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Shaping Public Policy: Is there a place for values-led debate and discourse in the public sphere?

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Introduction

This paper argues that there ought to be a place for values-led debate and discourse in the public sphere. It uses faith communities as a focus for developing its position. The paper outlines the importance of our public lives and the values of civil society as a buffer against the encroachment of the state and the market, and it points out the contribution of faith-communities to this endeavour. In analysing faith communities it outlines the reasons for the public presence of the Christian faith tradition, an inherently public religion. It goes on to explore the issues around justifying participation by faith-communities in public debate and the legitimate role of government in this process. It outlines three approaches to public participation by a particular faith community that is in keeping with the principles established earlier in the paper and extrapolates from these some suggestions for all who participate in the public sphere.

Civil Society and Public Life

There are many meanings to the word 'public'. At a very basic level, the public refers to all the people in a society. It makes sense to say something like: 'In the eyes of the public, she did the right thing.' But it can also refer to distinct groups of people within a society who share a common interest. We can have the theatre going public, the Cosmo reading public, or the football public. This happens when people gather around shared interests, perhaps objects, other people or movements. Finally, when used as an adjective, public describes openness and accessibility. A public hospital is

there for all, a public park can be shared by everyone and a public good, such as a clean environment, is in the common interest.

Just as a public can refer to everyone, a particular interest group, or be used as an adjective, it is important to note that there are different sorts of publics. Alastair Hannay, in *On the Public*, makes this point tellingly when he asks: “Did Roman citizens form a public? Was there ever an Iraqi public? What about present day China?”¹⁰ If someone were to answer ‘yes’ to any of these questions, then we need to wonder if the use of the word public in these cases has the same meaning as when we refer to the public in Ireland today? And if not, what is the difference?

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

¹¹ The opportunity to participate in matters of common concern goes to the heart of a democratic society. A healthy public life helps political institutions to become accountable. It pre-exists political life and allows people to gather casually in a myriad of places throughout society, where they form common lives, where they reflect and feel and debate and disagree about issues of concern to them. This is essential if politics is not to be a ‘theatre of illusion,’ with the real work going on backstage. “Public life creates community which both establishes legitimate government and holds it accountable to what people want.”¹² This is in keeping with the Latin meaning of the word public – *publius*, the people. It is the realm governed by the people and the source of the republic – *Res Publica* – ‘things of the public.’

¹⁰ Alastair Hannay, *On the Public* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹² Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers : Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 23.

Public and Private

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

The word 'public' as I understand it contains a vision of our oneness, our unity, our interdependence upon one another. Despite the fact that we are strangers to one another—and will stay stranger for the most part—we occupy a common space, share common resources, have common opportunities, and must somehow learn to live together. To acknowledge that one is a member of the public is to recognize that we are members of one another.¹³

This vision must do battle with the turn to the 'private' that is so popular today. There is not a great deal of value placed on being 'members of one another.' Rather, we attempt to carve out our own space in society, one protecting us from unwanted interference from others and the state. Our self-understanding is attracted by the notions of individuality and autonomy. In the midst of strangers, complexity and ambiguity, people understandably seek refuge and security in the private realm of life. It is the place where we can 'really be ourselves.'

There is a danger if we see these two spheres in oppositional terms, the private and the public. We need both, a healthy private life and a healthy public life. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, points out one of the dangers in an overly privatised life. She warns that:

[t]o live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an 'objective' relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2 ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 58.

An appreciation of how we are all connected, hearkening back to Palmer's view of our interdependence, is essential. We need to be open to other perspectives, insights and ways of living in the world. This is not an easy thing to do – hence the attraction of a private life. Such openness can be difficult to realise, for it might challenge our own assumptions about what we value and force us to take responsibility for what we believe and how we act in a new way. If this is to be a possibility, we need a healthy private life; we need to feel safe in some place, secure and at home. Arendt also supports such a view, warning against too much time being spent in public, in the presence of others, for life will become shallow.¹⁵ She appreciates the need for places that are 'hidden' from the light of publicity if there is to be depth to our lives. But the opposite is also true; the quality of our private lives is also contingent on the quality of our public lives.

A poor public life will negatively impact on the quality of one's private life. Take the example of security. If the public areas in our neighbourhood become unsafe, then our freedom is curtailed and simple tasks like walking to the shops for the newspaper become a worry. There are a number of important aspects to a healthy public life. It is an environment for learning. It is here that "we are reminded that the foundation of life together is not the intimacy of friends but the capacity of strangers to share a common territory, common resources, and common problems — without ever becoming friends."¹⁶

Public life allows for countless opportunities to meet with the 'other.' In a study of lives committed to the common good, Laurent Daloz et al., in their book *Common Fire, Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, found that "constructive engagements with otherness was the single most critical element undergirding commitment to the common good in the lives we studied."¹⁷ Everyone in the study described at least one significant experience at some point during their formative years when they

¹⁵ Ibid., 71.

¹⁶ Palmer, 31.

¹⁷ Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl Hollman Keen, James P. Keen, Sharon Parks Daloz, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 215.

developed a strong attachment with someone previously viewed as 'other' than themselves. The authors found that where people crossed boundaries in liberating and transformative ways, they came to a deeply held conviction that *everyone counts*.¹⁸ This does not *necessarily* happen in public life but it does provide a context for it to take place. These sorts of encounters are not always pleasant or easy. It is in meeting others with whom we disagree, disapprove, or even fear a little, that real transformation can take place.

Public life also provides needed respites and refreshment. There are all sorts of places in the public that help us get through the day – shops, cafes, community centres, faith communities, hairdressers, blogs, social networking sites, bars and theatres. It operates as a centre of communication. It allows for communication between diverse individuals and groups. Finally, public life helps with the creation of cosmopolitans, places where different cultures and ethnicities mix freely, in mutual appreciation for one another. The very fact of living and moving in public life among strangers, does seem, over time to create tolerance and appreciation towards others. There are, of course, many exceptions to this, but public life allows space for human diversity to be openly expressed. And as a consequence, "one of the most critical uses of the public realm is its capacity to teach its residents about tolerance—its capacity to transform its residents into cosmopolitans."¹⁹

Civil Society

A dimension of public life that contributes towards a healthy balance between the public and private dimension of human existence together is called 'civil society'. It is composed of those 'secondary institutions' or 'mediating structures' that stand between the person and the state on the one hand and the person and the market on the other. Civil society includes families, voluntary and community organisations, religious

¹⁸ Ibid., 76.

¹⁹ Lyn H. Lofland, *The Public Realm : Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory* (Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998), 237.

institutions, NGOs and neighbourhoods.²⁰ People are embedded in a host of groups and communities at any one time. They might be members of their own families, socialise with their friends, are members of the local football club, nominal members of their church, sing with a choral society, and do some work with a local charitable organisation.

When thinking of civil society, it is important to remember that it is not a homogenous sphere of society. There is great diversity in it and this is the cause of some tension. In order to be effective at the level of social policy, the sector needs to find a balance between presenting a common set of beliefs and finding a space for the diversity of the sector. A vibrant “civil society is one that provides a space for a diverse range of voices to be heard and where different interests and opinions are respected.”²¹ But all that goes on in civil society is not positive. For example, racist communities are members of civil society and at times, require the intervention of the state. Although there is great emphasis on the importance of community and belonging in civil society, we need to pay careful attention to what sorts of communities are at work. Communities rich in social capital can be formed in opposition to issues such as immigration or social inclusion. We need to acknowledge the shadow side to civil society.

Civil society shapes identity

At a very fundamental level, the relationships, groups, associations, and communities in civil society shape the kinds of persons we are and will become. In civil society, it is not monetary exchange (the market) or the coercive use of power (the state) that creates and sustains relationships and gives them meaning. Rather it is a commitment to a common purpose characterised by qualities such as love, friendship, loyalty, faithfulness, and trust that is essential here. Civil society fosters pre-political virtues such

²⁰ Don E. Eberly, “The Quest for Civil Society,” in *Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21st Century*, ed. Don E. Eberly (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), xxv.

²¹ Siobhan Daly, “Mapping Civil Society in the Republic of Ireland,” *Community Development Journal* 43, no. 2 (2008): 74.

as civility, integrity, honesty, reliability. These sorts of values are essential to the market and the state. They both need consumers and citizens who are, among other things, trustworthy, honest, loyal, self-controlled, and fair. It is in civil society that these virtues are learned in such a way that they become 'habits of the heart.' It is ironic to think that both the market and the state rely on the sorts of qualities that are produced in civil society and at the same time, they both undermine the very conditions that make their own existence possible. Ties of trust and solidarity are essential to markets – but the market does not foster these sorts of qualities. The state relies on communities to keep it at the service of all the people but it does not foster these conditions on its own.

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

The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope. They carry a context of meaning that can allow us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with the aspirations of a larger whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to the common good.²² This is a question of "having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend, work in a manner that benefits all people."²³

²² Robert N Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 153.

²³ Sean Healy and Brigid Reynolds, "Making Choices - Choosing Futures, a Question of Paradigms," in *Making Choices - Choosing Futures: Ireland at a Crossroads* (Dublin: CORI Justice, 2008), 45.

Importance of civil society

Gordon Brown, former British Prime Minister, states:

My intuition was and still remains that modern politics has been dominated by two entities, the individual and the state. They are embodied in two institutions, namely markets and governments. The shared assumption has been that between them they hold the answer to all social problems. The right prefers the market. The left prefers the state. Both however have found themselves faced with social problems that have resisted all attempts at a solution.²⁴

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

Although Tocqueville never used the phrase 'social capital', he understood the importance of those relationships that produced it—families, religious bodies, associations of all kinds—in forming democratic values and habits, and facilitating citizen participation that could influence and moderate the power of government. Finally, Bellah et al., also remind us that along with providing a check on the function and power of the state, these mediating institutions that constitute civil society are "the only alternative we as a nation have ever had, or are likely to discover, to the dominance of business leaders."²⁵

²⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *The Politics of Hope* (London: Vintage, 2000), xiv.

²⁵ Bellah and others, 212.

The Public Sphere

Communication is essential to civil society. People need opportunities to share information, opinion, values and ideas. The public sphere is the metaphor used to refer to this dynamic. According to Jürgen Habermas, it is a “domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed [where] citizens...deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion...[to] express and publicize their views.”²⁶ It is where and how people find out what is happening in their communities and the world around them. It is the forum in which they see the news, read the papers and magazines, surf the web, blog, podcast, look at television, listen to the radio and so on. But the public sphere is not just a forum for information; it is a space for participation on issues that are of interest to people. They go to meetings, participate in online blogs, write books, articles, journals, submit letters to newspapers, talk on the radio, produce music and theatre, participate in conferences, demonstrations and protests. This sort of participation gives rise to public opinion and helps shape consensus about how to live together. The public sphere is not unlike a public notice board where private citizens can publish their views on a whole range of ideas, not just political, but economic, social, and cultural. The important dimension of all this is how debate becomes public. Circulation is an important feature of this context. “Anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo circulation.”²⁷ The public sphere ought to be characterised by conversation and a diversity of positions.²⁸ Alan McKee says “We hear a story on the news, then we talk about it with friends; we exchange ideas on email groups, down at the pub, at the hairdresser; we telephone a talkback radio station, write a letter to a magazine, stop buying a newspaper because we disagree with its political stance.”²⁹

²⁶ As quoted in Alan McKee, *The Public Sphere : An Introduction* (Cambridge ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

²⁷ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York Zone Books, 2002), 91.

²⁸ David Tracy has much that is helpful to understand about the dynamics of conversation in *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Hans Georg Gadamer, Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed., Continuum Impacts (London; New York: Continuum, 2004).

²⁹ McKee, 5.

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Charles Taylor in *Modern Social Imaginaries* points out two important features of the public sphere. It is independent of the political and it has a force of legitimacy.³⁰ In other words, it can lend credence or credibility to particular perspectives or social arrangements. It is in the public sphere that the public have somewhere to stand that is outside of the political and gives a perspective from which to reflect on society. Political society is founded on the consent of those bound to it. The government must always seek the consent of those governed. And when the public come to a common mind on important matters, through debate and critical reflection, government is obliged to listen to it. “The public sphere is, then, a locus in which rational views are elaborated that should guide government.”³¹ But the public sphere is more than an instrument to guide government. It is, at its best, a humanising place,³² where relationships are built across differences, where perspectives are enlarged, and questions about what it means to live a good life are explored and behaviour changed accordingly. The public sphere is a place of contestation.³³

Habermas believes that there were two essential characteristics to the public sphere. It depends upon both quality of discourse and quality of participation. These are foundational to the public sphere.

A strong public life is essential for the overall cohesion of society and well-being of the person-in-community. Civil society plays a critical role in finding the right balance between the public and private dimensions of our lives. It is the place in society—outside of the state and the market—where civic virtues are taught and interests are acted upon in organized and meaningful ways. Participation in the public sphere itself is essential

³⁰ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Public Planet Books (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 87.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

³² This does not mean that it is always pleasant or enjoyable, but it can build community, consensus, and enlarge our sense of ‘we’ and improve our sense of ‘I’ at the same time, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

³³ This is a phrase used by Jose Casanova to refer to the public as the place in which ideas are contested with one another, see José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

if members of the public are not to become passive in the face of the state and simply consumers in response to the market. It is in the public sphere that ideas are generated, contested, accepted or rejected, and these in turn shape identity, understanding, and action.

Religion and Society

There is much discussion about the appropriate place of religious traditions in the public sphere. In the next sections of this chapter, I will explore the relationship between religion and society, its contribution to civil society, the internal logic for the public presence of the Catholic Christian community in the public sphere and three forms this 'public' presence can take.

The relationship between religion and society can be characterised by two very different points of view.³⁴ The first can be called the 'inclusive' position. It holds that Jerusalem does have something to say to Athens and that it is appropriate for people of faith to bring the social significance of their religious traditions to bear on public issues.

The other view, sometimes referred to as the exclusive position, suggests that religion and religious beliefs are best kept at home or within the church. People who hold this view are conscious of the pluralistic nature of societies today. Since there are many different religious beliefs present in society, they fear that the public involvement of religion will inevitably lead to a loss of freedom for some or the imposition of an agenda that is religiously based, thus compromising the neutrality of the state. Behind these fears is the assumption that religion in public inevitably leads to conflict and division.³⁵ Our history testifies well to such concerns.

³⁴ See Kent Greenawalt, "Religion and American Political Judgments," *Wake Forest Law Review* 36, no. 219 (2001).

³⁵ For more about people's fears concerning the negative dimension of religion in public see Kristin E. Heyer, *Prophetic & Public : The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), Chapter 1; Martin E. Marty and Jonathan Moore, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good : Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation About Religion's Role in Our Shared Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 23-41.

The two ways of framing the relationship between religion and society just outlined need more nuance. Religion is not simply a set of convictions that one can bring to bear on issues of public significance. “It is a considerably more dynamic and multidimensional reality than the term ‘convictions’ might suggest.”³⁶ It is part of the identity of the person and community. It is one of the ‘ways’ that people make sense of the world in which they live. It shapes how some people see, feel, understand, judge, and act in society. Therefore, it is not so easy to deliberately bring religion into the public sphere (in many ways it is already ‘with’ people from a religious background, whether they know it or not). This is equally true when one is expected to leave religious beliefs behind in one’s private lives (which aspect gets left behind, and how much of one’s identity is to be excluded from the public sphere, how does one separate religious convictions from one’s values?). The resolution to such issues will depend on the prevailing cultural assumptions about what is the most appropriate place for religious expression and these vary from place to place.

Contribution of Religion to Society

Much of the discussion about religion and society concerns the influence of religion on the working of government and policy issues. This is a very narrow focus and one that misses much of how this relationship actually takes place. David Hollenbach reframes this conversation in a very helpful way. He goes beyond the direct impact of religion on policy choices and explores the more indirect and subtle ways that religion influences politics and society at large. He emphasises the importance of intermediary associations in realising human dignity and the value of civil society as a counter weight to the market on the one hand and the state on the other. “Society is composed of a rich and overlapping set of human communities such as families, neighbourhoods, churches, labour unions, corporations, professional associations, credit unions, co-operatives, universities, and a host of other associations.”³⁷ These overlapping communities, their identity and values, give rise to particular political environments. And it is here, in and among these different communities, that religion has its greatest influence.

³⁶ David Hollenbach, “Contexts of the Political Role of Religion: Civil Society and Culture,” *San Diego Law Review* 30, no. 4 (1993): 878.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 884.

Churches make a significant contribution to the qualities of civil society. The fact of religious freedom—something that is essential in the development of democracies—draws attention to the importance of this right for other diverse groups to organize and participate in society.

The right to religious freedom allows religious traditions to be resources to democratic states through their teaching of compassion, love of neighbour, their myths and stories, imagination and source of civic skills.³⁸ Martin Marty fleshes out the contribution of religion, at its best, to society. He says that one of the positive elements of religious discourse in public is that it reveals the hidden motivations and assumptions of one's conversation partners. "A republic would be better off if everyone brought into the open whatever motivates and impels the citizens to decide and to act."³⁹ Marty outlines many other contributions of religion to society. He points out how religion can help bring perspective and point to the limits of politics; it can help combat apathy; its communities are practiced and durable; it contributes to conversations about the common good, and can draw on overlooked resources such as community, tradition, memory, intuition, affection and hope; religion provides a voice for the voiceless; encourages dealing positively with the other; provides stamina for dealing with crisis and offers chances for renewal.⁴⁰ Habermas recognises this contribution of religion to society and suggests that the liberal state

has an interest in unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere, and in the political participation of religious organisations as well. It must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves politically as such, for it cannot know whether secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid.: 888.

³⁹ Marty and Moore, 47.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 2 in Marty and Moore.

⁴¹ Jürgen Habermas, "Religion and the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 10.

Another way to look at the contribution of religion to society is to recognize the social capital it generates. According to sociologist John A. Coleman, religion generates “an inordinate amount” of social capital.⁴² Active citizenship relies on social capital. People who are connected to others in bonds that are characterised by trust and reciprocity are more likely to vote and engage in volunteer activity. And if they belong to churches, they are significantly more likely to vote and give money to others.⁴³ In their sociological survey, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Sidney Verba, et al., found participation in churches sows seeds of political activism and facilitates political participation in the United States.⁴⁴ This is because churches offer three key resources that increase the likelihood of political and civic participation in society. First, people learn transferable skills, such as public speaking, setting and running a meeting, writing a memo and raising money. These are the sorts of things that make the transition to wider participation much easier. Second, the churches provide dense networks of relationships among a wide variety of organisations; this makes it all the more likely that someone will be ‘asked’ to become involved in something more. And finally, churches give people a sense of their own power and ability to make a difference.⁴⁵ *Voice and Equality* provides evidence of the importance of churches to civil society and democracy. Coleman sums it up by saying that “The churches make our society more participatory, more egalitarian and more communitarian than it would be without them.”⁴⁶

⁴² John A Coleman, “Compassion, Solidarity and Empowerment: The Ethical Contribution of Religion to Society,” *Journal of Religion in the Social Services* 19, no. 2 (1999): 12.

⁴³ Ibid.: 13.

⁴⁴ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 9.

⁴⁵ See Coleman: 13-14.

⁴⁶ Ibid.: 14.

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

religiously engaged people are more likely than religiously disengaged people to be involved in civic groups of all sorts, to vote, to be active in community affairs, to give blood, to trust other people (from shopkeepers to neighbours), to know the names of public officials, to socialise with friends and neighbours, and even simply to have a wider circle of friends.⁴⁷

Finally, the public role of Christianity and the Catholic Church in particular, has been noted for their contribution to building up democracy throughout the world since Vatican II. Samuel Huntington illustrates how more than thirty countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America moved from authoritarianism to democracy between 1974 and 1989. He points out that most of the population in them is Catholic and that their culture has been shaped by Catholicism in significant ways.⁴⁸

It can be difficult to recognise this contribution when we are living with the knowledge of the unspeakable harm done to children in the care of the Catholic Church. The subsequent mismanagement and cover up by Church authorities compound this shocking and abominable practice. So much so, that there are many who cannot contemplate any sort of contribution to the public good by the Catholic Church.

That said, we must remember that the Church is made up of millions of good people and religious organisation, who in their day to day activities, generate much needed social capital and teach necessary civic skills that are required by functioning democracies. They shape and influence the

⁴⁷ John F. Kennedy School of Government, "Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey" <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/index.html> (accessed 30 October 2007).

⁴⁸ As found in David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics 22 (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 98.

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culture of a society in thousands of ways. Religious values and arguments that take place in the public sphere, that shape the imagination and vision of communities and persons, also filter up into the working of government by a process of osmosis. There is a symbiotic relationship between what happens in the background culture of a society and the apparatus of the state. But what is the theological warrant for such an engagement of religion and society? Why doesn't the Catholic Church simply look after its members and leave the public sphere to others?

Social Mission of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Christian tradition is inherently public. There is no choice for its members but to allow its vision, beliefs and convictions into the public sphere. There is no separation between love of God and love of neighbour. They are the two sides of the same coin. Catholic Christians are called to show love to their neighbours through the practice of justice and compassion, most especially to their neighbours who are poor, vulnerable and excluded. This social mission goes to the heart of the very identity of the Catholic Church.

At Vatican II, a dualistic view of the world and the confinement of religion to the private domain of one's life is described by *Gaudium et Spes* as one of the "more serious errors of our age."⁴⁹ One of the ways to avoid such an error is to re-examine the relationship between the religious and social mission of the church. These two dimensions do not exist independently of one another – rather, they are constitutive and indispensable to one another. It is not possible to find something 'essential' in each so that a clear distinction can be made between them. Rather, we need to allow for a complex intersection between them – one that is in constant motion and creative tension. Theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza offers a helpful analogy. If we are asked to define what it means to be human, we

⁴⁹ Vatican II, "Gaudium Et Spes," in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), #43.

might say that our rationality is what makes us different from animals. But that answer would not be sufficient on its own. We would need to add something about our emotions and the fact that we are embodied. In this way, we inevitably show how there is some overlap between what it means to be human and what it means to be animal. The same is true for the social mission of the church. The religious dimension does not stand alone; it criss-crosses with economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions of life. Attempts at exclusive descriptions inevitably lead to distortions. Fiorenza suggests that the “religious and social mission of the church relate to each other not in a singular or essential manner but with overlapping and crisscrossing characteristics.”⁵⁰ They are dialectical, in that the religious and social constantly *affirm*, *question*, and *enhance* each other. The religious mission criss-crosses with the humanisation of the world in which we live. This is not only a social task but rather is also “a sacred task for a vision of the world and humanity, as created and redeemed by God in an eschatological hope and promise.”⁵¹

*Gaudium et Spes*⁵²

Prior to the Vatican II there was a great deal of work being done by theologians to overcome a theology separated from ordinary life and share with the world “an intellectually rich and spiritually powerful Christian vision.”⁵³ This new effort in theology sought to overcome the dualistic eschatological vision of life that had come to characterise the practice of

⁵⁰ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Social Mission of Church,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵² *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, a key document of Vatican II known as *Gaudium et Spes* (from the opening lines of the document, meaning, joy and hope).

⁵³ J. Bryan Hehir, “The Church in the World : Responding to the Call of the Council,” in *Faith and the Intellectual Life: Marianist Award Lectures*, ed. James L. Heft (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 107.

faith. It wanted to move the church from being ‘over against’ the world, to a place where it was in conversation with social movements, both learning from society and teaching out of its own tradition and wisdom. This was an enormous shift; for so long Catholicism had defined itself over and against three movements: the Protestant Reformation, the Democratic Revolution, and the Enlightenment.⁵⁴ Now the church was placing itself ‘in’ the world, not over and against it but in it. “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men (sic) of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”⁵⁵

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the church starts with examining the ‘signs of the times,’ i.e. to the world. This listening is done in light of a particular biblical anthropology (view of the human person), eschatology (end times), ecclesiology (nature of the church) and Christology (understandings of Jesus Christ and his mission to the world).⁵⁶ This shift in the church’s relationship to the world has been described as being from a juridical conception of the church’s role to an anthropological one.⁵⁷ This is one of the central theological shifts that places the social mission at the heart of the church. Significantly, the person is now seen as the place of intersection between the church and the world. *Gaudium et Spes* says “The role and competence of the Church being what it is, she must in no way be confused with the political community, nor bound to any political system. For she is at once a sign and safeguard of the transcendence of the human person.”⁵⁸ This text captures the essence of how *Gaudium et Spes* understands the relationship of the church to the world. It takes the central theme of social teaching – the protection of human dignity – and gives it ecclesial standing.⁵⁹ Bryan Hehir puts it this way: “The reason why the

⁵⁴ J. Bryan Hehir, “The Social Role of the Church: Leo XIII, Vatican II and John Paul II,” in *Catholic Social Thought and the New World Order*, ed. Oliver F and John W. Houck Williams (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 37.

⁵⁵ Vatican II, #1.

⁵⁶ David Hollenbach, “Gaudium Et Spes,” in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 273.

⁵⁷ Hehir, “The Church in the World : Responding to the Call of the Council,” 113.

⁵⁸ Vatican II, #76.

⁵⁹ Hehir, “The Social Role of the Church: Leo XIII, Vatican II and John Paul II,” 37.

church enters public or social ministry is to protect the transcendent dignity of the human person.”⁶⁰ The decisive shift of this text was to locate the defence of the human person at the centre of Catholic ecclesiology and this moved the social ministry from the margins of the church to its centre.

Gaudium et Spes outlines four principles concerning the relationship of the Catholic Church to the world:

1. the ministry of the church is religious in nature and it has no political charism or ambition;
2. the religious mission is to seek the reign of God, this is its purpose and the church serves this aim;
3. the religious mission touches all parts of life; there is no part removed from God's reigning power;
4. finally, there are economic (resources), political (power), social (relationships) and cultural (meaning) consequences to the gospel – the church seeks to fulfil its religious mission by asking its members to uphold human dignity, promote human rights, contribute to the unity of the human family and help people make meaning in their lives.⁶¹

*Dignitatis Humanae*⁶²

The social mission is realisable because of the recasting of the church–state relationship that took place in *Dignitatis Humanae*, Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom*. Since the seventeenth century, the

⁶⁰ J. Bryan Hehir, “Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications,” *Catholic Theological Society of America* 41 (1986): 57.

⁶¹ See Ibid; Hehir, “The Social Role of the Church: Leo XIII, Vatican II and John Paul II.”; Hehir, “The Church in the World : Responding to the Call of the Council.”; Hollenbach, “Gaudium Et Spes.”

⁶² *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, another key document from Vatican II. *Dignitatis Humane* comes from the first line of the document, meaning Dignity of the Human Person.

Catholic Church believed it should be accorded special status in society by the state and that the coercive power of the state should be used to promote Catholic faith. However, *Dignitatis Humanae* replaced this belief with three principles. The first accepted the reality of religious pluralism in society and that religious freedom is a human right and should be protected by civil law. The second accepts the secular nature of the state – that it is not divinely constituted nor so ordered – rather, it has its own constitution and is limited by the law on the use of force. The third concerns the freedom of the church to be itself, without particular favour from the state.⁶³ This last principle creates a challenge for the church, in that, without any favouritism from the state, it is only as good as its witness. Sociologist José Casanova sees in this differentiation of the church from the state an opportunity for the church to “come fully into its own, specialising in ‘its own religious’ function and either dropping or losing many other ‘nonreligious’ functions it had accumulated and could no longer meet efficiently.”⁶⁴

Dignitatis Humanae has helped depoliticise the church-state relationship and *Gaudium et Spes* is responsible for putting the social mission of the church at the centre of its identity. Taken together, their legacy has been, as Hehir puts it, “to plunge the church more deeply into the political arena precisely because the protection of human dignity and the promotion of human rights in fact happen in a political context.”⁶⁵ Although this can sound very unreligious and very political, we must remember the context. The church is focused on improving the dignity of the person, building up solidarity among the human community, and with caring for creation. It has this purpose because by its nature it is to “continue to make present in history God’s salvation in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁶

⁶³ See Hehir, “Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications,” 1-2.

⁶⁴ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 21.

⁶⁵ Hehir, “Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications,” 58.

⁶⁶ Fiorenza, 156.

Implications of Vatican II

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

The work the Council did on articulating theological principles that brought the social mission of the church to the centre of its identity was solidified in the 1971 and 1975 synodal documents, *Justitia in Mundo* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. In the now famous statement of the bishops in 1971, there is no doubt about the centrality of the social mission, "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."⁶⁷ However one understands the use of the word 'constitutive',⁶⁸ there is no doubt that its use places the social mission at the heart of the identity and purpose of the church in and to the world. The concern for justice must be a part of all the dimensions of Christian life, and every aspect of the Church's ministries should help promote social justice and the dignity of the person in community.

⁶⁷ Synod of Bishops, "Justitia in Mundo," in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), #6.

⁶⁸ Kenneth Himes, O.F.M. asks if the bishops were "putting the work of justice on a par with the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments as being definitive of the Church? Or were the bishops simply making the point that working for justice is not merely an ethical implication of discipleship but something at the very heart of Christian life?" see Kenneth R. Himes O.F.M., "Commentary on Justitia in Mundo (Justice in the World)," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes O.F.M. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 341.

Shaping Public Policy:

Is there a place for values-led debate and discourse in the public sphere?

The duty to work for social liberation is central to Christian evangelisation. However, there are dangers if there is too much emphasis on liberation, with only a horizontal view of the world. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* warns against the reduction of the Good News, the politicisation of the Christian message, the over identification of religion with the struggle for liberation, and a danger of forgetting about the importance of attitudinal change.⁶⁹ These are helpful provisos in finding the right balance in the overlapping and crisscrossing characteristics that make up the church's social mission.

It is one thing in principle to articulate the reasons for the Catholic Christian Church's involvement in the world, it is another to see how it is and ought to be done in practice. We will now explore some of the challenges and tensions facing the Church and faith communities in participating in the public sphere and working for social change in liberal democratic systems.

Faith-communities: being public

In a secular state, religion becomes invisible at the political level, even when still prevalent at the personal level. Secular governments and politicians do not invoke scriptures or religious authorities to defend their policies. Instead they speak to principles and concerns that all the population can share irrespective of their beliefs or non-belief.⁷⁰

The legitimacy of a law, which the whole of society must adhere to, rests on the understanding and agreement of all. Only secular reasons can achieve this end. The explanation and justification of a law must be readily accessible to everyone in the society, religious and secular alike. One of the fears that drives some secular liberals to exclude faith-communities and religious discourse from the public sphere is the prospect that a law

⁶⁹ Pope Paul VI, "Evangelii Nuntiandi," in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), #32, #33, #35, #36.

⁷⁰ Julian Baggini, "The Rise, Fall and Rise Again of Secularism," *Public Policy Research* 12, no. 4 (2006): 204-212.

or policy imposed on all, will emerge and be justified by a belief from a particular religious tradition. This has happened in the past in this society and some are afraid that it might happen again, despite the advance of Modernity and separation of church and state. Consequently, an emerging assumption is that it is best to confine faith-communities and religious discourse to the realm of the personal and private dimensions of life. This will minimise conflict in the public sphere, prevent against the possibility of religious privilege and bullying inappropriately impinging on the state, and ensure a level playing field for all, regardless of creed.

For instance, Minister of Environment, John Gormley, might share some of this concern, when he said, in response to the Catholic Church's public participation in the Civil Partnership debate:

Well, first of all I must say I was taken aback when I heard the news this morning. I thought we had left the era of Church interference behind us and I'm speaking as someone who recognises that the Church has made a contribution to this country but really it should concentrate its efforts on looking after the spiritual needs of its flock and not intrude into temporal or state matters.⁷¹

When Minister Gormley refers to the Church here – it seems he is referring to the Bishops of the Catholic Church, the Church hierarchy. I wonder if he would say the same for Social Justice Ireland, Trocaire, or the St Vincent de Paul Society? They are also motivated by the Christian tradition and attempt to shape public policy from a Christian values perspective.

For instance, *Social Justice Ireland*, previously *Cori Justice*, have sought to bring the Christian tradition, particularly its understanding of justice, to bear on the quality of life in our society and world, particularly for those on the margins. They believe that public debate needs to include exploration of values – the ones stated and the ones operative. They say,

⁷¹ John Gormley, News at One, RTE, 17th June, 2010.

Our fears are easier to admit than our values. Do we as a people accept a two-tier society in fact, while deriding it in principle? This dualism in our values allows us to continue with the status quo, which, in reality, means that it is okay to exclude almost one sixth of the population from the mainstream of life of our society, while substantial resources and opportunities are channelled towards other groups in society.⁷²

Such a juxtaposing of reality and stated values can be found just as jarring when applied to the Catholic community as when applied to the wider society in Ireland today. However, the point remains. The introduction of values into public debate is much needed.

Social Justice Ireland believes that “engaging in activity to influence public policy and to generate structural change is answering the call to transform society which is a constitutive dimension of the Gospel.”⁷³ Over the past twenty years they have sought to translate Christian values into a language that is persuasive and reasonable to the public at large. They have done this through the use of accurate social analysis, credible alternatives and effective pathways from the present to the future. This combination is core to their work. It recognises the importance of speaking in “a language appropriate to the particular audience whether religious, secular, academic, policy maker or general public.”⁷⁴ When speaking to government, they speak the language of social policy, when speaking to economists, they speak in an economic language, and when speaking to church, they speak in a language of faith. This is one of their great strengths – they ‘communicate according to the mode of the receiver.’ They are multilingual, non-sectarian and expect no special favour from

⁷² Sean Healy and Brigid Reynolds, *Planning for Progress and Fairness, Policies to Ensure Economic Development, Social Equity and Sustainability*, Socio-Economic Review 2008 (Dublin: Cori Justice, 2008), 215.

⁷³ Sean Healy S.M.A. and Brigid Reynolds S.M., “Spirituality” <http://www.cori.ie/Justice/Spirituality/45-Spirituality/120-Spirituality> (accessed 1st February 2008).

⁷⁴ Social Justice Ireland, “About Us” <http://www.socialjustice.ie/content/about-us> (accessed 30th July 2010).

the state. The quality of their argument, their ability to work in partnership, openness about their motivation, and willingness to change when the evidence suggests it, all contribute to their effective participation in the public sphere. “We believe a public debate is urgently needed around the issues of progress, paradigms and policy, around the future that is to be built and the choices that need to be made now if the world is to move towards that future.”⁷⁵ Clearly, such a debate is much needed today.

Public justification for policy or laws

A core principle—that needs to be appreciated by all who participate in the public sphere—is that executive and legislative decisions need to be at the service of the public good – this is the purpose of the state. Such decisions must be justified in a language that is available to everyone – regardless of whether they actually agree with the particular measure or not. It would be wholly inappropriate for an organ of the state to justify a new piece of legislation or social policy with recourse to a particular faith tradition, or simply because the St Vincent de Paul Society sought it. The use of Christian Scriptures to justify new levels of social welfare payments, on behalf of the Department of Social Protection would be inappropriate in our democracy. It would not be acceptable if the Irish Government were to justify a new law concerning environmental protection through reference to recommendations from the World Council of Churches. Those sources are neither available nor intelligible to all and so are inappropriate for use by the state. The reasons given would be more like confessions of faith rather than reasons that every citizen could find intelligible and the possible basis for law. If the justifications for law and policy appear to the public as unintelligible and impositions from particular religious traditions, the legitimacy of the law will be undermined and the political order will rightly be called into question. The nature of the reasons given to justify law and policy, on behalf of the state, is the key issue here. Habermas puts it this way: “In a secular state only those

⁷⁵ Healy and Reynolds, “Making Choices - Choosing Futures, a Question of Paradigms,” 60.

political decisions are taken to be legitimate as can be impartially justified in the light of generally accessible reasons, in other words, equally justified vis-à-vis religious and non-religious citizens and citizens of different confessions.⁷⁶ Churches and faith-communities who participate in the public sphere must remember this and act as if they know it.

Appropriate level of involvement in public debate for faith-communities

While this principal has widespread acceptance in any functioning democracy, the appropriate level of involvement of faith-communities and religious discourse in wider society is more contested and complex. Ought faith communities to have a view on social and economic issues? If so, should they confine their voices to their own membership or is it legitimate for them to engage in public and political debate about these issues? And if debate is legitimate, what sort of language is appropriate? Can they use religious language or must it be a form of language that includes everyone, a form of public reasoning? These are important questions and suggest a place for faith-communities and religious discourse somewhere between the sacristy and the state. Some of these questions have been addressed earlier in this chapter. However, the issue of language is an important one.

There is a danger with too much care and attention being given to ensuring that the justification for policies and laws is equally accessible to all. While this is an essential dimension to our democracy, we ought not to let this principle stifle debate at the deliberative dimension of policy and law making. Perhaps there is room in this dimension for people to disclose some of their motivations for caring about particular issues – what values are behind the protection of human dignity and the environment? Some will draw strength from beliefs embedded in secular sources – others, from religious tradition(s). While there are opponents to

⁷⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “Religion and the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 5.

such an exercise, AC Grayling, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, there are also emerging proponents, even ones that have shifted their position on this issue. Jürgen Habermas changed his position, believing now that there is wisdom in religious traditions that modern democratic societies could benefit from. He believes that there is a place for religious voices and traditions in the public sphere. Another voice is that of atheist and secularist Julian Baggini. He says that:

Traditional secularism...has to go. In its place must be a public domain in which religion is allowed back in. The idea is not to create conflicts of belief but to allow disagreements to be resolved openly, without people feeling the need to deny differences in the fundamental convictions that shape their views. The secret of harmonious society in which different religious and non-religious beliefs are held is not for everyone to remain silent on the things that divide us, but discuss differences openly in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding.⁷⁷

It is important that we try to allow disagreements to be resolved openly rather than on remaining silent on what divides us. In Ireland, there are new worldviews, values and principles at work in our communities and society. These need to be talked about, explored and open to public scrutiny. While there are all sorts of disagreements about what is truth, the nature of the human person, role of the state, human rights and responsibilities, we still must share this island together, we must learn, in the midst of differences, to live together. "Uncovering the underpinning values and having them discussed, scrutinised and evaluated is crucial if there is to be any agreement or consensus on what constitutes real progress."⁷⁸ How are we to deal with competing worldviews, to show respect to one another and reach consensus where possible? I suggest that excluding the participation of faith communities and the voice of religious language, while making for a less conflictual public sphere, is not the way to move forward. Rather, if those who participated in the public sphere

⁷⁷ Julian Baggini, "The Rise, Fall, and Rise Again of Secularism," *Public Policy Review* 12, no. 4 (2006): 210.

⁷⁸ Healy and Reynolds, "Making Choices - Choosing Futures, a Question of Paradigms," 41.

were encouraged to disclose the values behind their views, then the quality of participation and debate might improve.

In this approach, in the realm of the public sphere, there ought to be room for people or groups to bring their faith traditions into conversation with particular issues in a more overt manner. What is the advantage of such an approach? Firstly, it provides important opportunities for religious groups to participate in the public forum, partly because it allows for the use of religious language. This helps minimise sectarianism and promotes a tolerant public sphere. It also allows for the possibility of new voices, insights, challenges to the status quo. The inclusion of, for instance, the Evangelical, Catholic, Muslim and Hindu voices in the Irish public sphere allows it to represent in reality the members of society, reflecting the plurality of our country.

Appropriate use of language

The issue of language is a complex one. The challenges arising from the use of religious language will depend on a variety of circumstances. Much will depend on the context, the intentions of the speaker or group, what it is that the audience hears and/or experiences and how the participants relate what they hear to their own world view. For instance, if a member of a faith community were appearing on Frontline with Pat Kenny, to talk about care for the homeless, they need to think about their audience and the appropriate use of language in that context. Are they trying to raise consciousness about the plight of the excluded, push for a piece of legislation, call the government to account on a particular issue, and/or explain why it is that Islam requires Muslims to reach out to those who are homeless. The nature of the audience, coupled with the speaker's own intention should be instructive on what sort of language to use. Would it be helpful to quote from the Koran and tell the audience about the five pillars of faith? There is little use in speaking in a manner that might resonate with one's constituency but is misunderstood by one's immediate audience. In such circumstances, along with political debates, confessional self-restraint will be the norm. Jonathan Chaplain points out that:

“harnessing faith-based reasoning to the task of discerning the public good will already discourage a great deal of possibly inappropriate faith-based language.”⁷⁹

Strategy of Avoidance

Those who favour the use of liberal public reason and the confinement of faith-communities and religious discourse to the personal and private spheres of life, sometimes do so out of a sense of respect for others. They believe that the bringing of values rooted in religious and moral traditions into public discussion in a pluralistic society will only lead to conflict and disagreement, and the respectful thing to do is to avoid what will fracture and harm relationships. Accordingly, politics, policy and the law ought not to be mixed up with religious and moral arguments. This is a legitimate concern. However, this concern, motivated out of respect, often just leads to avoidance. It is an avoidance of the deeper moral and value issues behind policy and legislation. For the idea of a neutral state is really just a chimera. It is a fiction. Behind laws and underneath policy there are implicit views, often unarticulated, about the good life – what it means to live well. If these deeper questions are removed from public debate, there is a loss to our discourse. The evacuation of the public debate of the values dimension can also lead to resentment and a backlash from excluded communities and voices. Respect in this instance can also mean leaving the moral intuitions of our interlocutors undisturbed and unexplored. But is this really respectful? I suggest not. Avoidance is not respectful, even if done for the best of reasons. Michael Sandel suggests that:

A more robust public engagement with our moral disagreements could provide a stronger, not a weaker, basis for mutual respect. Rather than avoid the moral and religious convictions that our fellow citizens bring to public life, we should attend to them more directly—sometimes by

⁷⁹ Jonathan Chaplin, *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning* (London: Theos, 2008), 65.

challenging and contesting them, sometimes by listening to and learning from them...A politics of moral engagement is not only a more inspiring ideal than a politics of avoidance. It is also a more promising basis for a just society.⁸⁰

Candour in representation, restraint in decision⁸¹

‘Candour in representation, restraint in decision’ might be a useful phrase to remember regarding the appropriate limits of participation and debate in the public sphere. My proposal is that citizens ought to be allowed to bring their faith convictions into the public sphere, engage in political debate and if they wish, use religious language. However, it must be remembered that statements that simply “assert the truth of a faith-based viewpoint without going on to unpack the public good reasons flowing from them, or without acknowledging the presence of other sincerely-held perspectives, will generally not be persuasive.”⁸² Stating religious beliefs on their own rarely persuades – if faith-communities want to influence public policy and the law, they need to give good public reasons for the validity of the views they hold. While it is appropriate for faith-communities to offer religious reasons for their policy proposals in civil society and deliberative forums of the state, it is not so for the state when justifying its own reasons for the adoption of policy or law. We do not expect our government to quote from the Koran or our judges to base a judgement on the sacred texts of Hindus.

While I suggest there ought to be a place for faith communities in the public sphere, who speak of values rooted in particular religious traditions – there ought also to be room for people who articulate other points of view to uncover their own values, the roots of their views and insight. What are the narratives and myths that give rise to particular positions

⁸⁰ Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 268-269.

⁸¹ Chaplin, 58ff.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 61.

being taken on issues in our communities? What is it that informs our own viewpoints? The advantage of such an approach is that it would lead to an improvement in the public sphere itself, in the forum – that it is not only concerned about particular issues of policy but about relationships and community – understanding and appreciating one's conversation partners. Such an approach might also help the participants not to adopt an immediate reflexive position to an issue. Rather, they might be invited to pause and wonder what it is about the present situation that challenges one's own worldview. Is there truth in the viewpoint of the other? Can I give it its best interpretation? Or am I just waiting for them to slip up or make the usual points before I pounce on them, making my own usual points – where is the learning, the relating, the fostering of the public sphere itself? Daly and Cobb put it this way:

One of the central limitations of academic disciplines in contributing to wisdom is their professed aim of value neutrality. That there is here a large element of self-deception has been pointed out frequently and convincingly. The ideal of value neutrality is itself a value that is generally highly favourable to the status quo. More objectivity is in fact obtained by bringing values out into the open and discussing them than by denying their formative presence in the disciplines... as long as the disciplines discourage any interest in values on the part of their practitioners, they inevitably discourage the ordering of study of the solution to human problems.⁸³

While the exploration of values and conversation is important, there comes a point when representative deliberation comes to an end and an executive or legislative decision is taken on behalf of the state. When this happens, the state needs to justify its decision through the use of reasons that affirm the public good. These reasons need to be understood and accessible to all citizens. It might be difficult to find exactly where this line is drawn, and there will be differences of opinion about that, but the fact remains, there is a limit to the use of religious language and the influence of faith-communities in our society. There comes a point where one must show restraint and trust in the executive and legislative dimensions of our society.

⁸³ Herman Daly and John Cobb, *For the Common Good* (London: Merlin Press, 1990), 131.

In the next section, I outline three modes of participating in the public sphere by faith-communities in Ireland today.

Faith-communities in the public sphere – 3 approaches

Cardinal Bernardin wrote that the ‘how’ or the ‘style’ of the church’s engagement in public life is crucial to the outcome.⁸⁴ I believe it is possible to see three different ‘styles’ at work today in Ireland. One places great emphasis on persuasion and dialogue, one believes in taking a more prophetic stance and another, which is difficult to categorize, places much of its effort in shaping the law of the church and the law of the land.⁸⁵ Before I describe these, it is useful to remember that there is quite a bit of overlap between them. At their best, they can complement one another. Also, depending on the context, one ‘style’ might be more appropriate than another.

A conversational approach

The first approach, drawn from Vatican II, emphasises that the church be in dialogue with the world.⁸⁶ This is a two way relationship, where the church has something to learn from the world and something to offer the world. The reciprocal nature of the relationship is fostered by “the clear recognition of the intrinsic value and validity of secular institutions and secular disciplines.”⁸⁷ This view allows the church to engage in authentic

⁸⁴ Joseph Bernardin, “The Public Life and Witness of the Church,” *America* (1996): 18.

⁸⁵ To apply more classic types to these categories, the first category described by Niebuhr as Christ the Transformer of Culture, the second could also fit here or could be described, along with the third category as Christ against Culture, see Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*; also the first category could be described as ‘church’ and the second and third one as ‘sect’, see Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 Vols (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960).

⁸⁶ See especially *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae* in David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought : The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).

⁸⁷ Hehir, “The Church in the World : Responding to the Call of the Council,” 112.

conversation – for without an openness to learning something from others, there can be no real dialogue. The organisations, communities and people who find a home in this category value persuasion as a means of communicating Gospel values. They seek to communicate the wisdom of tradition in a credible and engaging way – appealing to the intellect, desires, and innate sense of goodness and justice in people. This style, which is respectful of the variety of ways that people of goodwill interpret their faith, is committed to the process of transformation that takes place incrementally over long periods of time. It does not see itself as having definitive answers to give to the world. Rather it is more of a “catalyst moving the public argument to grapple with questions of moral values, ethical principles and the human and religious meaning of policy choices.”⁸⁸ In this way, it can help shape public opinion, values, and influence the culture. This influence on culture is the approach favoured by David Hollenbach.⁸⁹ He says, “Far better and more likely to succeed would be a church strategy of persuasion that operates on the cultural rather than the legal level.”⁹⁰ Such an approach requires patience, courage, wisdom and humility.⁹¹

To such an approach, there are some necessary cautions. There is the danger that involvement with the public will lead to accommodation and co-option with the values of the world, thereby diluting the imperatives of the Christian message. Persuasion can take time and this is something that many people who suffer injustice and exclusion do not have; they need help immediately. And so, there is also a need for something more immediate, and at times, confrontational.

⁸⁸ Hehir, “Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications,” 64.

⁸⁹ David Hollenbach, “Catholicism and American Political Culture: Confrontation, Accommodation, or Transformation,” in *Inculturation and the Church in North America*, ed. T. Frank Kennedy S.J. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹¹ For further reading on the ‘how’ of theology in the public sphere see Dan O’Connell, “Religious Education and the Public Sphere,” *The Furrow* 57, no. 7/8 (2006).

A prophetic approach

This leads to the second approach, which can be broadly categorized as prophetic. It seeks to persuade by witness and being uncompromising in its demands for social justice. This approach has deep roots in both the Christian and Hebrew scriptures. According to Abraham Heschel, “the prophet was someone who said No to his (sic) society, condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacency, waywardness, and syncretism.”⁹² The prophets were steeped in the justice of Yahweh and as a consequence were acutely aware of the presence of injustice and oppression within society. This awareness was nearly unbearable for them. They felt the pain of those excluded, the anger and compassion of Yahweh, and lived in the fissure between the prevailing culture of oppression and Yahweh’s desire for justice. According to Walter Brueggemann, the task of the prophet is to “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the dominant community around us.”⁹³ This consciousness is to accomplish two things. Firstly, it is to use criticism in dismantling the dominant consciousness and secondly, it is to energize people through a vision of what is possible here and now. Those who are poor and powerless are at the heart of such an approach. It lifts up their lives, juxtaposing how things are for them and how things are for the rest of us. It seeks to transform the dominant consciousness that sustains inequality and social exclusion, often in jarring and confrontational ways.

A critique of this approach concerns its danger of politicizing the Gospel by getting too involved in politics and the work for social justice. At times, it can lose connection with its own religious traditions. Such an approach can be polarising; you are either with us or against us – there is no middle ground. It often deals in broad strokes about issues of social justice and “[D]istinction, qualifications, and contending opinions are not the prophet’s stock in trade.”⁹⁴ This tendency can lead to work on single issues,

⁹² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial, 2001), xxix.

⁹³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

⁹⁴ J. Bryan Hehir, “Can the Church Convincingly Engage American Culture,” *Church* (2004): 7.

which perpetuate single issue politics, fragmenting further the political process, and distorting the particular religious tradition one belongs to – making it equivalent to the issue at hand.

A juridical approach

The third approach can be seen at work in debates concerning such issues as abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, cloning, gay marriage and adoption of children by gay parents. It is characterised by an oppositional stance on these issues. Within this category, there is a desire and a drive for clear and radical Gospel teaching. Its proponents will argue that their stance is to protect the vulnerable or promote some public good. It is reminiscent of the 'Christ against Culture' category as outlined by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*. Those who favour this approach seek to use legislation to further their mission. This is quite a different method from the one outlined in the first category, which seeks to influence the culture, which may in turn influence the law. This group aims to shape the law and so influence the culture. They believe it is reasonable to use the coercive power of the state to help shape the values and habits of citizens in society. They appreciate the educative qualities of the law.⁹⁵

Those who question this approach believe that it is alienating of church members and of society in general, and in the end is counterproductive. It does not appreciate the complexity of issues, nor the intricacies involved in working for social change. Referring to the mission of the church in working for justice and human rights, Hollenbach believes it will be compromised "by misdirected appeals to the coercive power of the state and by failure to make carefully reasoned and persuasive contributions on these matters in the cultural debates of the United States today."⁹⁶ Another danger with this juridical approach is that at some stage, Catholicism appears as only a "collection of prohibitions."⁹⁷ John Waters,

⁹⁵ Hollenbach, "Catholicism and American Political Culture: Confrontation, Accommodation, or Transformation," 17.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁷ John Waters, "Hearing Only Pious Cliches," *The Irish Times*, 22nd October 2007.

writing in *The Irish Times*, makes the point that if the culture perceives the church as being interested only in prohibitions, then regardless of what is said, it will not be heard properly. The danger then is that people only hear “pious regurgitation of what always sounds like clichés. The meaning shorts out on the circuit board of collective understanding, with its crisscrossing wires of prejudice, hostility, assumed knowledge, ideology and rote learning.”⁹⁸ If the church places too much emphasis on using the coercive arm of the state to realise its mission, especially in a pluralistic context, there is every chance that people - both within and outside the church - will not be open to hearing or being in conversation with the church about what it means to live well today. They will associate the church with rules, prohibitions and the imposition of the law.

Implications for Values-led Debate and Discourse in the Public Sphere

Thus far in the paper, I have argued that civil society makes an important contribution to the wellbeing of our shared lives, the Catholic Christian church, for all its failings, makes a contribution to the quality of civil society in a variety of ways, a key aspect of civil society relies on a public sphere that is inclusive and participative. I have argued that there ought to be a place for voices motivated by religious traditions in the public sphere and that respect in the discourse requires room for alternative visions of the good. I believe it is in our interest to cultivate public conversations that are value led, where reasons are offered for positions held that go beneath the usual sound-bite. Public discourse is inherently respectful when it engages others at this level, despite the difficulty. Regardless of the friction it can cause, we need to develop a way of engaging with alternative views of the good that try to explore deeply the values behind the vision. It is my hope that this will minimise the amount of talking we do ‘at’ one another and improve our chances of talking ‘to’ one another.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

While this paper has concentrated on faith communities and some of the issues concerning their participation in public discourse, it can, I believe, offer some suggestions for all who participate in the public sphere today.

- At the heart of the paper is a keen awareness and appreciation of one's audience and the importance of communicating in a language that the other can understand. People and groups need to be at least bi-lingual. They need to have another language than that of their own constituency. As mentioned earlier, *Social Justice Ireland* moves between languages depending on the context. While this sounds straightforward enough, it is quite a difficult thing to do in practise. The ability to articulate one's values in a language that can be heard and understood by one's interlocutors requires a deep understanding of those values in the first place and the skill to do the translation, without anything being 'lost in translation.' Faith communities would do well to learn this lesson if they want to avoid the danger of simply speaking to themselves.
 - If one is to be taken seriously in the public sphere, one's views need to be based on sound social analysis, for what we see will determine our response. Our 'seeing' needs to be carefully done, with as much expertise as we can muster. Our view must be based on sure footing, using evidence and experience, to ground our arguments.
 - Participants in the public sphere need to find ways to articulate their values – not just assert their opinions. This would foster greater depth and respect in public discourse. Regardless of being located within a religious or a secular tradition, everyone is working from some value base – some of it might be conscious, while another part of it might simply be based on uncontested assumptions. This is true for all participants. The uncovering, discovering and articulation of these values can lead to greater honesty in the discourse and this is a key component in our learning how to live well with our differences.
 - Values led discourse inevitably reveals one's vision of how things ought to be. Participants in the public sphere would do well to be realistic
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about what is possible from their vision in this particular setting, at this particular stage in our history. As *Social Justice Ireland* says, 'credible alternatives' are key. It goes on to suggest that the credibility of one's participation will be enhanced if one can suggest 'alternative pathways' to get from where we are to where we wish to go. It is one thing to decry what is happening in our world, it is another to suggest ways forward; something much needed in public discourse.

- There must be room in the public sphere, at appropriate levels, for all sorts of voices and visions. Voices from religious traditions might have some insight into how things are now (the naming of this present reality), how they might be in the future and how we might move from where we are to where we want to go. These voices, because they are a part of faith communities ought not to be excluded from public debate simply because they are rooted in religious traditions. To do this might cut us off from 'key resources for the creation of meaning and identity' as Habermas has warned.
 - Participants in the public sphere, who are trying to influence social policy and/or the law of the land, need to appreciate the wisdom of 'candour in representation, restraint in decision.' When participants know that their interlocutors understand these limits, greater trust can emerge between them. They will not suspect one another of trying to unfairly influence the process or seeking some sort of privileged relationship with the state.
 - The issue of respect was referred to in the paper earlier and it is an important quality for the well-being of the public sphere itself. The extent of participation will depend in part on how people actually participate. When the value of respect underlies robust and strong debate the overall well being of the forum will be enhanced. There is a danger if groups use the public sphere without consideration of the well-being of the very mechanism that affords them the opportunity to be public in the first place.
 - The quality of dialogue is also critical. Good dialogue involves speaking
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'with' another and not just 'at' them. It is a paradigm that appreciates the contribution of the other, and presumes that there is learning to be found in the conversation and encounter, for all the participants. Such a disposition will allow for partnerships and coalitions, essential if power is needed to engage with mechanisms of the state or the influence of the market.

- Efforts to uncover, discover and even recover values in public debate are crucial. They will allow for a greater congruence between what we say, how we act and what we believe.
- A participative, informative, and energetic public sphere is in the interest of the state. The state needs the legitimacy that is derived from the workings of the public sphere. Therefore, it ought to respect the nature of the deliberations that take place there and where appropriate, give practical support to its well-being.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that an inclusive public sphere is a public good. As Ireland changes, we are well advised to find appropriate mechanisms to include voices from different traditions: religious and secular. It is important that we try to allow disagreements to be resolved openly rather than on becoming silent on what divides us. These mechanisms ought to foster in participants a way to articulate their values, the sources of their positions and opinions. This will offer the possibility of greater understanding between the groups holding divergent positions. While their world views may diverge on different social issues, a strong, inclusive, participative public sphere is an appropriate forum for mutually enriching public debate and a contribution to civil society.

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