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Civil Society and Congregations as Public Moral Companions

GARY M. SIMPSON

Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota

FIFTY YEARS AGO WORLD WAR II ENDED, BUT THE RAGE OF NATIONS DID NOT. SINCE 1989, rage erupts less often between nations but more often within a single national border. Today the rage of nations percolates internally in the United States through the very capillaries of everyday life, and even in our heartland. The metaphors that saturate our daily discourse signal this raging: "culture wars," "the disuniting of America," "the melting pot at boiling point," "drive-by politics," "hate radio."

Fifty years after America's victory abroad will we suffer defeat at home? Will the American experiment simply overheat and explode? Something deeply moral is at stake in our nation's capillary rage. Conceivably this rage, as a moral thermometer, measures the decreasing possibility for the good life of an increasing number of ordinary residents.[1]

In the midst of this morally charged situation might not Christian congregations hear again the call to a *public vocation*? As we ponder this prospect, two questions will guide our inquiry. First, where might Christian congregations locate

[1]See, for example, Robert D. Kaplan's widely read "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994, 44-76, which appeared in newspapers across the country, and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

GARY SIMPSON is associate professor of systematic theology. His book, Christian Theology and Critical Social Theory, *is forthcoming from Fortress Press.*

a *space* in which they might attend to the public moral meaning of everyday rage? That public space, which we will explore, is "civil society." Second, how can this public space of civil society be *accessed* so that its moral possibilities can be maximized? We will explore "communicative moral practice" as the best model for accessing the moral possibilities of civil society. What a communicative civil society needs as it grapples with the moral meaning of our nation's capillary rage is the congregational vocation of "public moral companion."[2]

I. Civil Society—Enriching Our Impoverished Public Spaces

Already before the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union, central and eastern European dissidents were focusing on the renewal of civil society even in the highly restricted version in which it existed within the Soviet field of influence. Preliminarily speaking, civil society names "the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology—that fill this space." These dissidents raised their fledgling democracies by breastfeeding the multifarious social networks of churches, unions, neighborhoods, movements, and societies "for promoting and preventing this and that."[3]

In the United States we have lived with civil society for numerous generations. However, and especially in the fifty years since World War II, ordinary people in their everyday lives have come more and more to take it for granted. This everyday neglect has led to the impoverishing of this valuable public space. Our increasing rage stands as a sign of the times of a diminished civil society.

The United States's entry into both fronts of World War II necessitated the cooperation of the two mega-systems of modern life in our country: the democratic state and the market economy. Our victories in World War II had much to do—not everything, but much—with the successful cooperation of these two great systems

[2]The congregational vocation of public moral companion does not, of course, preclude other possible vocations. Furthermore, all congregational vocations stand intimately and distinguishably coupled with the congregation's fundamental missional identity as public witness to salvation through Jesus Christ (see Marc Kolden, "Creation and Redemption; Ministry and Vocation," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 14 [February 1987] 31-37). The mission statement of my own institution, Luther Seminary, strives in a similar way to claim a distinguishable togetherness between ministry and vocation: "Luther Seminary educates leaders for Christian communities called and sent by the Holy Spirit to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ and to serve in God's world." My attempt in this article is to particularize the last phrase, "to serve in God's world," with a morally reflective and sociologically viable congregational strategy for the United States. For an especially winsome explication of the clause, "to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ," see Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

[3]Michael Walzer, "The Idea of Civil Society," *Dissent* 38 (1991) 293. A more thorough investigation which draws on the seminal thinking of Jürgen Habermas is in Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, "Politics and the Reconstruction of the Concept of Civil Society," in *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, ed. Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarty, Claus Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992) 121-142. Peter Drucker, in a widely read article, has recently turned his attention to the significance of civil society—which he refers to as "the social sector"—and to the contributions which religious communities can make within it ("The Age of Social Transformation," *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1994, 53-80).

of our modern life. The success of these great systems in the war effort progressively lured, even seduced, larger numbers of ordinary Americans ever since to fixate our greatest attention and energies on the so-called "real world" of these great systems, to the detriment of the public space of civil society.

This growing, everyday fixation by ordinary American people on the market economy and/or the democratic state draws on two of the rival western heritages formulated over the last two centuries. Each of these intellectual heritages divulges something true about the pursuit of the good life in the modern era, but each also does so too onesidedly. The first is the neo-classical republican tradition which was proposed by Rousseau. This account highlights the moral agency of the *citizen* which has been the key for democratic idealism ever since. In the republican heritage the democratic political *state* is the public space of highest worth and citizenship is the telos which all other moral agency must serve.

The most telling criticism of this heritage is not that a democratic politics isn't good; it certainly is. I would argue vigorously that the democratic state is even the best possible state, given the modern era. The problem is that even though the democratic state significantly touches the breadth of ordinary living—and for the larger part does so beneficially—paradoxically, it is not the everyday life of very many ordinary people. The attention, time, and energy of ordinary people is necessarily focused on earning a living.

Earning a living awakens the second great western heritage: the market capitalist tradition. This heritage spurns the republican fixation on the democratic state and focuses instead on the *economy* as the place where moral agency will bring about the good life. Specifically, the *marketplace* is that space of highest worth. With "market" as the root metaphor, even the moral agency of economic production plays second fiddle to the consumptive path to the good life. The autonomous agency of personal, private choice satiates the spirit of the market heritage. Catering to the consumptive, choosing appetite are the entrepreneurs, who, perhaps even more than consumers, seem "much the best thing to be," as Michael Walzer puts it. In this *laissez faire*, classic liberalism, economic production, consumption, and entrepreneurship must remain liberated from the state. Even the democratic state must keep its "hands off" the economy, thus the minimal state.

The onesidedness of the market capitalist heritage shows up in at least two ways. Some, and this number is growing, come to the marketplace with far too few resources of their own to purchase the goods needed in order to participate effectively in our modern society. Many, and this number is also growing, come to the economic marketplace with enough or even an abundance of the consumptive and entrepreneurial resources in order to participate, but do not find the good life in this space. They find, instead, a meaningless, even a "heartless world." Many in this latter group search for a "haven" from the heartless world of the marketplace, which is usually some cocooning space of private intimacy like the nuclear family or the familially fashioned congregation. Disturbingly, far too many find the private spaces to be equally, if not more, heartless than the world of the economic marketplace or the democratic state. Such heartlessness reveals that our private

intimate spheres remain fragile and cannot flourish without being rooted in and accountable to the broader moral networks that constitute civil society.[4] Furthermore, our private spaces too easily become colonized under the consumptive strategies of the economic marketplace as well as under the administrative necessities of the democratic state.

Tragically, neither of these heritages thematizes "civil society," thus their onesidedness. This fact, coupled with our post-World War II fixation on either the political or the economic sphere, or even on some creative combination of the two—which is a gain!—has contributed to the neglect and impoverishment of this morally significant public space. In our everyday world we revel in our cultural heritages, we coordinate our actions as groups according to mutually recognized norms, and we develop individual and social identities. These key features of our everyday world—cultural embodiment, social integration, and socialization—have both a symbolic-metaphorical-linguistic dimension and an institutional dimension. Civil society as a public space corresponds to the institutional dimension of our everyday world.[5] Enriching civil society will diminish the colonizing effects of the marketplace and its media of money as well as of the state and its media of administrative power. At the same time, enriching civil society will provide the more private spaces of our everyday world with a richer moral milieu than is possible when each solitary individual—or family—is trying to stitch together its own moral fabric.

Congregations traditionally exercise great influence regarding the symbolic-metaphorical-linguistic dimension of the three basic tasks associated with the everyday world of life. Still, in the contemporary situation the ongoing survival and lively reproduction of the life world needs the institutional dimension which we have called "civil society." Here is where a plurality of institutional embodiments can come together for the mutual enrichment and recreation of a lively moral milieu. The multiplicity of struggling and often isolated institutions native to civil society are beginning to cry out to one another for help. Given a morally rich enough texture to civil society, even economic and government institutions could enter this space without dominating it, which would also bring valuable moral assistance to these institutions and their systemic worlds. By giving ear to these cries for help from civil society, Christian congregations are recognizing a

[4]Christopher Lasch's account of the family, *Haven in a Heartless World* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), remains flawed precisely because he does not account for the heartlessness of the family "haven" itself, leaving Lasch unable to locate and access the moral resources which families themselves desperately need today. See Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, for a trenchant account of the ideology of familial intimacy that infects much congregational life today.

[5]See Wolfhart Pannenberg's theological analysis of "institutions" as an approach to the reformation teaching about the "orders of creation" in *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 397-416. Robert Bellah and his associates correctly portray the difficulty that many Americans have in understanding how much of our everyday life is lived in and through institutions (see *The Good Society* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991] 3-18). Though much is good in this book, these authors, too, do not make "civil society" a theme. This remains a major flaw in their conceptualization of "the public church," where "God Goes to Washington" is the beginning of their analysis.

renewed calling, a public moral vocation. As the public moral companions of the institutions of civil society, what kind of access to the moral possibilities of civil society is available to congregations?

II. Models of Moral Access to Civil Society

During those times when Americans have attended to civil society, three models of this public space have functioned to give institutions and Christian congregations access to its moral possibilities: the agonistic, the liberal, and the communicative.[6] Historically the first two have dominated the American imagination and practice, which dominance, as we will discern, has also contributed to the current impoverishment of civil society. In the agonistic model, the dominant practices of civil society revolve around a competitive struggle among rival versions of personal moral virtue. In the agonistic model of civil society, each rival tradition presents itself as a pure, self-sufficient, and cohesive totality of virtue. The moral virtuosos of a tradition vie for pre-eminence over other traditions by displaying themselves as publicly as possible. These virtuosos strive to gain the acclaim of the majority of citizens who begin as passive onlookers, continue as active imitators, and finish (at least an elite minority) as admired moral masters. These agonistic practices lead to the dominance of a single agenda of personal virtue along with the diminution, assimilation, or outright elimination of rival traditions. Furthermore, with the agonistic model, civil society remains particularly susceptible to the technological temptations of the now ubiquitous sound bite. Conventional clichés, simplistic stereotyping, and either/or scenarios exhaust the moral possibilities. Communitarian heritages often promote this model and so do certain Christian movements with a more sectarian slant.[7] The advantage of the agonistic model is that personal virtues for practical face-to-face living are cultivated though the economy and politics as systems are shielded from moral consideration. The social costs remain steep.

The liberal model of civil society originated in order to squelch the moral totalitarian consequences of the agonistic civil society. In the liberal model, moral discourse is subject to the conversational constraint of neutrality whenever a single moral tradition asserts that its moral conception of the good life is superior to others. The constraint of neutrality prohibits not only agonistic "trumping," but also "translating" moral disagreements into a supposedly neutral framework as well as "transcending" moral disagreements by imagining some hypothetical circumstance. Rather, moral traditions must agree not to disagree in public and, instead, must confine moral disagreements to private spheres. Not only is the act of disagreeing privatized but also the very terrain of controverted subject matters

[6]Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992) 73-98.

[7]The most influential contemporary version is that of Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon in *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989). My proposal of the congregational vocation of public moral companion contrasts sharply with the Hauerwas-Willimon "colony" proposal and with other solely "contrast community" visions of the congregation.

is privatized. The liberal civil society accedes more and more morally relevant issues to the private sector economy or lifestyle intimacy or religious conscience. Along the way the liberal model also privatizes the congregation. By shuttling the potentially most significant moral issues to private spheres, the liberal model, of course, is trumping certain other moral formulations. Paradoxically, the practices of the liberal model contribute to the withering away of the very space of civil society itself.

In the midst of these two traditional models of civil society a new model, the communicative model, is emerging.[8] A communicative civil society shares certain features with the dominant models. Like the agonistic model, and unlike the liberal model of neutrality, it welcomes and, indeed, accentuates questions of moral truth that have practical import for the everyday world of life. Unlike the agonistic model with its characteristic practices of elitist moral display and purist moral trumping, the hallmark of the communicative civil society is that claims to practical moral truth must be redeemed critically through participatory practices. Participatory procedures and practices empower traditions and institutions that are affected by a moral claim to have a say in the formulation, stipulation, and adoption of moral norms. Boldly stated, one could say that communicative civil society "comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity."[9] By elevating participatory and communicative aspects, the communicative model eschews the totalizing and colonizing tendencies also at the heart of the agonistic model without, however, succumbing to the liberal model of public moral neutrality. The communicative civil society extols the capacity for creative moral possibilities embodied within communicative practices themselves while also focusing on the systematic distortions that accompany the self-interested monologue of any single moral tradition.[10] Furthermore, the communicative model rescinds the overly rigid boundaries between the public and private and, instead, allows for overlapping terrains of public and private life.[11]

III. Congregations as Public Moral Companions

Vocations are the places and ways that anyone and everyone, knowingly or not, participates in God's ongoing creative work to bring, nurture, and sustain temporal life in the world. In trusting the gospel of Jesus Christ, we acknowledge

[8]See my "Human Nature and Communicative Ethics," *dialog* 33 (1994) 280-287, for an introductory essay on communicative ethics and for a more complete bibliography of this emerging trajectory of moral reflection.

[9]Benhabib, "Models," 105.

[10]Communicative ethics, like Reinhold Niebuhr, exercises a sharply double focus on both human moral resources *and* self-interested limitations (see especially Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932] xxiv). Niebuhr's subtitle, *A Study in Ethics and Politics*, manifests the weakness of his account which overlooks the public space of civil society as well as the communicative access to that space.

[11]See Nancy Fraser, "Talking about Needs: Interpretive Contests as Political Conflicts in Welfare-State Societies," *Ethics* 99 (January 1989) 291-313.

these places and ways as God's creative work on behalf of our neighbors and ourselves as God's creative companions. Like an individual, a congregation has a variety of vocations in which to bring God's creative work to bear on the life of our neighbors and our neighborhoods. Today, the building up of the moral milieus that make life in our public communities possible commends itself as just such a calling. Civil society is the location for this vocation of public moral companion, and communicative moral practice is the best model for nurturing the modern moral milieu. Admittedly, behind my proposal for a "communicative" civil society breathes a doctrine of God, of humans in the image of God, and of the first use of the law in which the reformation's theology of the word in a communicative mode would more fully unfold.

Congregations participate in the moral life of the community in two ways at once, one more internal and the other more external. Internally, congregations have often assisted families in the task of the moral formation of their members, in particular of the young, and this will continue as a prime moral vocation of the congregation. As they engage in this vocation of moral formation, congregations sometimes fall prey to the temptation to view themselves as private Christian enclaves, alienated, isolated, and protected from the truth claims of other moral traditions. However, in our ever more pluralistic public environment, innumerable traditions make claims upon congregations that bid them to offer justification, in the sense of ethical grounding, for the truth character of the moral formation imparted in congregational life. In this way—among other, even more important, ways—a congregation exists as a meeting place of private and public life.[12]

As the meeting place of private and public life, congregations respond with integrity to their more external moral vocation as public moral companions. Today, an increasing number and variety of the institutions of civil society need moral companions who will encounter with them the moral meanings latent in the problems of contemporary life. Of course, this is a risky vocation, because Christian congregations do not have a corner on the moral wisdom needed in many conflicted situations. As a public moral companion, a congregation becomes an encumbered community, encumbered with the moral predicaments of the other institutions of civil society. Christian congregations, however, are no stranger to an encumbered life, to a life of the cross. Herein lies the redemptive moment characterizing every vocation when encumbered companionship puts to death a congregation's enclosed centrality.[13]

In summary, consider certain marks that characterize the congregational vocation of public moral companion. As public moral companions, congregations acknowledge a *conviction* that they participate in God's ongoing creative work. In a communicative civil society, congregations exhibit a *compassionate commitment* to

[12]See Martin E. Marty, "Public and Private: Congregation as Meeting Place," in *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 133-166.

[13]Kolden, "Creation and Redemption," 36.

other institutions and their moral predicaments. The commitment of moral companions always yields a *critical* and *self-critical*, and thus fully *communicative*, procedure and practice of moral engagement. Finally, as public moral companions, congregations participate with other institutions of communicative civil society to *create* and *strengthen* the moral fabrics that fashion a life-giving and life-accountable contemporary society. ⊕