawls and Michael Walzer and the American Bishops looked at justice questions. For each, the realization of justice required some 'back and forth' movement between the idea of justice and the lived experience of the people.

John Rawls developed two principles he believed were the foundation of a just society and felt that every reasonable person could subscribe to them. He also wanted to find a balance between his two principles of justice and the considered judgments of people in society. Considered judgments are what people hold to be true and trustworthy, the perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions that have served them well over time. Without this back and forth movement between the two principles and the considered judgments, his two principles would remain abstract ideas and the considered judgments of people be with-

6. Himes and Himes, p. 4.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

out new, potentially useful insights about social justice.

Michael Walzer's approach is similar in that it seeks to help people recognize, name, and create what is just in society. His approach is inductive, not deductive. Walzer comes to an understanding of what is just by bringing the wisdom of the past concerning issues of domination and distribution into conversation with our own considered judgments today. Again, there is a back and forth movement involved in coming to a fuller understanding of justice. For Walzer, the process of conversation, consideration, and discerning the wisdom of the past in relation to the practices of today, can itself be transformative and creative of justice. The back and forth movement between practices illustrative of justice from the past and the actual practices of today is essential if communities are to appropriate new insight and deeper understandings of what it means to live justly today.

In 1986, the American Bishops' pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* sought to provide an ethical framework from within its own tradition and apply it to economic issues of the day. The bishops did not just write this framework behind closed doors, then have it produced in the public, and expect it to be read and appropriated. Instead they sought the help of many communities.⁹ They consulted with theologians, economists, sociologists, congressional staffers, social justice leaders, business leaders, labor leaders, and farmers. They welcomed all correspondence.¹⁰ This consultation required that they articulate their best thinking and reflection on the nature of justice to others. And this set up the opportunity for a back and forth movement between their ideas and the considered judgments of their constituency.

On three successive occasions, the Bishops' committee made their drafts of the document available to the public. There was wide, deep and thorough participation in the development of the document, with Catholics bringing their own experience and beliefs into conversa-

9. It is interesting to note that there were those in Rome at the time of the writing of the pastoral letter that disapproved of this consultation, believing the Church is there to teach and not to seek advice. It prompts the question as to what it means to be a good teacher and where do teachers get their wisdom and authority?

10. Charles E. Curran, "The Reception of Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Teaching in the United States," in *Modern Catholic Teaching: Commentaries & Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2004), p. 479.

tion with it. Without this dialogue, the Pastoral Letter would sit outside the experience of the community and be wholly ineffective in transforming the imagination and practice of the Christian community and influencing social policy.

In these examples, thinking about justice requires some movement back and forth between the authors' views and the considered judgments of people. This back and forth movement towards some consensus is what characterizes the dynamic in the public sphere, when it is functioning at its best.

THE REVISED CORRELATIONAL METHOD

I suggest that the communication of theological fragments works in similar ways to the issues regarding justice, as described by these authors. There must be some sort of back and forth movement between the stated position or theological fragment(s) and the considered opinion of others, all towards some sort of living and realizable balance.

The revised correlational method of theology is most suited to this sort of work. This method seeks to establish mutually critical correlations between interpretations of the Christian tradition and the contemporary experience.¹¹ When this is done at its best, it is like a conversation. The impulse behind a conversation is the question. What is important is not so much telling something to someone else but exploring the question together. For American theologian David Tracy, the emphasis is on the question and the aim is conversation.

This assumes a relationship with the conversation partner which may require some work beforehand. It is important to establish a relationship where a conversation involving theological fragments is appropriate. The interlocutor is not some object to be told and convinced of one's truth, rather a subject with whom the search takes place together. And just as the person or community attempts to communicate something from a theological perspective to others, they themselves must be open to receiving something back as an essential aspect of the relationship. Otherwise, there is no conversation only a

11. David W. Tracy, "The Role of Theology in Public Life: Some Reflections," *Word & World* 4 (1984), p. 235.

'talking at' the other.

The following are some key points to bear in mind when bringing theological fragments into the public sphere:

- One needs to 'communicate according to the mode of the receiver.' Tracy has three audiences in mind for theological conversations: the academy, the Church, and the wider society. These speak different languages, and it is incumbent on the communicator to be conversant in the language of the audience.
- Being understood is not enough, one needs to be persuasive, thoughtful, and open to changing one's mind. There are plenty of bland theological pronouncements in the public sphere. They do not change anything, except perhaps the profile of the announcer to his/her own constituency. Those who bring theological fragments into the public sphere need to be creative and familiar with current communication media.
- Theological fragments are most persuasive when they are spoken or lived authentically, with a genuine voice and honest lifestyle. This happens best when there is a coherence between what is said, how it is said, and the practice of the person or community doing the communicating.
- The message is also more persuasive if the person or community bringing it into the public sphere, sustains a presence there over time. Others can see that they care about the quality of 'public life' itself as well as their own particular interests. Occasional and episodic forays into the public forum will effect little change.
- Finally, deep respect for one's conversation partners is very important. This will not always be easy, particularly in divisive discourses, but it is in keeping with the gospel and Christian tradition. The very act and manner of contributing to the public sphere also helps to create a particular type of public sphere. It is important to remember, we are creating the public sphere as well as participating in it.

ISSUES WITH CORRELATION

The work of correlation raises some important issues. On the one hand, there is a danger that while genuinely addressing some issue of

public significance, in an effort to be understood and transformative, one might lose touch with the particularities of the Christian tradition. And on the other hand, in an effort to protect the distinctive character of the Christian faith, the person or community may not engage the public in a persuasive and effective manner.¹²

Dasvid Tracy believes that to speak in a public fashion means to speak in a manner that is disclosive and transformative for 'any intelligent, reasonable, responsible human being.'¹³ Each of his three publics – the Church, society and the academy – require the person to provide the evidence and make explicit the criteria for their positions. Tracy claims that faith beliefs will not always be adequate to sustain the argument and so recourse to philosophy will be necessary. This is where Ronald Thiemann disagrees (it must be born in mind that Tracy is speaking out of the Catholic tradition, while Thiemann is speaking out of the Lutheran tradition). Thiemann believes the use of philosophy undercuts the ability of the theologian to bring the distinctive convictions and practices of a faith tradition to public argument. I agree with Tracy. There is little point in speaking and communicating in the public sphere if one is not understood or – even worse – if one is misunderstood. Yet, Thiemann also has a point. The public argument, or the space for public discourse, ought not to preclude religious belief and distinctive practices as a matter of course. These public discourses take place in a larger cultural context. This larger context is both shaped by the discourse and, in turn, shapes the discourse. And so, it will be a matter for people of Christian faith, who are aware of the culture, to speak and communicate in a manner that stands the best chance of realizing their ends.

The real question is not so much the issue of language *per se*, but rather: Will religious convictions and beliefs have any real impact on

12. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 20.

13. David W. Tracy, 'Defending the Public Character of Theology,' *The Christian Century* 98 (1981), p. 351.

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public policy in a pluralistic society? The challenge is to find a way to influence the development of policy without seeking a return to Christendom. Consequently, the credibility of those who bring theological fragments into public life needs to be high. They must come with good analysis and clear descriptions of the issues that concern them. They must be able to work in partnership with others, across all sorts of divides. They must be able to articulate their interest in issues persuasively and have enough political savvy to appreciate how policy changes, and have a deep understanding of the wider cultural context in which they work.

CONTRIBUTING

In a multicultural and pluralistic Ireland, it is increasingly important that Christians participate in the public sphere. This is the place that ideas and views are offered, contested and revised towards some consensus of public opinion.

Christians are reasonably comfortable talking to one another, there are plenty of shared assumptions and common experiences. There is conversation in the academy and much thoughtful reflection in scholarly journals and conferences about what it means to be a Christian in the world today. However, there is not enough conversation with 'society' (there are some notable exceptions such as the Justice Commission of the Conference of Religious of Ireland, the Vincent de Paul Society, the Céifin Centre, and the Iona Institute).

The public sphere is one realm where this exchange can take place. But it will mean Christians leaving their comfortable surroundings of Church and academy and having to learn a new language and way of communicating the wisdom of their tradition. This communication needs to be like a 'conversation'. In the process, Christians will come to know their faith in a new way, strengthen the public sphere and contribute to a more just society.

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Remembering together in Church and Society

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