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"Is Public Theology Really Public?"

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Some Problems with Civil Society

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Abstract

This paper sketches two ways in which the concept of civil society is currently being used to carve out a space for Christians to be "public," and makes some suggestions of problems that arise from these models. The first way involves the theoretical appropriation of John Courtney Murray's work by authors who advocate a "public theology." The second is a practical application of Harry Boyte's work on civil society which is being appropriated in Catholic schools to advance the public mission of Christian education. Despite differences, this essay argues that, though both seek to create a space for the church which is both "public" and "free," neither succeed. At the end of the paper, suggestions are made of a more adequate ecclesiology of the public.

In trying to make sense of the recent explosion of literature in political theory and social ethics on "civil society,"[1] it is not hard to feel like the Native Americans must have felt when the Europeans began talking excitedly about the "discovery" of America. Civil society would appear to have been here all along, and yet the term is invoked, especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall, as representing some important new possibilities in democratic revitalization. The term has its origins in the Scottish Enlightenment and Hegel, but reappeared with renewed vigor in the 1970s. It names a space that, above all, is public without being political in the usual sense of direct involvement with the state. This distinction between state and

society is seen by some Christian social ethicists as a breakthrough concept because it seems to allow the church to avoid mere privatization on the one hand, and the Constantinian specter of implication in state coercion on the other. Chastened by its experience with rule, yet aware of the absence of a privatized Christianity from the biblical and traditional witness, the church seeks to speak clearly in the public arena without carrying a big stick.

In this paper I will sketch two ways (of many, I hasten to add) in which the concept of civil society is currently being used to carve out a space for Christians to be "public," and then suggest certain problems that arise from these models. The first way involves the theoretical appropriation of John Courtney Murray's work by authors who advocate a "public theology." The second is a practical application of Harry Boyte's work on civil society which is being appropriated in Catholic schools to advance the public mission of Christian education. The first way is more oriented toward public policy, the second toward grassroots activism. Despite differences, however, I will argue that, though both seek to create a space for the church which is both "public" and "free," neither succeed. At the end of the paper, then, I will suggest ways toward a more adequate ecclesiology of the public.

Murray and Friends

In Catholic circles the father of public theology is John Courtney Murray, who put tremendous emphasis on a sharp distinction between state and society. According to Murray, this distinction originates in the medieval distinction between, on the one hand, the *imperium*, and on the other the *ecclesia*, by which he indicates the entire Christendom, or *christianitas*. This distinction mirrors the distinction between temporal and spiritual. Just as the *imperium* served a limited role in medieval Christendom, so the American constitutional order establishes limits on the state.[2] The state in Murray's thought is but one limited part of society, that part responsible for the maintenance of public law and political administration. The importance of this distinction is to carve out free space beyond the direct grasp of the state, a space which contemporary theorists call "civil society." Murray puts it this way: "In general, 'society' signifies an area of freedom, personal and corporate, whereas 'state' signifies the area in which public powers may legitimately apply their coercive powers. To deny the distinction is to espouse the notion of government as totalitarian."[3]

For the sake of civil peace, religion is excluded from the state but allowed to flourish in the remaining public space defined by civil society. Here the various religious "conspiracies," as he called them, could meet on common ground and debate public life in the language—not of theology, which tends to divide one from the other conspiracies—but of natural law, the language of cool, dry reason. Natural law, Murray thought, has no theological presuppositions; rather it provides for the possibility of reasoned

discourse among religions and even with that "conspiracy" which does not acknowledge God at all.[4] Underlying this reasoned discourse, and in part proceeding from it, is a public philosophy or public consensus.[5] This consensus is not the sum of public opinion or self-interest, but is based on certain truths that structure the political system of the United States; "we hold these truths" because they are true.[6] This consensus does not eliminate conflict, but rather serves as an agreed basis upon which conflicts are in theory resolvable.

For my present purpose it is important to see that for Murray this consensus manages to maintain the fences which make his distinction of state and society work. In the first place, society is free of coercion precisely because there are commonly agreed rules for discourse which are built into the American proposition and are part of American experience. Reasoned discourse guarantees that public conversation will take place on the basis of persuasion, and not coercion. In the second place—and this is seldom noticed in Murray's thought—this consensus also maintains a proper distinction between civil society and economic activity. Murray acknowledges the power and omnipresence of economic forces from which neither state nor church, family nor individual is immune. However, it is precisely the idea of the "public consensus" that saves us from the overweening power of corporations and economic forces. Murray adopts his exposition of the "public consensus" from Adolf Berle, who attributes the relative freedom America enjoys from abuses of economic power to this consensus: "[T]he ultimate protection of individuals lies not in the play of economic forces in free markets, but in a set of value judgments so widely accepted and deeply held in the United States that public opinion can energize political action when needed to prevent power from violating these values."[7] Through the public consensus, the state is mobilized in its coercive function to keep economic power in check, without the state thereby overstepping the boundaries of its own power. State, civil society, and work are all separable into semi-autonomous, though interrelated, spheres.

Contemporary interpreters of Murray's project have adopted his distinction of state and society as central. In Richard John Neuhaus' conception of democracy, for example, it is crucial that there be many different actors in the "public square."

> The state is one actor among others. Indispensable to this arrangement are the institutional actors, such as the institutions of religion, that make claims of ultimate or transcendent meaning. The several actors in the public square—government, corporations, education, communications, religion—are there to challenge, check, and compete with one another.[8]

The churches, then, take their rightful place as public institutions without direct implication in wielding coercive state power, entanglements which

have had disastrous consequences in Western history.[9] As another Murrayite, George Weigel says:

> Those who enter the civil public square have a right to speak from religious conviction. But those who claim a right to speak assume a responsibility to speak in such a way that they can be heard... In concrete practice, this will mean "translating" religiously-based moral claims and arguments into concepts and language that can be heard and contested by fellow-citizens of different faiths.[10]

This follows from Weigel's definition of "public" as "understandable to all."[11]

Not all interpreters of Murray are content with Murray's banishment of theological language from the public square. Michael and Kenneth Himes, for example, in their book *The Fullness of Faith*, have pleaded for the public significance of theology, though under certain limited conditions. According to the Himeses, clarity about the distinction between state and society ought not to obscure the fact that there is some interpenetration between the two. This recognition likewise demands a recognition that people who act in the realm of the state do so having been formed by religion.[12] This formation takes place primarily in the hearts and minds of believers who, though acting publicly, have been shaped in their "basic orienting attitudes" by explicitly religious symbols. More than this, however, the Himeses wish to allow the use of theological language in the public forum, even though the listeners may not share the faith of the speaker. Although public debate in civil society must be based on a consensus among all people, religious or not, on what can be considered reasonable, religious people should not shy away from using religious symbols, such as the Trinity, in the hope that they may communicate something universal even to those who reject the theological origins of such symbols. Here the Himeses turn to David Tracy's concept of the "classic," defined as "a phenomenon whose excess and permanence of meaning resists definitive interpretation."[13] In the presence of such a classic in art or religion, for example, even the uninitiated is subject to the transmission of some truth which is therefore a public truth. The Himeses also adopt Tracy's suggestion that one should concentrate on the "effects" of such truth, and not its non-public "origins" in the doctrine of one particular religion.[14]

Theology has, therefore, an important contribution to make to the public life of a society. Nevertheless, when moving from civil society to state, the "basic orienting attitudes" that theological symbols elicit must be translated into public policy by means of a social ethic, that is, theories of justice, the state, and so on, which cannot be derived directly from theology; "public theology is several steps removed from public policy."[15] The Trinity, for example, must first be translated into a concept of "relationality" which

belongs to social ethics, and then into an affirmation of a certain kind of rights-language.[16] The result in theory is a theology which is free to function in a fully public manner, yet not in a way that seeks to impose its alien beliefs on the other. The church stands in a position to form hearts and minds, to equip them for public life, but it remains outside access to the coercive power of the state, and theology remains subject to the bar of what the society can consider "reasonable."

Public Achievement

The Murrayite models sketched so briefly here depend on the maintenance of a space in society beyond the reach of the state, yet Murray and his successors share a tendency to see that space as oriented toward the state. Free discussion takes place outside of the state in civil society, yet such debate is oriented ultimately toward the making of public policy. Although theoretically limited, the state is still the primary means for the establishment of justice. This is the case whether what is primarily in mind are either lobbying efforts by the social justice arms of the church bureaucracy aimed at producing legislation, or efforts aimed at affecting "culture" as a whole. There is talk of "the" (singular) public square. The "common" to which the "common good" refers is the nation-state. "The health-care debate," for example, has to do with legislation before Congress on government-sponsored health care insurance, prescription drug price controls, Medicare, and so on.

There is another model of civil society, however, which is beginning to have an increasing impact in Christian circles. It shares with the Murrayite models an emphasis on the creation and maintenance of free spaces in society beyond the direct purview of the state. Unlike the Murrayite models, however, its accent is not on public policy but on the democratic potential of civil society itself. One important exemplification of this model is based on the work of Harry Boyte, one of the principal interlocutors in the debates over civil society. From the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota, Boyte has been advocating for the renewal of American democracy through the empowerment of grassroots citizens' groups. In addition to extensive publishing in the field, Boyte is also something of an activist. One of his more prominent endeavors is called "Public Achievement," an attempt to instill the virtues of citizenship into school-age children. Public Achievement has been very active in Catholic schools in my area, and the social justice office of the archdiocese has just begun a major collaboration with Boyte to use Public Achievement as a means of training Catholic school students in the public use of Catholic social teaching. At St. Bernard's Catholic school, Public Achievement has taken root and changed the culture of the school. Every Thursday morning is given over to Public Achievement, facilitating involvement for every student in every grade. St.

Bernard's has been made a national model for the creation of a Catholic School of Democracy and Social Justice.[17]

For Boyte the term "civil society" conveys three important themes in democratic theory, all derived from recent democratic movements in the U.S., the Third World, and especially Eastern Europe during the fall of communism.[18] The first is a renewed appreciation for the quotidian and mundane types of power wielded by ordinary citizens. There is a small movement to break the preponderant concentration of political science on electoral politics and parties to the exclusion of the actual decision-making taking place in concrete communities. Boyte has been structuring his work around case studies of community organizations.[19] The second is the importance of alternative sources of power as bulwarks against the state. It has long been a bias of left-wing politics especially to think big, to "see like a state," as the title of James Scott's recent book has it.[20] "Civil society" became an energizing concept for the movements of 1989 that brought down totalitarian regimes from the inside. The third is an appreciation for the free and uncoerced nature of discourse in voluntary community settings. Boyte and Sara Evans have pioneered the study of what they call "free spaces," defined as "settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where people can act with dignity, independence and vision. These are, in the main, voluntary forms of association with a relatively open and participatory character" which include many religious organizations, clubs, self-help groups, and so on.[21] The black church is singled out as an autonomous institution which has, at various points in American history, allowed the very possibility of free speech that opposed the dominant culture. For Boyte, such institutions are not merely important for their own sake, but as seedbeds of democratic movements with much broader impact. The civil rights movement, begun in the black church, is, for Boyte, a particularly important paradigm of "democratic renewal."[22]

Rather than fix on "the" public debate as supervised by the state, therefore, Boyte wants to encourage democratic renewal as it springs from local community action. That said, however, Boyte is critical of those he calls "voluntarists," who would locate active citizenship in voluntary organizations and leave it there. Can we seriously expect, Boyte sharply asks, to confront power with "volunteers?"[23] Here Boyte is critical of theorists such as Benjamin Barber who define "civil society" (like Murray) over against both government and economic activity. For Barber, civil society is a kind of refuge from the coercion of the state and the consumerism of the market, a position which Boyte regards as fatalistic.[24] According to Boyte, democratic renewal must not remain confined to "free spaces," but must challenge institutions such as the state and the corporation. Crucial to this challenge is the idea of "public work," which Boyte and Nancy Kari define as "patterns of work that have public dimensions (that is, work with public purposes, work by a public, work in public settings) as well

as the 'works' or products themselves."[25] In blurring the lines between "public" and "work," Boyte and Kari hope to renew a sense that America is not built in volunteers' spare time, but is the product of people's day to day labors. The workplace is reclaimed as a potentially public space, and what is usually considered public is recast as the work of ordinary citizens, not merely the operations of the distant state bureaucracy.

Boyte is also critical of those he calls "moralists," who blame the deterioration in democratic practice not on government or the economy but on declining morality and a lack of personal responsibility. While Boyte advocates a renewal of citizens' sense of personal ownership for what is public, he believes it is wrong to blame the citizens for what has gone wrong in American democracy. Absent from the moralists' considerations, says Boyte, is a serious analysis of why Americans feel so powerless, and the overwhelming forces of government and market which produce passivity in people.[26] To practice civil society is unavoidably to speak in terms of power. Boyte would perhaps be critical at this point of the Murrayite emphasis on reason over power. Boyte himself accents consensus-building, such emerges in the rough-and-tumble of competing power, not in some arid forum of public reasonableness.

One place where theory meets practice in Boyte's work is in Public Achievement. The stated goal is to educate young people "to think and act as citizens";[27] St. Bernard's School has adopted the theme "Educating Catholic Citizens for the 21st Century."[28] The method is to engage students in "public work," here defined as "the hard, ongoing effort of working with a diverse group of people to solve public problems and to make things of lasting contribution in shaping and creating our communities and the wider world."[29] Guided by a coach, a team of young people decides on a problem to address, then takes action. Examples of issues range from the need for a skateboarding park to racism in the community to U.S. policy on endangered animals or undocumented workers.[30] Actions include appeals to responsible authorities, letter-writing, fundraising, community awareness projects, and other activities.

A theory of civil society is embedded in this practice, and Public Achievement is centered on inculcating this theory and developing "public identities" in young people. Weekly debriefing sessions offer reflection on core Public Achievement concepts, such as "cocreation of learning, public work, self-interest, and power."[31] Democracy is defined as the "work of the people,"[32] not merely the work of political professionals. Furthermore, democracy means "more than a people's right to participate in governance, it means all people hold power and can exercise it to create our common world."[33] Freedom is defined as the ability of individuals to "choose their life and their ends unobstructed by others," though it is acknowledged as possible that the collective self-determination of the society could override an individual's self-determination.[34]

This last point is significant. No particular ends are given, other than the renewal of American democracy. Much emphasis is put on dealing with a diversity of people who will have a diversity of ends. How issues are chosen therefore depends on the self-interest of participants:

> Traditional forms of civic education focus on institutional politics . . . or community service (e.g., helping those in need). Public Achievement departs from these approaches by giving explicit attention to the self-interest of participants, and to concepts of public contribution in a world of diverse values and cultures.[35]

As this passage indicates, self-interest is not defined narrowly. One of Public Achievement's primary themes is moving away from a view of politics as based on what I/we can get from the government.[36] The Public Achievement participant is made aware that a range of interests exists from self-interest to a broader conception of the public interest. Nevertheless, the participant is alerted to the importance of interests, and informed that "a basic premise of public work is that people are more likely to become active on an issue that they feel strongly about."[37] With no ends given, Public Achievement must recognize that the self-interest of individuals and groups will play a key role in determining what problems are approached and how they are approached. Public interest, therefore, emerges from a process of consensus building by which it is hoped that agreement on ends can be reached among diverse people with diverse interests.[38] Consensus is by no means undergirded by a strong conception of truth, as it is for Murray.

Problems

I am entirely in agreement with the attempt to envision a space for the church that is neither Constantinian nor privatized. There is much to applaud in the Himeses' attempt to move theology out of the ghetto of private discourse. Boyte's scheme goes further in breaking out of a narrow focus on the making of public policy. I am in deep sympathy with Boyte's populism, in particular his appreciation for the churches as potential "free spaces" which escape the hegemony of the state. Christian educators' attempts to use Boyte's ideas in the form of Public Achievement have the potential to aid in moving the churches' political discourse and activism beyond limp recommendations on how to vote. Nevertheless, I want to point to some problems that undercut these attempts to give the church a significant public presence.

To begin with, both the Murrayites and Boyte are far too reticent about the interpenetration of state and society. In both models civil society appears as an essentially free space beyond the coercive reach of the state. The flows of power tend to move from civil society to the state, such that the ultimate

goal of democratic organization and social movement—even for Boyte—is to generalize the impact of such movements through influencing the state. The potential of every person to limit, control, and use the state is highlighted in a fashion not too distinct from the "civics" approach that Boyte criticizes. Although Boyte's approach emphasizes power more than the Murrayite stress on reasoned consensus, power nevertheless tends to be envisioned as flowing in one direction, from civil society to state.

Insofar as its proponents are speaking descriptively, however, I find this view of civil society far from convincing. Indeed, other political theorists beginning with Hegel have drawn the flows of power in the opposite direction, from state to civil society. For Hegel, the associations of civil society take on an educative function between the state and the individual. Work is not excluded from Hegel's definition of civil society. Rather, civil society is where concrete labor is converted to abstract labor, that is, where the raw, untamed forces of labor are taken up by the institutions of civil society—such as trade unions, schools, and corporations—and domesticated for the sake of the universal interest of society. Labor, and all the interests and ends of individuals, must pass through the educative project of civil society before they can be fully realized, gathered, and universalized in the state, which is the "actuality of the ethical Idea."[39] Though based on production and family, the state is not the result of them, but rather comes first and is the true ground of them according to Hegel.[40] Work, family, and the person herself only become "real," take on objectivity, by participation in the state.

Michel Foucault has shown in great detail how what Hegel considered the ideal has become a baleful reality. The institutions of civil society—the party, the union, the school, the church, the prison—have an educative or disciplinary function which realizes the state project.[41] Surveillance has become a general feature of Western society, a feature that is one with state hegemony but does not depend on a totalitarian center to enforce its rule. The power of Foucault's Panopticon image is precisely that *self*-discipline becomes the norm, reinforced by the pedagogical function of the apparently free institutions of civil society. As Michael Hardt argues in an essay entitled "The Withering of Civil Society," it is perhaps most descriptively accurate to say that there is no longer any significant distinction to be made between civil society and state, the two having been fused to such a great extent.[42] For example, government regulation—much of it for good ends—reaches into every facet of society and every type of activity. Furthermore, fully a third of the U.S. economy is implicated directly or indirectly with the state, and government is increasingly seen as a bureaucratic provider of goods and services whose primary job is to serve its "customers," a fact which Boyte himself laments. In arguing against the voluntarists, Boyte acknowledges the extent to which spaces in state, business, and civil society have come to resemble each other because they have been colonized by the rationalization

of the market. He singles out the managerial culture of the mega-church, with its emphasis on attracting new congregants by providing them specialized service, as a particularly bleak example.[43] Today's gods do not respect the neat divisions between state, civil society, and economy, a point made sharply by Michel de Certeau:

> Seized from the moment of awakening by the radio (the voice is the law), the listener walks all day through a forest of narrativities, journalistic, advertising and televised, which, at night, slip a few final messages under the door of sleep. More than the God recounted to us by the theologians of the past, these tales have a function of providence and predestination: they organize our work, our celebrations—even our dreams—in advance. Social life multiplies the gestures and modes of behaviour *imprinted* by the narrative models: it continually reproduces and stores up the "copies" of narratives.[44]

If this interpenetration of state, society, and economy is indeed the case, then appeals to the idea of free space outside the state may not be sufficient for the creation of true alternative spaces. Indeed, a project like Public Achievement can be seen as fulfilling the kind of educative or disciplinary role that Hegel and Foucault envision for the institutions of civil society. Embedded in Public Achievement's definition of freedom, for instance, is an anthropology that allows assimilation to a democratic capitalist order but is not so easily assimilable to a Christian anthropology in which a person's ends are not chosen but given by God. If Christian children's "public identities" are being formed to be citizens of the nation-state, those same students can perhaps be forgiven for forgetting that by baptism their "citizenship is in heaven," as Paul tells the Philippians (3:20), and that their fellow citizens are the saints, as the Ephesians are reminded (2:19). In other words, it is difficult to conceive of the church as a "free space" when we have been self-disciplined to avoid public Christian language even within our own schools.

In both the Murrayite and the Boyte models, the price to the church of admission to the "public" is a submission of its particular truth claims to the bar of public reason, a self-discipline of Christian speech. In the case of Public Achievement, particular Christian ends—such as an especial care for the poor before considerations of self-interest—are subjugated to a purely procedural search for consensus among a diversity of ends, none of which can ultimately claim a larger warrant than what issues from self-interested choice. Political theorist Romand Coles criticizes Boyte's pragmatism for its propensity—contrary to Boyte's intentions—to silence minority positions and unpopular claims to some measure of truth. An emphasis on drawing together many diverse voices can foster a need to converge *prematurely* around common goals. Coles argues that proposals to change the terms of

political discourse that seem "absurd" or "divisive" to the mainstream are in danger of being silenced. "Pragmatic politics can foster poor listening and a restless intolerance toward those who speak from angles and in idioms that are foreign to many in the organization or those in the middle to whom an organization would appeal."[45] Thus although Boyte holds up the black church as a model of a "free space," it is not clear how he could accommodate as public the outrageous truth claims some black churches might want to make, claims such as "Jesus is Lord, and not just for us." An even deeper problem, however, is the fact that Public Achievement, despite its claims, does present as given one ultimate end: the renewal of American democracy. On this point there is no talk of a diversity of ends; the achievement of American democracy is simply presented as the *telos* of one's actions and the proper object of one's faith.

Murray is at least clear that the public consensus is built not upon self-interest but upon God-given truth. Nevertheless, the Murrayite project represents the self-disciplining of the church's ability to make theological claims in public. Theology must submit to what "the public" can consider reasonable, where "the public" is understood in terms of the nation-state. Christian symbols must be run through the sausage-grinder of social ethics before coming out on the other end as publicly digestible policy. As Talal Asad has shown, however, religion as a symbol system theoretically detachable from communities of discipleship is a modern invention which facilitated the absorption of the church into the modern secular state. For the Himeses, ritual and symbol are generically distinct from instrumental or pragmatic actions. Christian symbols function (as Clifford Geertz maintains) to elicit motivations which are then translatable into publicly available actions. Christian symbols can elicit transformations apart from participation in a community of discipleship. However, as Asad points out in his study of medieval—especially Benedictine—practices, ritual was never imagined as a distinct activity separate from a complete program of Christian discipline and discipleship. Indeed, religious symbols are never separable from bodily practices of discipline and power; it is simply that in the modern West the primary locus of discipline has become the state-society complex, and the church has been essentially transformed into a semi-private voluntary association.[46]

The great irony, then, is that in trying to arrange for the church to influence "the public," rather than simply *be* public, the public has reduced the church to its own terms. Citizenship has displaced discipleship as the church's public key. In banishing theology from the public sphere, the church has found it difficult to speak with theological integrity even within the church. The flows of power from church to public are reversed, threatening to flood the church itself.

It is little wonder that many people find liturgy, sacrament, and doctrine to be irrelevant to the "real world" of social problems. Christian symbol

floats free from the church, which theologically is a social reality in its own right. Christian symbol must be translated and replaced in order to escape ghettoization. In the Christian tradition, by contrast, the liturgy is more than a generator of symbols for individual consumption. It is, as the original Greek *leitourgia* suggests—and despite Public Achievement—the true "work of the people," the *ergon* of the *laos*. The church gathered around the altar does not simply disperse and be absorbed into civil society when God's blessing sends it forth. The liturgy does more than generate interior motivations to be better citizens. The liturgy generates a body, the Body of Christ—the Eucharist makes the church, in Henri de Lubac's words—which is itself a *sui generis* social body, a public presence irreducible to a voluntary association of civil society.

As this critique suggests, I think the deepest problem with the two models of civil society we have been examining is their anemic ecclesiology. Their search for a public Christian presence which is neither private nor in the thrall of the state simply bypasses the possibility of the church as a significant social space. Missing is even a basic Augustinian sense that the church is itself an alternative "space" or set of practices whose citizenship is in some sort of tension with citizenship in the *civitas terrena*. For Augustine not the *imperium* but the church is the true *res publica*, the "public thing"; the *imperium* has forfeited any such claim to be truly public by its refusal to do justice, by refusing to give God his due.[47] For the Murrayite and Boyte models, on the other hand, what is public is that space bounded by the nation-state. To enter the public is to leave behind the church as a body. Individual Christians, fortified by "basic orienting attitudes," can enter public space, but the church itself drops out of the picture. The church is an essentially asocial entity which provides only "motivations" and "values" for public action. Christians must therefore find their politics and their public role elsewhere, borrowing from the available options presented by the secular nation-state. If we wish to go public, we must take on the language of citizenship. When Catholic schoolchildren embrace the plight of undocumented workers they are told they are being "citizens," unaware that the very fact that these workers are denied citizenship is the cause of their plight.

The Church as Public Space

What would it mean to construe the church as a public space in its own right? First we must be more precise about what "public" means. In one sense I have been using the term negatively to mean "not private," that is, not confined to the individual or the home. It would be a mistake, however, simply to accept the dichotomy of public and private as it is currently construed. In the Christian tradition, the home is not simply private space, simply *oikos*, in part because the home is always open to the community

through the practice of hospitality (Luke 10:3-11), but also because the church itself is a new "family" that breaks down the isolation of the old family unit (Mark 3:20-35). As John Paul II says in his "Letter to Families," the family through the church opens up to a wider "public" space, the widest imaginable; the family is the "fundamental 'cell' of society" whose task is to extend its own "communion of persons" to the creation of a "civilization of love." John Paul reminds us that etymologically the word "civilization" is derived from *civis*, or citizen, but this meaning should not be confined to what is ordinarily construed as the civic or political; "the most profound meaning of the term 'civilization' is not merely political, but rather pertains to human culture."[48]

The church appears then as a term which is neither *polis* nor *oikos*. Ephesians 2:19 uses both "public" and "private" language simultaneously: "you are citizens (*sympolitai*) with the saints and also members of the household (*oikeioi*) of God."[49] The early Christians borrowed the term *ekklesia* or "assembly" from the Greek city-state, where *ekklesia* meant the assembly of all those with citizen rights in a given city. The early Christians thus refused the available language of guild or association (such as *koinon*, *collegium*) and asserted that the church was not gathered around particular interests, but was interested in all things; it was an assembly of the whole. And yet the whole was not the city-state or empire, but the people of God. As Gerhard Lohfink points out, the ultimate source for the language of *ekklesia* is not the Greek city-state but the assembly of Israel at Sinai. In Deuteronomy the foundational assembly of Israel at Mt. Sinai takes place according to the formulaic phrase "the day of the assembly."[50] In using the term *ekklesia* the church understood itself as the eschatological gathering of Israel. In this gathering those who are by definition excluded from being citizens of the *polis* and consigned to the *oikos*—women, children, slaves— are given full membership through baptism.

The gathering of Israel is made possible by certain detailed practices, structured by the Torah, and oriented toward the exclusive worship of God. What makes these practices "public" is that no aspect of life is excluded from them. The Law makes clear that what one does with one's money, one's body, one's neighbor, even one's feces are all within the ambit of the people's worship of God, and all these practices combined form a distinctive body of people. In the church, the practices of the liturgy, the creeds, the scriptural canon, hospitality, binding and loosing, the exercise of episcopal authority, all constitute the church as a distinctive public body.[51] Augustine goes beyond saying that the church is public like the Roman Empire is public, however, arguing that the Empire is not public at all because its practices are not oriented toward the worship of God. A true *res publica* is based on justice, which must include giving God his due in sacrifice, for only when God is loved can there be love of others and a mutual acknowledgment of right. According to Augustine, the true public thing is

thus constituted by the Eucharist, which offers true sacrifice to God and makes the church into Christ's body.[52]

Having discussed what it means to call the church "public," we need also to be more precise about what it means to call the church a "space." One option here is to produce a two-dimensional mapping of the nation-state, then configure the borders of the church on this grid. Those borders could be drawn as coterminous with the borders of the nation-state (theocracy), or as an isolated island geographically within the nation-state but not participating in it (Amish), or as a space within "civil society," that is, within the national borders but outside the state apparatus (Murray). What these models have in common is the map, a formal figure of abstract places from which the dimension of time has been eliminated.[53] Placing the church on such a grid is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. In medieval theology, the temporal indicated a time between the first and second comings of Christ, during which the coercive sword of civil authority, under the tutelage of the church, was "temporarily" necessary. One need not endorse the Constantinian arrangements of medieval Christendom to lament the fact that in modern times the temporal has become not a time but a space, a realm or sphere, one which is usually located *outside* the spiritual realm occupied by the church.

There is a much richer concept of space to be found in the work of Jesuit social theorist Michel de Certeau. Certeau contrasts the "place" (*lieu*) of the map with "space" (*espace*). Place is a static order in which all the elements are arranged in their proper location, *beside* one another, no two things occupying the same location. The map produces a place by means of an abstract, two-dimensional grid produced by observation, allowing surveillance and control of a particular territory. After the fifteenth century, maps gradually replaced itineraries, which had described journeys or pilgrimages in terms of the actions prescribed at different points (e.g., spend the night here, pray at this shrine). Such itineraries describe not place but space. A space takes into account the vector of time, such that different spaces are created by the ensemble of movements and actions on them. Space is produced by people performing operations on places, using things in different ways for different ends. According to Certeau it is stories that "organize the play of changing relationships between spaces and places."[54] For example, the stories told in history books (Manifest Destiny) and on the evening news induce belief in a national territory, which mobilizes certain actions such as participation in war. The stories told by Native Americans might, on the other hand, refract space in entirely different ways, and mobilize other types of actions. In theological terms we can think of Certeau's work here as a gloss on Augustine's conception of the two cities. They do not exist beside each other on a territorial grid, but are formed by telling different stories about ends, and by thus using matter and motion in different ways.

The Eucharistic liturgy can be understood as what Certeau calls a "spatial story," an operation performed on matter and place—in this case by God, with human cooperation—which produces a different kind of space. The liturgy is not a symbol to be "read," its "meaning" formally detached from its signs, internalized by the individual, and smuggled as "attitudes" or "values" into another space outside of the church. Just as eating and drinking together do not merely symbolize a family, but help to constitute a family, so eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ transform the partakers into a body with a social dimension. For this reason the discipline of the Christian community has since the very beginning taken the form of excommunication; who is and who is not partaking of the table defines the spatial limit of the community gathered around the table.

David Schindler uses the home-cooked meal to illustrate how the family is a different practice of space. The home-cooked meal, Schindler says, is itself a different economy, one which *transforms* material objects and reconfigures space and time. Lest this be seen as a quaint and strictly private practice, Schindler describes how the Christian is called to extend this space into ever wider circles; the task of the church is to "domesticate" the world, to heal the homelessness and anomie of the modern condition by extending the "community of persons" that exists in the family—and that mirrors the Trinitarian life—to the whole world. The church does this by performing actions on matter and motion, space and time.[55]

To speak of the church as a public space means, then, that Christians perform stories which transform the way space is configured. The preeminent "spatial story" is that of the formation of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. Imagine if Christian students, such as those involved in Public Achievement, were trained to see others not through the lens of self-interest but as fellow members of the mystical body of Christ? Why not tell them that in taking action on the plight of undocumented workers they are not reinforcing the borders of the national territory defined by "citizenship," but rather building up the body of Christ, which transcends those borders, and in which all—Christian or not—have a share? This approach shares with Boyte a concern to move beyond the image of the unitary "public square" to the fostering of a multiplicity of free spaces that are nonetheless fully public. Far from a withdrawal, this approach asserts the full public currency of the most basic Christian convictions. Furthermore, the international nature of the church challenges the sectarian narrowness of the nation-state for which citizenship stops at the border.

To take the church seriously as a "free space" would mean more than encouraging Christians to look for the public elsewhere. Boyte's work helpfully suggests that our imaginations have been limited by a narrow focus on one public forum supervised by the state. When Christians approach the creation and use of material goods, for example, we have been trained to think in terms of "economic policy," by which is meant the conversation in

civil society and state among banks, the Federal Reserve, corporations, labor unions, Congress and other concerned parties over how the state ought to manage or not manage the flow of money, taxes, tariffs, etc. When framed in these terms, the only responsible reaction seems to be lobbying. Under certain circumstances lobbying—or, better, "witnessing"—may be helpful. The most fruitful way to dialogue with those outside of the church, however, is through concrete practices that do not need translation into some putatively "neutral" language to be understood. A significant response would be creating spaces in which alternative stories about material goods are told, and alternative forms of economics are made possible. For example, churches in my area have already begun to establish relationships with CSA (community supported agriculture) farms. In CSAs, a community is formed by buying shares of a farm's produce at the beginning of the growing season, thus sharing the risks involved in farming. The community is invited to help with the work of the farm and receives the benefits of its produce. In a significant and material way, the imagination of globalization is short-circuited and replaced by an alternative economic space which gives priority to personal relationships, community responsibility, a livable income for farmers, and a direct stewardship of the land from which our food comes.

The irony implicit in the models of civil society I have examined is that in our attempts to do social justice and to make theology public, we in fact consign the church to public irrelevance. Public theology is simply not public enough. What is lost is an important possibility of challenging in a fundamental way the dreary calculus of state and individual by creating truly free alternative spaces, cities of God in time.

NOTES

[1] Among many examples, see Andrew Arato, *Civil Society, Constitution, and Legitimacy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Benjamin R. Barber, "The Search for Civil Society," *The New Democrat*, no. 7 (March/April): 1995; Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Harry Boyte, *CommonWealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989); Sara Evans and Harry Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). For a history of the concept, see John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

[2] John Courtney Murray, SJ, "The Problem of Religious Freedom," in *Religious Liberty: Catholic Struggles with Pluralism*, ed. J. Leon Hooper, SJ (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 144. Murray does not appear to deal with the problem of transposing the homogeneous wholeness of the term "society" from the complex of overlapping personal loyalties which constituted medieval Christendom.

[3] Ibid., 144-5.

[4] John Courtney Murray, SJ, "The Origins and Authority of the Public Consensus" in *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 109-23.

[5] Murray uses the terms synonymously, saying that "public philosophy" emphasizes objectivity of content, whereas "consensus" emphasizes a subjectivity of persuasion; Murray, "Two Cases for the Public Consensus: Fact or Need" in *We Hold These Truths*, 79.

[6] Murray, "The Origins and Authority of the Public Consensus," in *We Hold These Truths*, 98-106.

[7] Adolf Berle, quoted in Murray, "The Origins and Authority of the Public Consensus," 101.

[8] Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 84.

[9] Ibid., 116-17.

[10] George Weigel, *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 116.

[11] Ibid., 115.

[12] Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, OFM, *The Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 14-15.

[13] David Tracy, quoted in ibid., 16.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 22-3.

[16] Ibid., 55-73.

[17] Harry Boyte, Nancy Kari, Jim Lewis, Nan Skelton, and Jennifer O'Donoghue, *Creating the Commonwealth: Public Politics and the Philosophy of Public Work* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, n.d.), 18.

[18] Harry C. Boyte, "Off the Playground of Civil Society," *The Good Society* 9, no. 2 (1999): 1, 4.

[19] Boyte's book *Citizen Action and the New American Populism*, co-authored with Heather Booth and Steve Max (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986) consists almost entirely of such case studies. Boyte's *CommonWealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* interweaves such case studies with a more general democratic theory.

[20] See James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). Scott's earlier work includes a fascinating book called *Weapons of the Weak*, a study of poor people's ordinary ways of resistance to power, which typically involve foot-dragging, false compliance, sabotage, and the like, and not more dramatic revolutionary uprisings.

[21] Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 17-18.

[22] Ibid., 26-68.

[23] Boyte, "Off the Playground of Civil Society," 4-5.

[24] Ibid., 4-5. For Barber's position, see his *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998). Habermas likewise writes of the "self-limitation of civil society" to those spheres outside of the economy and the state, since both state bureaucracies and markets are now too complex to be directed by democratic processes; see Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 366-73.

[25] Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 202.

[26] Boyte, "Off the Playground of Civil Society," 5-6. Boyte has in mind especially *A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths*, a statement put out in the summer of 1998 by the Council on Civil Society, chaired by Jean Bethke Elshtain. The statement had a wide range of signatories, from Cornel West to Republican Senator Dan Coats of Indiana. For a summary of *A Call*, see www.americanvalues.org.

[27] *Building Worlds, Transforming Lives, Making History: A Guide to Public Achievement*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Center for Democracy and Citizenship, 1998), 1. This is the training manual for coaches and participants in Public Achievement.

[28] Boyte, et al., *Creating the Commonwealth*, 23.

[29] *Building Worlds, Transforming Lives, Making History*, 1.

[30] The students and teachers of St. Bernard's were cited by Governor Jesse Ventura in his 1999 State of the State address for their successful attempt to build a new playground.

[31] Boyte, et al., *Creating the Commonwealth*, 18.

[32] *Building Worlds, Transforming Lives, Making History*, 40.

[33] Ibid., 23.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Boyte, et al., *Creating the Commonwealth*, 14.

[36] *Building Worlds, Transforming Lives, Making History*, 39. Public Achievement is differentiated from the "civics approach," which stresses receiving goods and services from the government, and the "communitarian approach," which can become too narrowly focused on the interests and experience of one relatively homogeneous group. For Boyte's own criticism of interest-organizing, see his *CommonWealth*, 12-13.

[37] Ibid., 23. Self-interest appears to be a legitimate starting point provided it result in public action. Thus Public Achievement at St. Bernard's is described as "a vehicle for students to act on their self-interest in public ways around work to make change"; Boyte, et al., *Creating the CommonWealth*, 15.

[38] Ibid., 16.

[39] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), §257.

[40] Ibid., §256.

[41] See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 293-308.

[42] Michael Hardt, "The Withering of Civil Society," *Social Text* 45, vol. 14, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 27-44.

[43] Boyte, "Off the Playground of Civil Society," 5. Examples of the interpenetration of state and society can be multiplied. One that comes immediately to mind is the official encouragement given to corporate mergers by government "regulators." What debate there is over such mergers is conducted around the question, "Will this particular merger be good or bad for consumers?" People are defined as consumers, not citizens, by state management of the debate.

[44] Michel de Certeau, "Believing and Making People Believe" in Graham Ward, ed., *The Certeau Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 125.

[45] Romand Coles, "Toward an Uncommon Commonwealth: Reflections on Boyte's Critique of Civil Society," *The Good Society* 9, no. 2 (1999): 26. As examples of prematurely silenced forms of discourse, Coles cites "supporting non-anthropocentric ecological ethics, animal rights, radical bending of gender roles, challenges to mainstream political, economic, and cultural practices from the vantage point of small minority positions."

[46] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-54.

[47] St. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), XIX, 21-2.

[48] Pope John Paul II, "Letter to Families," 13.

[49] See Reinhard Hütter, "The Church as 'Public': Dogma, Practice, and the Holy Spirit," *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 334-61.

[50] Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?: Toward a Theology of the People of God*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 218-20.

[51] Hütter, "The Church as 'Public.'"

[52] Augustine, XIX.21-3, X.6.

[53] Michel de Certeau explains what happens when the "trajectory" (we might substitute the word "pilgrimage") is replaced by a mapping. The category of "trajectory":

> "was intended to suggest a temporal movement through space, that is the unity of a diachronic *succession* of points through which it passes, and not the *figure* that these points form on a space that is supposed to be synchronic or achronic. Indeed, this "representation" is insufficient, precisely because a trajectory is drawn, and time and movement are thus

reduced to a line that can be seized as a whole by the eye and read in a single moment, as one projects onto a map the path taken by someone walking through a city. However useful this "flattening out" may be, it transforms the *temporal* articulation of places into a *spatial* sequence of points . . . ." (Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 35).

[54] Ibid., 118. See 34-42, 115-30.

[55] David L. Schindler, "Homelessness and the Modern Condition: The Family, Evangelization, and the Global Economy," *Logos* 3, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 34-56.