Public Theology and Democracy

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I have suggested in a much debated essay that the tragic events of 9/11 created a discursive crisis in the contemporary American Anabaptist and Peace Church communities of faith (see "Peace and Polyphony: The Case for Theological and Political Impurity," *CGR* 20.2 [2002]). Indeed, in the aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers, some Anabaptist peace activists were trying to out-God-talk Osama bin Laden and the Taliban in the public square with commands from Jesus rather than directives and demands from Allah.

Certainly, persons of faith can and must fiercely protest war and passionately pursue peace. This is not the critical discursive question blurred by the fire and smoke. Rather, the question is, How do persons of particular faith communities enter into public and political discourse? Do those of us who are Americans enter political dialogue and debate as citizens of a pluralistic democracy or as religionists representing a God's-eye-view and command? Unless we are prepared to be a kinder, gentler, Anabaptist Taliban, I contend we must enter the conversation as citizens and public intellectuals. Hence, it is important to make an artful distinction between our personal loves and convictions and our broader public responsibilities to a common good and to the peace of the city. Can faith communities, colleges, seminaries, institutions, and agencies formed and informed by Peace Church values produce an interdisciplinary rhetoric and pedagogy of peacemaking inspired and empowered by the values and practices of faith, yet beyond the God-talk of confessional and communal discourses? I believe the answer is yes.

My evolving work explores the possibilities of a constructive public theology that enters into solidarity with the project of peacemaking as a public and pragmatic vocation. This desire to compose a practical, public theology is not a mere academic interest. Indeed, it evolved from my many years of pastoral ministry as I attempted to preach and teach in ways that inspired and equipped my parishioners to embody the Gospel as a living peace church in the world, and for the world, rather than become yet one more sectarian, sacred reservation of spirit in a blessed fallen world. I first articulated my passionate, pastoral concerns for a public theology capable of addressing the church, the academy, and society in a formal way in "God in Public: A Modest Proposal for a Quest for a Contemporary North American Paradigm" (*CGR* 4.1 [1986]).

These concerns have since evolved and found expression through several publications, including "Give Me Prophecy and Joy" in *Brethren Life and Thought* (Summer and Fall 2003). My proposals for this evolving theology are explored in *Prophets, Poets & Pragmatists: Toward a Public Theology* (in progress). My concern is how particular traditions might contribute to a public good. More specifically, I am very interested in the polyphony of questions around religion in democratic culture and the role of faith in public discourse. Thus, I welcome Professor Ted Grimsrud's fine essay, "Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy."

I could write several pages of appreciation for the ways Grimsrud's work challenges Anabaptists to reconsider and re-imagine our dual vocations in the world as Christians and citizens. Here I will focus only on a matter that both conservative and liberal Anabaptists should consider: the confusion about a necessary distinction between personal morality and public ethics.

I suspect this confusion is at least one reason so many Mennonites, Brethren, and Quakers voted for George W. Bush in the November 2004 elections. Conservative or traditional members of these faith communities were attracted to the Republican accent on personal faith, morality, and values, and thus carried their domestic and churchly tastes and dispositions to the polls with little regard for the complicated demands of seeking the common good. Considering this matter of personal morality and public justice, I fear that Grimsrud's quick dismissal and deconstruction of Ted Koontz's important paradigm of first and second languages for doing Christian social ethics only perpetuates this confusion. This dismissal of the necessity of a private-public distinction in ethical discourse invites a situation in which persons of deep faith and strong personal convictions vote on the basis of personal morality – whether that morality is liberal or conservative – rather than in the interests of the broader common weal.

Koontz's model of first and second languages for doing religious ethics intersects with Walter Brueggemann's understanding of biblical prophetic discourse being different on the wall (in the public square) and behind the wall (within the gathered community of faith). It links up nicely with philosopher Richard Rorty's metaphor of "Trotsky and Wild Orchids" on the value of private-public distinctions in ethical language in pluralistic societies. It also reflects John Howard Yoder's use of middle axioms in Christian ethics and witness. In addition it coheres with the long history of many Christian imaginative

theological constructions of "the two kingdoms" as a way of noting a duality between personal confessions of faith and the demands of affirming secular justice as well as civil and social order in a blessed but fallen creation.

My response to Grimsrud's apparent longing for a consistent Christian language or confession in the public square will accent three themes: Anabaptism and Liberalism, Personal Passions and Public Responsibilities, and Seeking Cultures of Peace.

Anabaptism and Liberalism

Stanley Hauerwas has critically yet correctly charged that my work seems to care as much about "the liberal project" as it does about Jesus and the Anabaptist Vision. For the task of composing "a public theology" or a theology that engages both church and culture, this is indeed true. My project seeks to bring the creative energy and eros of Anabaptist and Peace Church movements into solidarity with classical liberal commitments to creative democracy, personal liberty, ethical individualism, civic virtue, and human desire. (The reference to "liberalism" here is not to a contest between liberal and conservative theologies but to the philosophical and political traditions of democratic liberalism.)

I am distressed by a new, sophisticated wave of illiberal resistance to the friendship between discipleship and democracy in the Anabaptist academy. Inspired by illiberal theological thinkers such as Hauerwas, MacIntyre, and Milbank, this resistance tends to take on two different forms in the Anabaptist guild: the conservative communitarian and the counter-cultural radical. While both forms of religious cultural critique claim some prophetic unction, the true prophet committed to a public peace, rather than to his own personal or communal ideological purity, must likewise master poetic and pragmatic discourses. In the composition of a theology of culture in a pluralistic society, the person of faith would do well to read both Jesus and Jefferson, and to quote Emerson and Whitman as freely as Menno and Mack in the public square.

Walt Whitman, the strong poet of democratic vistas, knew how to make the poet, the pragmatist, and the prophet dance together with joy in the public square. Whitman, as a creative public intellectual, understood the importance of poetic and transcendent visions and voices beyond mere morality and tribal confessions for the well being of the common weal. Righteous calls to social ethics or personal morality become flat and rule-based without soulful transcendence. Remember Whitman's "Mystic Trumpeter"?

Sing to my soul – renew its languishing faith and hope;
Rouse up my slow belief – give me some vision of the future;
Give me, for once, prophecy and joy.

Like Grimsrud, I believe Peace Church work in public theology must be in conversation with some of the best academic work in the field, including the pragmatic religious social criticism of Jeffery Stout (*Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton, 2004) and the prophetic religious criticism of Cornel West (*Democracy Matters*, The Pilgrim Press, 2004). After all, if we care about the peace of the city we must catch a vision and speak in a voice that is more reflective of the polyphony and pluralism of the New Jerusalem than the serenity and solitude of Eden. Along with Grimsrud and Whitman, I believe we must "invite a multitude to speak." However, Whitman also reminds us that we each contain a multitude and thus our voices carry the sounds of many communities simultaneously.

Personal Passions and Public Responsibilities

On April 19, 2004 I preached a sermon from my familiar pulpit of the Monroeville Church of the Brethren in suburban Pittsburgh. That afternoon I heard a sermon in Pittsburgh that almost made me regret I had said *anything* about "God" that day. The occasion was the annual meeting of the National Rifle Association at the downtown Convention Center. Rocker and gun-lover Ted Nugent actually preached a sermon to the NRA delegates entitled "God, Guns, and Rock'n'Roll." (See Nugent's book by the same title published by Regnery, Inc. in 2000). Nugent's sermon was public God-talk at its worst. He freely and passionately linked the American Dream to the trinity of God, guns, and rock'n'roll. In his theology God signified national morality, rock'n'roll represented our freedoms, and guns were gifts from both God and the Constitution to insure that the ungodly would dare not tread on our rights as Americans. Not surprisingly, Nugent also suggested that God endorsed current United States foreign policy and our brave war president.

When I hear God-talk like this, I find myself more and more drawn to the public philosophy of Walter Rauschenbusch's backslidden grandson, Richard Rorty, who offers a thoughtful analysis of a necessary distinction between our personal passions and our public responsibilities in a pluralistic,

secular society. Let me summarize this point from my essay on Rorty's work, "The Coming Only Is Sacred" (*Cross Currents* [Winter 2004]). Rorty calls this distinction the case of "Trotsky and Wild Orchids," which is also the title of his most autobiographical essay. There he tells the story of his boyhood conviction, acquired from his parents and their circle of New York friends and colleagues, that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists. Even as a boy Rorty had a deep concern for social justice. Yet he was a precocious kid and loved many things, including wild orchids. He learned to identify, by their Latin names, the forty species of orchids found in the mountains of the northeast. This personal obsession with rare, beautiful flowers made him feel uneasy, because he doubted that Trotsky would approve of such a passionate interest and involvement that did nothing to ease human suffering.

At age fifteen Rorty escaped the bullies who beat him up on the playground of his high school and entered the University of Chicago with a problem on his mind: how to reconcile Trotsky and wild orchids in some kind of metaphysical, theological, or philosophical system. This problem occupied him for the next twenty years and displayed itself in various thought experiments and proposals. Finally, Rorty reached the conclusion for which he is now famous in some circles, infamous in others: We need not harmonize the personal and the public.

This is not to suggest that at times the personal and the public cannot and do not come together in satisfying ways. They indeed do. Nevertheless, Rorty suggests it is good to resist the temptation to systematically reconcile our private obsessions, whether they are wild orchids, confessional poetry, metaphysical speculations, or tender lovers, with our public responsibilities to others in a pluralistic, democratic society. This proposal is not merely funded by Rorty's philosophical rejection of grand systems; it has much to do with his political commitment to freedom, tolerance, and a resistance to human cruelty imposed by what he calls bullies, oligarchies, and bosses.

Following Rorty's private-public distinction, in private one is free to follow one's bliss or tend to one's personal ethic of self-creation. However, in public, there is a need for a broader set of ethical distinctions and political obligations to others and to social institutions. Rorty is convinced that the ultimate synthesis of love and justice may be found in the creative dance steps of a partnership of self-creation and social solidarity.

Seeking Cultures of Peace

Rorty's public philosophy can be very attractive to persons of faith. His Jeffersonian celebration of a secular state, coupled with his contempt for theocracy, should satisfy both conservative Anabaptist advocates of a two-kingdom theology and progressive Peace Church members who have made anti-Constantinianism the rage even in the mainline churches of the west. His resistance to bullies, bosses, and oligarchies must cheer the hearts of Free Church believers and liberal persons of faith from many traditions.

Yet there is something incomplete about Rorty's insistence that religious discourse or the language of faith must *always* by its nature be placed in the category of "the private." Rorty's grandfather Rauschenbusch understood that faith was not simply centered in privileged or provincial rites and rituals, doctrines, and dogmas, or creeds and confessions; religion or faith can be a way of seeing the world. It can be a way of imagining oneself in relationship to others and to ultimate concerns, and to the process of meaning-making. As such, religion as imaginative composition or construction finds its closest analogue in art. Thus, like art, the religious imagination helps many of us participate in that mysterious and social reality we call "culture." Whether pondering classical categories of the good, the true, and the beautiful, or attempting to define cruelty and compassion within a postmodern linguistic turn, it is rarely possible or helpful to completely exile the discourses, images, and practices of faith from the conversation. The pragmatist committed to social transformation and concerned about cultures of peace in a violent world would do well to discern the cultural effects of religion for the hopes of personal and public reconciliation – as well as for their potential to damage and destroy.

Keeping in view my suggestion that art is religion's nearest analogue, consider Joyce Carol Oates on "The Faith of a Writer":

> I believe that art is the highest expression of the human spirit. I believe that we yearn to transcend the merely finite and ephemeral; to participate in something mysterious and communal called "culture" – and that this yearning is as strong in our species as the yearning to reproduce the species. Through the local or regional, through our individual voices, we work to create art that will speak to others who know nothing of us. In our very obliqueness to one

> another, an unexpected intimacy is born. The individual voice is the communal voice. The regional voice is the universal voice.
>
> – Oates, *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art* (Ecco, HarperCollins, 2003)

What I am suggesting is that individual and regional voices, particular voices, together contribute to a more public or universal voice. There is no generic public voice. The multitude of particular voices in a great society finds a public coherence not in an easy harmony but in a complex, creative polyphony. This includes religious voices. Whether the social critic or public philosopher believes these religious voices are inspired by God, the Muse of art, emotional needs, psychological projection, or the longing for social cohesion, they are nevertheless a profound, powerful part of culture and the human art of meaning-making, and thus cannot be exiled from public debate and discourse. (This is why, in conversation with my colleagues and co-editors, we chose a culturally-conscious title for our book on international peacemaking: *Seeking Cultures of Peace*, ed. Fernando Enns, Scott Holland, and Ann Riggs [World Council of Churches, Cascadia and Herald, 2004].)

In a public theology, the concern is not with seeking mere doctrines or theologies of peace but rather "cultures of peace." This concern was recently addressed at an international peace conference held in Nairobi in August 2004, for which Bethany Theological Seminary was the host planning and fundraising institution. The conference, called *Watu Wa Amani* or "People of Peace," brought together members of the Historic Peace Churches with ecumenical representatives from the World Council of Churches to address the conflicts in Africa in light of an active call to peacemaking and reconciliation. The conference did theology in a cross-cultural and contextual style, and was especially attentive to how theology, worship, and spirituality contribute to the formation of a social vision. In the spirit of public theology, local or communal concerns were never pried apart from the cosmopolitan realities of the global village. Yet this social vision requires an artful translation in its movement from the sanctuary into the streets.

In this setting, African colleagues told us how the *sokoni*, the market, can serve as a metaphor for the rules of public discourse. The African market is a common ground where members of a village, town, or city gather not only for commerce but for conversation that is truly public about the ordinary

and extraordinary slices of shared life. Those who gather there, whether Christian or Muslim, recognize that the rules for communication in the market are different from the grammars of space that is merely domestic, tribal, or religious. The creation of hospitable space in the market requires a public philosophy and discourse that differs in tone from the particular theology and personal confessions appropriate to the church or mosque.

Personal Dreams and the Public Good: A Case Narrative

I do much of my writing in an old tavern converted into lovely living and studio space in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Yellow Springs is a progressive, left-leaning village where artists, intellectuals, social activists, young professionals, and old hippies still dare to discuss religion and politics in the public square. I recently had a conversation about a political poster with a couple of village residents in Dino's Coffee Shop. My table-talk conversation partners were smart, cynical men who seemed to mix an eclectic blend of anarchism, neo-Marxism, and sixties counter-cultural values into their politics.

Our discussion and debate about the message of the poster made me think of many quarrels I have had with Anabaptists and radical Christian peacemakers about public and political responsibility. With the November 2004 election quickly approaching, the poster presented two side-by-side drawings of the presidential candidates, George Bush and John Kerry. There was an identical text under each candidate: *Middle-Aged, Yale Educated, White Christian Male*. Then there was this message: "If you like corporate power, special interests, free trade, war, and the security state . . . then this election is for you! Because this November, you can have your way regardless of who wins." Under the poster text a detachable bumper sticker declared, "DON'T *just* VOTE because our dreams will never fit in their ballot boxes." My companions liked the poster very much.

I told my new acquaintances that although I valued political dissent and vigorous social criticism, the political sentiment of the poster struck me as terribly sectarian and even flirting with totalitarianism. Our debate began! I cannot report here all we exchanged in our conversation, but I will identify concerns I expressed that arc from that very secular coffee shop table to some of my theological conversations with self-professed "Christian radicals."

I of course took issue with the politically naïve notion that there is no substantive difference between the two candidates and the resulting "so why

vote" attitude. Yet the center of my critique was directed to the resistance to compromise and to the desire for purity or utopia implied in the poster, which is language alien to the possibilities of deep democracy and rhetoric more akin to totalitarian dreams. The bold declaration, "DON'T *just* VOTE," really diminishes and even mocks the value of voting, and thus disrespects the bloody struggles for civil rights by the disfranchised. But it is the stated reason for this resistance – "because our dreams will never fit in their ballot boxes" – that is so disturbing, because it is profoundly anti-democratic.

I challenged my sectarian political critics to consider the language of *their* ballot box. I made the case that these men had graduate degrees from major public universities, they drank public water, used public utilities, carried their personal dreams from place to place on public roads that took them safely home at night. If in the twilight hours the rare robber or rapist might be suspected of prowling the placid streets of Yellow Springs, a call to 911 would bring the Village Police, who truly understand their vocation to be peace officers, speeding to their doors. "It is not *their* boxes," I insisted. "It is *your* ballot boxes because we all share this impure, imperfect, gritty yet graced public space together."

With too much caffeine pulsing through my head and heart, pointing dramatically to Xenia Avenue, the main drag of the village, I said, "Hell, yes, this might be the boulevard of broken dreams, but it's where we live!" I continued, "Do you really think that in a pluralistic society the public ballot box is supposed to hold our personal dreams without compromise? In a deep democracy or in a strong democracy, the ballot box strives to collect the vision of the common good, the dream of a beloved community beyond mere private interests, the commitment to justice and safe public space for all." Happily, this is a conversation that can never end in an anti-totalitarian society.

Conclusion

Political thinkers as diverse as Rorty, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hannah Arendt, and Albert Camus remind us of the dangers of imposing one ideology, theology, dogma, or dream onto the public sphere. Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* demonstrates that when a personal dream is substituted for a broader public good in the political process, a dangerous flirtation with totalitarianism begins.

This critical difference between personal convictions and public goods is often misunderstood in radical Anabaptist and Peace Church communities. Grimsrud's article is marked by this misunderstanding. Yet a very orthodox, normative Anabaptist theologian does carefully outline this distinction in one of his works. John Howard Yoder offers his views of the two kingdoms, church and state, Christian and citizen, in *The Christian Witness to the State*. There he makes a clear distinction between an ecclesiology and a more public political philosophy for Christian thought and practice. The Christian of course is called to follow the way of Jesus, Yoder argues. The church through its own body politics – discipleship, community, and peacemaking – is a living witness to the reign of God. Yet the church is not the world. Only the Constantinian, theocrat, or totalitarian would be tempted to confuse the functions and identities of church and state.

The Christian witnesses to the state by embodying the practices of the Gospel in and through the community called church and, quite importantly, by actively calling the state to be true to its own highest ideals in the practice of justice. The Christian is not seeking to baptize the secular state as an agape community. Instead, according to Yoder, the thoughtful Christian may point to *middle axioms* that are points of mediation or compromise between the perfection of Christ as the church understands it and the brokenness of the world. The Christian appropriately expects mutual, brotherly-sisterly love in the redeemed community, yet speaks prophetically for justice in the public square. Granted, some Mennonite scholars contend that Yoder later abandoned the middle axiom paradigm for a more uncompromising "politics of Jesus" as normative for all of life. One scholar recently told me, "It is not surprising that liberal Brethren are so drawn to Yoder's earlier language of compromise!" In my view, Yoder's constructive use of established middle axiom ethical language was his attempt to re-imagine classical two-kingdom theology in a democratic culture.

Although Ted Grimsrud and I are perhaps informed by different theological imaginations on this matter of two languages or private-public distinctions, I think we agree that the church is indeed in the world for the world. I am grateful for Grimsrud's intellectual gifts to the church, the academy, and society. His ongoing work in biblical studies and social ethics truly embodies what it means for a Christian intellectual to love God and the neighbor with all one's mind.