THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

Human Dignity within Secularity, in the Light of a Theology of Church and Kingdom

by
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This contribution will attempt to situate the contemporary debate on the meaning of human dignity within secularity in the context of Christian theology. Historically speaking, Christian theology has been a crucial source for the ethical concept of human dignity. Much philosophical and theological controversy—as well as widespread public concern and attention—is focused on whether, and in what ways, Christian faith and Christian theology can continue to be a source of this fundamental ethical idea.[1] This essay will focus on these questions by exploring a number of key relationships within theology, relationships which seek to hold in tension both the particularity and universality of Christian faith, its identity in Jesus Christ and its affirmation of universally shared humanity. These relationships are: Christ/Spirit, Church/Kingdom, Witness/Service. By drawing together the common threads in these relationships, the paper hopes to draw attention to the key challenges

[1] In his editor's introduction to *The Moral Status of Persons: Perspectives on Bioethics* (Amsterdam/Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2000), Gerhold Becker notes that the "concept of personhood encapsulated a theological doctrine about human life and its destiny based on the faith in a personal God, whose Incarnation in Christ revealed the mystery of his own Trinitarian nature. Thus the sanctity of human life and the dignity of human personhood, while not identical, became synonymous expressions of respect for the divine act of Creation." (4). Becker's introduction to this volume notes that this theological background is no longer a shared basis for the concept of personhood and highlights the range of contributions from Western and Eastern thought which explore its theological, philosophical and ethical parameters in contemporary thought.

for Christian witness to human dignity within secularity, understood as a common space of shared life and discourse for those of different religious and philosophical world-views.

I The Joachite Tradition: the "Age of Christ" and the "Age of the Spirit"

First of all, I would like to recall the significance of the "Joachite" thread in Christian theology and history, stemming from the twelfth-century Calabrian abbot, Joachim da Fiore. Joachim's ideas are a key historical source of patterns of thought and action which focus both on the Christ/Spirit relationship and the tension between Church and Kingdom.[2]

The thought of Joachim of Fiore was an attempt to interpret the doctrine of the Trinity in explicitly social and historical terms. His ideas raise a number of issues in the understanding of the relationship between Trinitarian faith and our expectations of social community within human history that remain important to this day. Joachim's deepest concern was to link the Trinity to history in a fundamentally apocalyptic perspective. In his various meditations and symbolic interpretations of Scripture, Joachim sought to do this by interpreting the two testaments through the notion of three ages of history, each age associated with a person of the Trinity.[3] The first age, the age of the Father, was the age of the Law, the Old Testament; the second age, of the Son, is the age of the Church; the third age will be the age of the Spirit, characterized by an immediate knowledge of God, by worship "in spirit and truth."

On the basis of this historical doctrine of the Trinity, Joachim accused Peter Lombard of speaking of a "quaternity" in the definition of the Trinity in his famous *Sentences*, since he spoke of a common nature notionally distinct from the three persons: "the blasphemy of Peter, who by dividing the unity from the Trinity introduced quaternity."[4] In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council defended Peter against Joachim's criticism and condemned

[2] For an important assessment of the influence of Joachim's ideas, see Norman R.C. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Paladin, 1970), especially 108-113.

[3] Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). 16-20.

[4] Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought.* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 164.

Joachim's own conception of the Trinity as deficient in the divine unity, which he "conceives not as true and proper, but, so to say, as collective and by similitude, just as many people are called one nation, and many faithful one Church."[5]

The Lateran Council's concern focused on Joachim's "collective" doctrine of the Trinity. Later in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas's critique of Joachim's teachings focused rather on his association of the three persons with three "ages" of salvation history. Article 4, of Question 106 of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa* is devoted to the question "Whether the New Law will last until the end of the world?" Thomas emphasized the centrality of Christ for salvation until the end of time, rejecting the notion of a third age of the spirit. The point particularly criticized by Aquinas was that Joachim's notion of the third age of the Spirit posited a differentiation in the history of the world, and of the Church, between Pentecost and Parousia, a differentiation that appeared to relativize the definitive character of Christ for all time. For Aquinas, "the New Law too does not belong only to Christ but also to the Holy Spirit: "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" etc. (Rom 8:2). So we are not to look forward to some further law proper to the Holy Spirit. Since Christ began his preaching of the Gospel by saying "The Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17), it is absurd to say that the gospel of Christ is not the gospel of the Kingdom."[6]

[5]"The Error of Abbot Joachim," in J. Neuner SJ and J. Dupuis SJ, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (London: Collins, 1983), para. 317, 107. However, "the condemnation was carefully phrased so as to avoid branding Joachim himself as a heretic and to safeguard his reputation." In 1220, Pope Honorius III ordered a public declaration throughout Calabria that Joachim was not a heretic and that "eum virum Catholicum reputamus"; cf. Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy,* 32. Joachim was to be praised in Dante's *Paradiso* as "Calabria's abbot […] Joachim, spirit-fired and prophet true" (XII, 141). *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Cantica III: Paradise*, trans. D. Sayers and B. Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 161.

[6] *Summa Theologiae*, volume 30: 1a2ae 106-114, ed. C. Ernst, OP (Blackfriars, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), 19. Joachim's notion of the "age of the Spirit" has continued to provoke debate in contemporary theology. Jürgen Moltmann, in his "Christian Hope – Messianic or Transcendent? A Theological Conversation with Joachim of Fiore and Thomas Aquinas," in *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), argues that Joachim's notion of the "age of the Spirit" does justice both to the Christological and the eschatological dimension of the Spirit. "Thomas Aquinas failed to recognize that when he ecclesiasticized the Spirit in his argument and declared that the Church itself was part of the time and state of the Holy Spirit" (101-2). I am myself more inclined to accept the judgement of Yves Congar and of Walter Kasper that

II Church, Kingdom and Secularity

The principal theological questions that arise from Joachim's work today are, therefore: Can we speak meaningfully of an "age of the Spirit," which is in some sense distinguishable from the "age of Christ"? Does this mean, in turn, that we can speak of an "age of the Kingdom" which is distinguishable from the "age of the Church"? If not, what stimulus can Joachim's ideas give to our sense of the relationship between Christ and the Spirit within this "final age," the *saeculum*, the age of the Church which extends from Pentecost to Parousia?

The medieval—and modern—controversy over Joachim da Fiore's notion of the "age of the Spirit" can help to focus our reflection on the relationship between Church and Kingdom. Thomas's insistence that the "New Law will last to the end of the world," and Augustine's emphasis that there will be no differentiation within the *saeculum*, express the fundamental Christian conviction that there can be no "age" in human history which in any sense transcends the time when the Church witnesses to Christ in patient hope for the coming of the Kingdom. There can be no "age of the Spirit" which can be distinguished from the "age of Christ": within this *saeculum*, this present age of pilgrimage, the power of the Spirit is to make Christ present to all people in all times and places. An "age of the Spirit" cannot, therefore, be one which relativizes the role of Christ in the salvation of the world or the role of the Church in witnessing to him. From the perspective of Christian orthodoxy, this is the essential flaw in any religious or philosophical project that envisions a spiritual content in which Jesus Christ no longer plays a definitive role. This is true of a pluralist theology of religions.

talk of the "age of the Spirit" does run the risk of weakening the bond between Christ and the Spirit in the time between Pentecost and Parousia. As Kasper argues, in his *The God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1984), "The new thing which the Spirit brings is that he constantly makes Jesus Christ present anew in his eschatological newness […]. This means that we are continually linked to the humanity of Jesus and that the tension between letter and spirit cannot be overcome through historical progress" (209). Cf. also Y. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York/London: Seabury Press/Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), volume 1:128. A rejection of any distinction of "ages" in the time between Pentecost and Parousia is implicit in the affirmation of Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum*, para. 4, that: "The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Tim 6:14 and Tit 2:13)."

It is also true, in a different way, of all those philosophical humanist projects since the Enlightenment—perhaps influenced by Joachim's vision—which have acknowledged the contribution of Christian faith to the "education of humanity," to use Lessing's phrase, but consider it now to be transcended by self-conscious humanity. Any understanding of the secular which sees itself as "transcending" Christianity in this sense becomes part of an ideology of secularism, rather than simply the acknowledgment that we live in a common space characterized by freedom of conscience.

Sharing this common space, the Christian Church respects whatever is genuinely humane in these philosophical commitments, and most of all the varying paths to wisdom and holiness of the other great faiths. Yet, at the same time, part of its insistence that the "age of Christ" will never be superseded or relativized is a critical challenge to any humanist or spiritual vision that ceases to put concrete human suffering at its center. The urgent need to constantly recollect this imperative has always been a challenge for the Church itself. Christian faith has at its center the suffering of the Word-made-flesh in a concrete individual, Jesus of Nazareth. It makes the claim that all spiritual visions are judged and tested by this event, the reconciling presence of God-with-us and one of us amidst the absurdity of human suffering. The "age of Christ," which will encompass all of human history until the end of time, is the age in which no spiritual vision can claim validity unless it keeps before its gaze the suffering of the human person in his or her concrete individuality.

The positive meaning of the "age of the Spirit," which is also and at the same time, the "age of Christ," is in its affirmation of the boundlessness of the Kingdom, its discernible presence in all human contexts and cultures.[7] In this "age of the Spirit," understood synchronically, the Church recognizes that the Kingdom exceeds its own boundaries, and that it waits together with all humanity for the "liberty and splendor of the children of God" (Rom

[7] This universal presence of the Kingdom, and the need to relate it to the kingdom of Christ, are both emphasized in John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio,* 20: "It is true that the inchoate reality of the kingdom can also be found beyond the confines of the Church among peoples everywhere, to the extent that they live 'gospel values' and are open to the working of the Spirit who breathes when and where he wills (cf. Jn 3:8). But it must immediately be added that this temporal dimension of the kingdom remains incomplete unless it is related to the kingdom of Christ present in the Church and straining towards eschatological fullness." (Vatican Website, www.vatican.va, English edition.)

8:21).[8] It can recognize the work of the Spirit in all human actions and institutions which seek to respect and embody values that are in harmony with the Gospel. The presence of the Spirit in all times and cultures means that the Church can be challenged to deepen and enrich its own response to Christ through the stimulus and even provocation that it receives from the most unexpected quarters.

For an understanding of secularity, what is vitally relevant in a theology of the relationship between Christ and the Spirit in history is the relationship between the experience of moral and spiritual value and its ultimate ground and meaning. The presence of the Spirit within all history means that values in harmony with the Gospel can be experienced in many different contexts, inside or outside the Church. Because of this, the common space of secularity can share these values, regardless of their origin. In many cases, they will spring from the historical influence of the Christian heritage, the positive fruits of Christendom. In others, they may have a more explicitly philosophical origin, or be part of the wisdom of other religious traditions. These values, the fruits of the Spirit, can be experienced through their own self-evidence, their sheer power to enrich and enlighten, to liberate and encourage. In this "age of the Spirit," the values of human dignity and human

[8] In his *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Maryknoll: Orbis 2002), John Fuellenbach notes that Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* clearly emphasized the distinction between the Kingdom of God in human history and the coming Kingdom in its eschatological fullness (e.g., *Lumen Gentium* 5: The Church "receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is, on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom. While she slowly grows to maturity, the Church longs for the completed kingdom and, with all her strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with her king.") Yet, in his judgement, it is arguable whether Vatican II really made the distinction between the Kingdom in history and the pilgrim Church itself, and that this distinction was only clearly made in later documents, in particular *Redemptoris Missio*, as noted above. Those who argue that Vatican II did distinguish between the pilgrim Church and the Kingdom in history emphasize *Lumen Gentium*'s characterization of the Church as a sign or sacrament of the Kingdom: "Hence that messianic people, although it does not actually include all men, and at times may appear as a small flock, is, however, a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race […]. All those, who in faith look towards Jesus, the author of salvation and the principle of unity and peace, God has gathered together and established as the Church, that it may be for each and everyone the visible sacrament of this saving unity" (9). For Fuellenbach, a "theological fruit of non-identity" of Church and Kingdom in history is that "it shows how the work for justice and liberation inside and outside the church is intrinsically linked with the kingdom present now, since the ultimate goal of the kingdom of God is the transformation of all reality" (82).

solidarity can be a part of the common space of followers of different creeds, without a shared background of belief. Yet, because this is at the same time the "age of Christ," the question of the source and ground of these values cannot be avoided. Within our human history, so marred by sin and suffering, who can give us hope that these values are not illusory, that they will not succumb to our brokenness, but are rather formed and tempered by the reconciling embrace of that brokenness?[9]

III Service and Witness: A Christological Perspective

This understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Kingdom can give us a foundation for understanding the relationship between service to others and Christian witness in secular society. When Jesus is asked by the disciples of John, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect some other?," he responds: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." (Lk 7:22-23) Jesus' response, harking back to Luke chapter 4:18-19, and in turn to Isaiah 61, presents the "program" of the Kingdom, the ways in which the in-breaking of the Kingdom can be palpably experienced in the healing of human beings, in liberation and the restoration of dignity. But at the same time it is a statement about Jesus himself, it is the answer to the disciples of John: "blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." The good news of the Kingdom can be stated in terms of the fullness of human life, but it cannot be divorced from the one who proclaims the Kingdom, who makes a particular challenge to personal discipleship.[10]

[9] For David Hollenbach, in his "Social Ethics under the Sign of the Cross" in *The Global Face of Public Faith: Politics, Human Rights and Christian Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003), an ethics that goes beyond mere self-defensive survival must seek the ultimate reality, and so the ultimate question, vital for all who seek a social ethic, is: is ultimate reality God as Enemy or as Friend? Drawing on Aquinas's theology of the Cross as a sign of God's compassionate friendship with humanity, Hollenbach interprets the sign of the Cross as "an invitation to interpret the ultimate mystery surrounding the fragments and pieces of human history as the reality of compassionate friendship" (64).

[10] For François Bovon, in his *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1—9:50* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), Jesus' words in these Lucan passages emphasize the present palpability of the Kingdom: they "should not be understood purely metaphorically for

This passage highlights for us some key themes in the relationship between Church and Kingdom. The Kingdom, the eschatological fullness of creation, transcends the Church and is the destiny of all humanity. The Kingdom can be experienced here and now in all those graced acts and events in our lives which communicate something of the fullness of human destiny. In this sense, it can be described in ethical, human terms, even, in a sense, "secular" terms, as Jesus does so describe it—the signs of the Kingdom are that "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk and the lepers are cleansed." In contemporary terms, this understanding of the Kingdom as sensed and anticipated in works of healing and restoration of dignity is quite compatible with a secular commitment to human welfare, in the sense of a commitment that is focused simply on the needs of human beings in ethical terms. Service to human beings is, simply in and of itself, a work for the Kingdom.

In whatever contemporary context, secular or religious, Christian theology gladly affirms that authentic service to human beings—especially the radical care summed up by the phrase "the lepers are cleansed"—is motivated by love. Yet it does raise a question concerning hope: the meaning of the Kingdom is that the signs and anticipations that we witness in these works of healing will find their fullness in a life beyond death, a life "in which every tear is wiped away" (Rev 21:4). In this hope, we transcend a secular ethical perspective, daring to affirm that the sorrows of this life can be transformed to joy in the next. Are our works of service and healing a commitment to other human beings in the face of death, beyond which no human mutual service can pass, or a response to intimations of a future

spiritual benefits, after death or the Parousia. Jesus' speeches and miracles will show that salvation reaches the entire person even now" (154). At the same time, his healing of others is also a sign of his own Messianic role: in both of these passages Jesus' interpretation of his works of healing is as an "actualization of prophecy through the schema of prophecy and fulfillment" (282), a prophecy of the Messiah as bearer of the Spirit (154). Luke T. Johnson also emphasizes that Luke 7:23 "asks that the works of healing and preaching be accepted as signs of the prophetic Messiah through whom God is visiting the people"; cf. *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina. Collegeville: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1991), 122. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, volume VII, ed. G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), in its article σκάνδαλον ("offence"), emphasizes the eschatological character of Jesus' response to John's disciples in this verse: it is a challenge to make a decision about Jesus, since "every beatitude and every woe (cf. Mt 18:7) on the lips of Jesus is an eschatological judgement […].The macarism here is closely connected with the depiction (on the basis of Is 35:5 and 61:1) of salvation that has already come. The present age of salvation is also an age of decision" (350).

fullness which only God can bring about? In this sense, the Kingdom is present in ethical service, but the meaning of that service is obscure without faith in the Kingdom as radically future.

This means that, for Christians, witness must go hand in hand with service. Service has its own integrity in ethical, human terms. In itself, it is quite compatible with secularity, in the sense of a commitment to other human beings which is agnostic about the religious or transcendent meaning of human existence. Yet service must be accompanied by witness if the ultimate meaning and direction of that service is to be understood. While service has its own self-evident goodness, it can be radically nourished and strengthened by the hope that witness can inspire. This witness is given primordially by the Church, which bears witness that the signs of the Kingdom we experience in acts of loving service will be fulfilled in the eschatological Kingdom. Further, since the Church remembers and makes present the self-offering of the risen Christ, it already experiences that fullness in a sacramental way, celebrating in the midst of humanity for the sake of all humanity.

Through faith, the Church confidently proclaims the eternal destiny of the human person, despite the obscurity of that destiny in this world. Yet this faith does not insulate members of the Church from all that threatens human dignity in this life. Faith can give consolation in suffering, but does not lessen its force, which is shared with all as part of the human condition. In suffering, all human beings, whether agnostic or believing, experience absurdity, the absence of meaning, especially as suffering so often destroys works of loving service or goes beyond the limits of our capacity to respond. The experience of suffering brings home to us the radical difference between religious faith and other kinds of knowledge. Faith is a seeing in darkness, a hope in a love and goodness that is so often belied in experience (Hebr 11:1). In the midst of suffering, Christian witness focuses more and more on Christ, the suffering servant, on the paradox of the crucified Son of God. The challenge of this witness was summed up by Jesus himself: “blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me” (Lk 7:23).

The meaning of accepting Jesus, and not finding him an “offence,” is expressed in the character of our response to all those whose need calls for the ministry of the Kingdom. It is this response which is, in fact, our decision about Jesus himself. This is nowhere emphasized in Scripture more than in Matthew 25:31-46. This passage, unique to Matthew, although often called “The Parable of the Last Judgement,” is not in the form of a parable but is

rather the conclusion of an eschatological discourse, "the unveiling of the truth which lay behind all the parables in chapters 24-25."[11] It has the character of solemn assertion about our ultimate destiny. As it makes clear, the criterion of our salvation lies in our acts of mercy towards those we encounter in need within the circumstances of ordinary, historical existence. It is those specific acts which will testify to the genuineness of our response to the love of God. Each of them, in the descriptive detail of the narrative, is to do with service to the need of our neighbor in conditions of poverty, hunger and distress. In that encounter with our neighbor in distress we encounter Christ: our salvation is realized in these acts because they are a response to Christ in the person of our neighbor. The incarnation of the Word has its anonymous manifestation in the real presence of Christ in those in need of our service. The text of Matthew 25 affirms the eternal significance of historical acts of solidarity, through which we acknowledge the love of the Word-made-flesh.

The key Christological passages of *Gaudium et Spes* argue that this identification of Christ with every human being is a truth implied by the incarnation itself. In paragraph 22, which affirms that Christ reveals to us the mystery of our own humanity, the union of Christ with humanity is interpreted in both universal and highly individual terms: "Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare. For, by his incarnation, he, the son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man." The implications of the Paschal mystery are understood in a similar way in the same paragraph: "For, since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal

[11] John P. Meier, *Matthew*, New Testament Message 3 (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1980), 302. I find Meier's argument persuasive here, since the narrative focuses directly on our encounter with the Son of Man; for an argument that this text is, nevertheless, a parable, cf. W. Carter and J.P. Heil, *Matthew's Parables: Audience-Oriented Perspectives*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series (Washington DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1998), 208. Donald Senior, in his *Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) argues that the works of love referred to may describe the love with which the Gentiles are to receive Christian missionaries, rather than love of neighbor in a universal context, but in both the more universal interpretation and his own, "fidelity to the love command […] becomes the decisive criterion of divine judgement" (285).

mystery."[12] And in its final paragraph 93 the Pastoral Constitution re-affirms that "the Father wills that in all men we recognize Christ our brother and love him effectively, in word and in deed."[13]

This mystical union of Christ with, and presence in, every human being is clearly given considerable theological weight in *Gaudium et Spes*. This presence is both universal and particular, and at the same time anonymous. As Matthew 25:37 makes clear, those who served Christ in the hungry, thirsty and imprisoned did not know that they had done so. The needy and bereft are described in Matthew 25:35-36 in the same straightforward human terms as the program of the Kingdom in Luke 4 and 7. Service to them is service to a fellow human being, and can be authentically understood in those terms. Yet, without doing violence to the humanity and individuality of each person, service to that person is also service to Christ—and not merely figuratively, but as a matter of theological truth.

The anonymity of Christ in the person in need gives us a guide for a Christian attitude to secularity. Service to that person is in itself a service to Christ, without any need for interpretations which in any way distance this service from the concrete humanity of the one before us. Their humanity requires no interpretation in other terms or contexts of meaning: Matthew emphasizes that those who served Christ had no idea that they were doing so. Service to that person, in their concrete need, would be rendered less attentive and less respectful if it was coupled with an insistence on Christian witness. It demands respect for the conscience and beliefs of that person: any imposition of religious or other meaning, which has nothing to do with service itself, threatens to replace service with manipulation or indoctrination. The ethical task of service must retain its own integrity. Yet, in its own proper context, Christian witness to Christ's identification with that person can be a unique form of service.

[12] Austin Flannery, *Vatican II*, 923, 924. In his commentary on chapter one of the document, "The Dignity of the Human Person," the then Joseph Ratzinger notes that "we are probably justified in saying that here for the first time in an official document of the magisterium, a new type of completely Christocentric theology appears," which "dares to present theology as anthropology" (159). Christ taking to himself human nature means that the human nature of all human beings is Christologically characterized (160); cf. Commentary on the *Documents of Vatican II*, H. Vorgrimler, ed., *Volume 5: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (New York/London: Herder and Herder/Burns and Oates, 1969).

[13] Flannery, 1001.

IV The Church and Human Dignity within Secularity

What do these Christological themes, linking Church and Kingdom, witness and service, indicate for the contemporary relationship between the Church and secular society?[14] Since the Church affirms the values of human dignity, freedom and justice as values that anticipate the Kingdom, then it can affirm much of the project of secular liberal society, understood as the attempt to form a common life based in freedom of conscience. It can respect the liberal state's agnosticism about the transcendent sources of meaning, since that affirms freedom of individual conscience in religious matters. The secular character of the state, in this sense, also frees the Church from the temptations of wielding civil power.

The secular character of modern liberalism, at its best, implies a belief in human dignity and human rights that is an ethical "given": of its nature, it can make no publicly shared appeal to transcendent foundations or destiny. Its force comes from its self-evidence: this self-evidence can be and is reinforced by many human stories of suffering, compassion and sacrifice which are publicly shared through the national media or local experience. Yet the way we interpret and respond to these stories and events is also formed by wider and deeper narratives, which, thankfully, tend to give such acts of compassion and self-giving a specially respected place in liberal culture. We are also painfully aware how that compassion can be conspicuously absent for certain minority groups, and how often it is superficial, short-lived and unsupported by practical assistance.

In his "In search of humanity: human dignity as a basic moral attitude,"[15] Gerhold Becker draws attention to the divergence between the low opinion

[14] In his *Christ and Human Rights: The Transformative Engagement* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), George Newlands notes that very little has been written on the relationship between Christology and human rights: "there are, however, important areas of reflection and practice which overlap with both Christology and human rights. These include humanity before God, righteousness and justice, mercy, reconciliation, and hospitality. Christ is often seen in the Christian tradition as the center of forgiveness and generosity, of commitment to marginality, to specific sorts of strangers" (8). He argues, however, that the relevance of Christology to human rights is strongly contested in contemporary society because of the "extremely ambiguous record of Christianity in relation to human rights through the centuries" (11). In particular, he points out that the relationship of Christology to human rights has varied in the tradition according to the influence of different images of Christ, for example, the contrast between Christ as implacable judge and as fellow sufferer (63).

[15] In *The Future of Value Inquiry*, eds. M. Häyry and T. Takala (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2001), 7:53-65.

of the concept of human dignity held by many professional ethicists and its prevalence and importance in the constitutions and foundational legal documents of many nations, as well as of the United Nations Organization. As Becker argues, this "astonishing asymmetry" needs explaining.[16] While many moral philosophers see the concept of human dignity as an empty formula and a "useless relic of the moral past" which vainly attempts to preserve an echo of Christian theology,[17] many nations—most of all the Federal Republic of Germany—see it as the foundation of their common ethical life.[18] Becker notes that a number of moral philosophers contend that their profession should be given pre-eminence in ethics committees because of their expertise, and rejects this argument in favor of an emphasis on the practical and intuitive nature of morality.[19] This applies particularly to the concept of human dignity—what for some professional ethicists is merely an "empty formula" remains, to judge by its prevalence in key documents, a crucially important affirmation for those who seek to defend and preserve human rights and ethical decency: "Human dignity draws its moral force not from a particular and well-defined philosophical conception but from the intuitive appeal of the ordinary language of respect for the human person and her inherent worth […] though the idea was originally derived from a particular religious world view and humanistic tradition, it may still be worth defending even and particularly within the conditions of secular society."[20]

The reality of our shared ethical recognition of human dignity and human poignancy, as well as the reality of its often restricted scope, and its fickleness and fragility, give us some indications of the task of the Church in bearing witness to the Kingdom in a way that serves all members of society. Yet part of that task is careful reflection on the mode of communication itself. How can the Church communicate its support for human dignity

[16] "In search of humanity: human dignity as a basic moral attitude," 56.

[17] "In search of humanity," 53.

[18] As Becker notes, citing Haim H. Cohn, of the Supreme Court of Israel ("On the Meaning of Human Dignity," *Israel Yearbook on Human Rights*, 234) the Constitutional Court of the German Federal Republic does not give the concept of human dignity a merely declamatory value, but affirms it as an "actually binding constitutional norm of the highest rank." "In search of humanity: human dignity as a basic moral attitude," 54.

[19] "In search of humanity," 57. Becker affirms the expertise of ethicists in clarifying complex technical and scientific issues, but not in terms of a "higher wisdom" than the general public in their sensitivity to ethical values.

[20] "In search of humanity," 60.

in ways that respect the secular character of society? For John Rawls, in his "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," the essence of a concern for "public reason" is a matter of respect for others, for civility or "civic friendship": public reason demands that the reasons we give in public life, reasons that can justify coercive laws and public political institutions, are reasons that are, at least in principle, both intelligible and acceptable to others, so that the normative status of these laws and institutions can be justified to all citizens, in relation to the common good, in terms that they might reasonably accept.[21] Laws and institutions should not be based directly on the beliefs and imperatives of "comprehensive doctrines," including religious doctrines, but rather on some shared basis of public reason. From a Catholic perspective, this requirement is an important expression of freedom of conscience: citizens should not be forced to obey laws or conform to institutions which are directly mandated by a particular religion. Civil institutions must be based on a shareable conception of the common good, rather than on the beliefs of any particular religion.[22]

On this basis, if Christians seek to contribute to public political life, it must be in ways which do not invoke the specific content of their religious beliefs, but rather in some way express the implications of that content in publicly shareable terms. They have the task of discerning the ethical and political meaning of their religious faith, and of articulating that meaning in particular contexts, without seeking to impose the content of their religious faith itself on others. Such are the constraints of civility in liberal and pluralist societies, the constraints of public reason. Acceptance of this constraint can be the expression of a positive desire to serve others, to respect their freedom of conscience by confining advocacy to forms of expression which appeal to whatever can be evoked as common human experience. A sensitivity to the religious freedom of others will be aware that an insistence on particular religious doctrine may be heard simply as an appeal to a particular group identity, or a recounting of opaque claims to authority, rather than as an invitation to reflect on our common human situation. At the

[21] *The Law of Peoples with "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 137-8.

[22] I share the view of Patrick Riordan SJ, in his "Permission to Speak: Religious Arguments in Public Reason," *Heythrop Journal* XLV (2004), 178-196, that Rawls's conception of public reason is in harmony with Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom), insofar as basing public political life on the religious beliefs of a particular group would amount to a violation of the freedom of conscience of citizens who do not share those beliefs.

same time, Christians, by the nature of their discipleship of Jesus Christ, are called to be faithful to the identity of the Christian Gospel: in seeking to serve their fellow citizens, they must also bear witness to the Gospel and its proclamation of eternal life, which infinitely transcends the priorities of any human society. A Christian contribution to public life must therefore be characterized by both a sense of service and a sense of identity, both a desire to evoke and share the common ethical truths that ground a society of mutually recognized rights and a fidelity to the particular truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the same essay, Rawls argues that religious "comprehensive doctrines" appropriately play a role in the "background culture" of a society, and that they can act as sources of motivation for individual citizens' allegiance to democratic values and practices, as part of the "overlapping consensus" that undergirds those values and practices. They do not normally have a place in the language of the judiciary or of public political institutions—in particular of elected officials or those seeking public office. Yet, taking a "wide view of public political culture," Rawls does accept the validity of their contribution in the public political forum subject to an important "proviso": "reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support. This injunction to present proper political reasons I refer to as *the proviso*, and it specifies public political culture as distinct from the background culture."[23] How to satisfy this proviso, he argues, "must be worked out in practice and cannot feasibly be governed by a clear family of rules given in advance. How they work out is determined by the nature of the public political culture and calls for good sense and understanding."[24]

In my view, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," particularly through its deployment of the "proviso," does present a fair and balanced view of the appropriate use of religious language in the different contexts of contemporary liberal society. If the secular character of society means that reference to the Christian sources of human dignity in the "public political forum" does need to be subject to this "proviso," there is every reason why the Church, in the "background culture," has the task of situating the sheer "givenness,"

[23] "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 152.

[24] "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 153.

the intuitive quality, of human dignity in a grounding and sustaining narrative, in theological reflection and communication, in communal ethical life and in sacramental practice.[25] By an active presence in our culture, the Church can bear witness to the source and destiny of human dignity in creation and Kingdom, can prophetically challenge any denial of compassion and dignity to out-groups, including the unborn and the terminally ill, and can encourage fellow citizens in their understanding of our common lives as held together by acts of sympathy and self-giving.

[25] As Christopher Insole argues in his *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism* (London: SCM Press 2004), Rawls's "proviso" expresses a pragmatic approach which does not stipulate rules in advance (46). For Insole, the only claim that cannot be accommodated by the later Rawls is "the claim that a religious believer should not, in any circumstances—even in a pluralistic culture when discussing the use of public power in the case of a stand-off—be required to introduce non-religious reasons when communicating with citizens who do not share those reasons" (62). While I accept Rawls's general argument in "The Idea of Public Reason," it is crucial that references to the "background culture" are not construed as limiting the public relevance of religion in a broader sense than the formal exercise of political power and legal judgement. As David Hollenbach notes, "to be sure, reciprocal reasonableness constrains what can be done in the name of religion. But it is also the case that serious religious discourse in civil society and the background culture can have significant impact on what citizens at large judge that they can reasonably affirm." *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 167.