From Personal to Private, From Political to Public Religion

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The Cushwa Lecture, like the Cushwa Center, promotes the study of American Catholicism in public life. The Cushwa lecturers and those who are part of the Cushwa Center well know that they have nothing to talk about except for the grounding of that public faith in personal life. I hope to serve the lectureship, the Center, American Catholicism, and all who care about religion, the academy, and public life, by reflecting in this first lecture on the meanings of "personal," especially since they can easily drift into the concept of "private," and on the meanings of "public," since they are often confused with the concept of "political."

" 'When I use a word,' " Humpty-Dumpty said, " 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.' " That is how some people look at all acts of defining. Yet we do not have to be completely arbitrary about terms, even if they point to very complex realities. While I do not wish to make this a dictionary exercise, I thought the Oxford English Dictionary would be a good place to begin tracing the meanings.

The writers of the Dictionary recognized our problem. Thus: "The varieties of sense [of the term 'public'] are numerous and pass into each other by many intermediate shades of meaning. The exact shade often depends upon the substantive qualified [e.g., 'the public ministry of Jesus,' 'public affairs,' a 'public hall'], and in some expressions more than one sense is vaguely present; in others the usage is traditional, and it is difficult to determine in what sense precisely the thing in question was originally called 'public.' "

The Dictionary goes on to provide over thirty definitions and examples, but never uses or needs the word "political" to help explain "public." We shall see, however, that in our society, in respect to the church, most people easily blend and confuse the two terms. When the Dictionary does get down to basics it says two things about "public": first, "pertaining to the people of a country or locality." And second, "in general, and in most of the senses, the opposite of 'private.' " Now we have a base, a starting point for making some important distinctions.

I. Personal Faith

In historic religion, especially in Catholic Christianity, there has been a space for private faith, meaning only that which is not visible as a public expression. When Catholics or other Christians have been serious about the specifically sacred dimensions of faith, they have meant "personal" more than "private," and we do well to separate the two in our culture. Let me begin, then, with a sort of hymn praising the qualities of *personal* religion.

Personal: this means that, as everyone must die by himself or herself, so each must believe by and for herself. When some friends tore open a roof in order to lower their paralytic companion through a crowd to Jesus, we read that "when Jesus saw *their* faith," he had compassion. Yet the transaction mattered when Jesus said, "your sins are

forgiven," and when the paralyzed man was subsequently given power to walk. Personal faith is a great treasure, the goal of the spiritual journey; the believer sees it as a gift of God. The philosopher says that "because we are present to a world, we are condemned to meaning." The sociologist says that the person in culture cannot tolerate a merely random world, a haphazard universe; he must endow his joys and sorrows; she must endow her fortunes and misfortunes, with meaning.

Personal faith follows one through the stages of life, shaping the "basic trust" which Erik Erikson and his colleagues in psychology say is vital for the infant, and still shaping the seniors as they make their passage to eternity. When the candle burns low and the family gathers, there is at least momentarily little concern for public life, even in the case of a public figure. Now it is all personal. The black widow's shroud and the white Resurrection pall both testify to the ways circles of grief and hope are infused with personal faith.

Personal faith affects the zones of intimacy, and helps provide a bond for friendships. "I do!" or "I will!" or "I baptize you!" or "I confess!" are typical ways people show that their ego, their self, is involved with the acts of faith. When temptation comes, as one wrestles against the bottle or in the face of executive choice, a person is not concerned with debates over public religion. How deep and rich are the resources for overcoming the temptation? Personal faith informs the view of the world, "inscape," Gerard Manley Hopkins called it. Such faith helps one appreciate singular things: this cup, this buttercup, this sunset, this smile.

Personal faith is not or has not been purely the invention of the moment. It recalls the strain of ancestors. It is communally based. Of course, one can come to the story of Christian faith by reading the Gideon Bible in a hotel room, but what has mattered is the fact of the Gideons who put it there, the communities which preserve, retell, and pass on the story. Yet their goal has never been to tell a story; they

want to make it *your* story. Any attempt to talk about public religion or the public dimensions of faith which forget personal piety, thought, and action, will overlook the enduring and urgent power base of anything that is to survive in the public.

II. Personal Turned Private

In modern culture, however, many of the aspects of personal faith in a religious communion are giving way to a corruption—or at least I hope to show that it is a corruption—from "personal" to "private." And if personal religion is the base of public faith, private religion is the thwarting of any possibilities of such public expression and summoning of forces. To make such charges stick, however, I shall have to show which meanings associated with "private" create these problems, since there is nothing wrong at all with the notion that personal faith has a right to exist in a sacred zone of privacy, where it must go to seek nurture.

"Private" today is taking on a color given it by those social analysts who speak of the "privatization" of religion as the end of a long process of religious change. In the evolution of religion in culture, the religious view and expression matched in every way all cultural views and expressions. In some ways there was no private sphere, since the sacred and the secular were not separate. Everyone in the tribe was initiated into one set of symbols and meanings, through one set of rites and ceremonies, informed by one set of stories and myths.

Through the centuries there has occurred what scholars call "differentiation," "particularizing," "specificity," a "universalizing" and thinning out of meanings. John Courtney Murray used to like to think of faith in its churchly form as a Thing with a capital "T." You could not get past it without noticing it and having to deal with it. Such faith could cause offense, inconvenience someone, raise curiosity, force decision, take action in corporate life, and save

someone. The privatization of religion removes the capital "T" from "Thing" and makes the substance and form of faith very elusive, invisible.

A string of sociologists from Max Weber and Emile Durkheim through the American Talcott Parsons to contemporaries like Peter Berger, Robert Bellah, and Thomas Luckmann have added their own colorings to the description of this privatizing process. Luckmann says that its end result in industrial society is "invisible" religion. John Murray Cuddihy once playfully condensed "modernity" in religion into the word "refinement." It calls us to be refined, mannered, careful not to offend, civilly polished. This leads people to say, "religion is a private affair," or "I happen to be a Jew," or "I choose to be a Catholic." At the same time, "refinement" means it is ground down and made inoffensive, like refined flour, refined sugar, the pumpkin refined into mush for the sake of piemaking.

The other aspect of modernity which affects the privatizing of religion is the way it impels choice. Berger reminds us that the Greek word *haeresis* behind our word "heresy" means to choose. Berger wrote a book on *The Heretical Imperative,* which even counselled people to pick and choose and form a faith for their own private sets of meanings. Tradition and community henceforth and necessarily were not strong enough to sustain the private search. Bellah noted that people would follow their own spiritual trajectory. They would momentarily attach themselves to a religious institution if it served their momentary needs, and then lose a sense of fidelity when the organization no longer directly or patently met those needs. Thomas Luckmann noted that it is the nature of modern, urban, mobile, industrial life to find one's private faith unsupported by either the primary or the secondary associations of life. In mixed marriages the family is not united. In a world of choice, the children go separate ways. The public school does not give a unified set of symbols in religion. Of course, in a world where church and state are separate, the government can-

not do so, and where commerce dominates, mass media will avoid the subject.

No villain, or at least no single kind of villain assured this corruption of personal into privatized faith. Most of it resulted from processes. We have technical terms for them. Some speak of "secularization," meaning the decline in religion or in its power to explain things in culture. More now speak of modernization as this process which relocates religion in the private sphere, causes the chopping up we call differentiation, forcing the act of choosing among options. Still others simply note pluralism, a result of life in a constitutionally free society rich in peoples and groups and choices.

There are other nuances. One can look at collective biography and see the process. Many scholars, communicators, literary figures, and public officials were brought up in what after adolescence they see as repressive or boring religious subcommunities. Liberated from these at college and critical of them ever after, they find that life goes on somehow, anyhow. They dismiss all the religion in the world as declining, insignificant, and powerless because their childhood faith no longer vivifies. In the process we produce a public that cannot comprehend and misperceives religion in an Iranian revolution, in Northern Ireland and in Middle East tensions, in the healing or reconciling as well as the conflict-heating aspects of life abroad and at home.

We often forget what historians are to remember, that the privatizing of faith is an event of modernity. "My own mind is my temple," said patriot Tom Paine. His greater contemporary Thomas Jefferson was a modern when he announced that if he had to go to heaven with a group he would not go at all. A century later philosophers William James and Alfred North Whitehead defined religion as individual and solitary activities, whose public dimensions have receded and hold little interest. The result is religion taken à la carte; it is a buyer's market.

I would do privatization a disservice to leave it without

noticing the assets that come with it, for here as so often in life the package deals with which we live have positives and negatives. There are positives. Private faith is born of something very beautiful: personal freedom, constitutionally affirmed, which allows for the integrity of each person's choice. Private faith honors the intrinsic value of religion: it shows how even in the modern world and maybe especially there the spiritual flame can burn, must burn. There is some beauty in seeing private faith as an internal transaction, not a mere formal attachment to external matters passing by.

There are problems, however, with privatized and invisible religion. The character of faith has, of course, changed with it, for people in biblical religion. In Israel God calls, forms, and leads a people in whose context the person emerges. In the New Israel God in Christ calls, forms, and leads a people spoken of as a "communion," or even as "the Body of Christ." Private faith is a hybrid of selectivities. Few can pass anything of it on to their children. Margaret Mead liked to say that the children of parents who live in and believe in no vital tradition have to make a mishmash of all the world's religions. Since private faith is my invention, I take command, and can rule out all critical or self-judging elements which would have played a part in saving me.

Private faith for the most part lacks social power; it cannot achieve change in the human city. For that reason many have called for, or have observed others calling for, a move out of the private into the political zone. Political religion helps feed people, produce justice, provide better laws, organize forces for good. It may do all of these, but we should in transit examine what all is involved in a move from private to political faith.

III. Political Religion

The phrase "political religion," so far as I can tell, entered our vocabulary through Abraham Lincoln, a biblically informed president who said that the content of his political

religion came from the sacral lines of the Declaration of Independence. Most of the time, however, it has come to mean the invisible religion turned visible, the disorganized religion becoming organized toward political ends, the life of the churches summoned to focus in the ballot box and the acts of legislation.

The Dictionary speaks of the "political" in these terms: "Of, belonging to, or pertaining to the state or body of its citizens, its government, and policy, especially in civil and secular affairs; public, civil; of or pertaining to the science or art of politics." For one moment, one word length, "public" enters the definition. For the rest it goes its own way, and I wish to push that "own way" to some length.

Bernard Crick has spoken of politics as the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole political community. "That's politics," we say: Catholics, homosexuals, Hispanics, feminists, Fundamentalists, WASPs, blacks all have to be in on the act. They will get too sullen and unruly if no one pays attention to their interests. Whoever wants to be elected will not examine their truth claims or comment on their validities. He or she will appeal to them, organize them, make them part of a bloc in order to gain and assert power. The more power such groups bring, the more proportional power they have to gain through conciliation.

Politics, Crick reminds us, cannot do everything. It cannot save souls, make sad hearts glad, sustain people at the point of death, delight them at the moment of their passages from one stage of life to another. When it does overreach and become the be-all and end-all of existence, the religionist who is prophetic discerns idolatry. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh" (*Psalm 2:4*) in the face of such pretensions and grasps. Jacques Ellul has spoken of the political "illusion," of "politicization" as the reduction of all life to political power, and seen the moves as spiritual evils.

Politics, however, can be a servant of faith and the believers' causes. Politics is a modest but still urgent art or science since it faces up to the violence that is history's dirty secret. Through meeting interests, using rhetoric, writing constitutions, passing laws, making compromises, it helps assure some measure of equity and justice and human welfare in that world of conflict. Political life is recognized as better than its alternatives, anarchy or the totalitarian abolition of free political activity.

Yet there are limits to political expression. When the public sees churches being "only political," as when they protect their interests, they do not see a reach beyond self-concern. Naturally, churches will march to Capitol Hill to protect tax exemption, specific policies, and the like. Almost as naturally, they now have all learned that there is no non-political place to stand in a political world. Not to take a stand is to take a stand. On those terms, the last great ethnic-interest group formed just before 1980 is the New Christian Right. Its leaders were explicit about their change. In 1968 they still thought that political religion—in the hands of Martin Luther King, the National Council of Churches, or Vietnam dissent—was beside the point, nay, sinful. Now they were sure that it was sinful not to participate. After such vivid switching, it was easier for more moderate and durable participants in political religion to go about their business.

When the New Christian Right, the Catholic Bishops, the black churches, the resolution-passing Protestant church agencies are explicit about political involvement, they know they take risks with their message and the loyalty of their own divided and often half-political flocks. They have to calculate whether the risks are worth taking in the light of possible losses. Are the causes urgent, do they need our help? Is there a danger that we shall by manipulation of electorates try to get our will and way, to pass into law a specific set of religious tenets? Will we be distracted from specifically spiritual causes appropriate to personal faith?

The most delicate aspect of political religion is this: religion in a free society cannot coerce, cannot tax, cannot raise armies, cannot force change of opinion. When leaders act as if it can, they live on borrowed time. In the 1960s some otherwise creative leadership began to live off the spiritual capital invested by previous generations. No, over the generations, religion has no political power except that rooted in the common vision, shared hopes, united prayers, cohesive stories, integral memories that call a group into a bond and commitment.

When leaders forget that, their political activity is accused of being unrepresentative, illusory, or even exploitative and phony. The accusers may not be right; at this point, I am pointing to risks, not necessary truths or valid claims. Yet the profound religious leaders in politics always knew that they must feed the spiritual life even as they acted: Dorothy Day, Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, King, Merton, Camara, and lesser and lesser known folks have known this. They have been people of prayer who stayed close to the story. The political organizations and expressions of the church served good human purpose but were not idolized as substitutes for faith.

Much of the confusion over the role of churches, I contend, results from the inability to make or see distinctions between this political species of public life and the public genus itself. To reduce all to politics or focus everything in politics is to make some premature and sometimes never-needed leaps. The public order, revisited, has much to offer as a penumbra informing politics. It provides more outlets for varied religious expression, more kinds of contacts congruent with the nature of personal, parochial, and communal faith.

IV. The Public Zone

To point – and we need now do no more than point – to the spheres of public, I wish to rely in very free paraphrase, almost stream-of-consciousness form – on Parker J. Palmer,

The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981). What and where is "the public"? The public is where strangers meet on common ground. The Catholic, the Jew, and the secularist meet for common purpose and contention, on terms or in an arena established constitutionally and by practice. Within my Lutheran sanctuary I may never meet the stranger who has valid claim on me, never influence the other, who might profit from my public concerns.

In the public, the fear of the stranger is faced and dealt with. Of course, one group may meet another in public and have more reasons than before to be fearful. Yet much of the problem between publics in a free society results from chaos and mystery formed of ignorance.

In the public sphere, people share resources and generate abundance. Believers may get new ideas concerning art, public service, and ways to conceive the republic when they bump into each other in a zone where no one group's resources suffice and yet where existing ones are not threatened. In public, conflict occurs and is addressed. When there is no public we nurse our private paranoid delusions, convince ourselves of the evil of Outsiders, and heighten tensions about which we can do nothing.

Christian people with their catholic riches know that in public, life gains color, texture, drama, and festive life. The Corpus Christi procession, the Medieval Morality Play, the cathedral-turned-mall were historic examples of catholic imagery turned colorful, dramatic, and festive in public life. Today the fair, the exposition, the gallery and concert hall and entertainment scene bring publics together for these purposes. People are drawn out of themselves, to share emotions: think of the difference between watching a comedy in private on television and sharing it in a lively theatre crowd.

In public, mutual responsibility becomes evident and mutual aid possible. When Christians turn public, they do

not necessarily confine themselves to political action. They may house the homeless and feed the hungry even before blind administrations are overthrown, to be replaced by administrations with other kinds of blindness. But no set of Christians can or need do the housing or feeding alone.

In public life, opinions become audible and accountable. Whisperings about conspiracy are enemies of public vitality. Nursed grudges, unheard complaints, unvoiced contributions belong to privatized religion. Faith has nothing to fear from having and using opinions and accounting for them. In public, vision gets projected and projects are attempted. The person who takes religion à la carte, the privatized one who manufactures a pick-and-choose smorgasbord of Zen-Catholic-Buberian-macrobiotic-eucharistic-self-esteeming delights cannot project a vision, for it has no social meanings or consequences. It is in public that people are empowered or protected against power.

Both the political and public worlds may use the same instruments, notably rhetoric, but to somewhat different ends, with somewhat different risks. Politics is not more tainted or tainting than other forms of public life; it has its own color and character of taint, and the church will not use all its corrupting power or be corrupted singly in this sphere. The public order does seem to have more self-correcting devices than does highly focused interest-serving politics. It would be pathetic, perhaps tragic, to use the call into the public as a means of distracting from necessary and salutary political action on the part of the churches. Yet it is the public sphere that the public overlooks when it assesses religion in society, and this needs examination and change.

The public tradition is grand, in Western faith. Israel moved among the nations and exposed personal faith to public view: it was to be a "light to the nations." Jesus's ministry was public, rarely confined to synagogue or Temple, where special meanings were to be shared. He took those special meanings into agora and street, voicing them from boats to crowds and letting people eavesdrop as he

walked in furrows of fields. The trial chamber was a more natural place for this ministry than the synagogue, though Jesus respected the place where personal meanings were nurtured and often withdrew to a "private place" to pray. He did not think almsgiving or the evidence of the heart's stirrings belonged in the public arena where trumpets could blow and ostentation signalled hypocrisy. Most of the time, however, he wanted the "secret" of the Kingdom to have public effect. He spoke of the believing community as a leaven, a salt, a light "of the world," which meant not just of the leavened, salty, lighted people.

The Church catholic depended upon personal faith but demanded public expression, and left Europe, much of the Western hemisphere, and many outposts of the Third World changed because of its public concerns.

If once upon a time the public came naturally, as part of a legal responsibility, today it is something to be worked at. A free society calls for voluntary moves into the public, and sees these as expressions of freedom. In a free society the instrument is never coercive; the churches use persuasive means.

If the public dimension is to become more urgent, more visible, and more to be celebrated, we can look to a generation in which a theology or set of theologies impelling believers into public order is cherished. Here one evokes other biblical and philosophical rationales than are applicable in personal, private, or even political expression.

A public theology has this distinctive mark, at least in the Christian world: there must be some theological legitimation of human activity beyond that which goes on in the Church. W.H. Auden used to parody Protestant evangelistic sermons: "We are all here in the world to save all the other people. What all the other people are for, we haven't the faintest idea." All the other people, singly and especially in gathered form, belong to the public theology scheme. The prophet Amos reminded Israel that the Lord of Israel was active beyond Israel. The Second Isaiah has

Yahweh speak of the Persian King Cyrus, who played a part in restoring Israel after exile, as the anointed, the shepherd of God's people even though he did not know the name of the Lord. Cornelius was God's instrument for good among Jew and Gentile though he evidently did not share the faith of Israel and had not yet been "born again" as a Christian.

From such biblical clues about the Lord of history, Christians have responded by devising numbers of theological interpretations of public order. Those who have no such resources, who see everything beyond the church as always and only demonic, anti-Christ-ian, and evil, can only be political, never truly public. It is this tendency that made the New Christian Right look like a player by new rules. Christians may use many instruments, all of them too complicated to elaborate upon here. We can signal them by terms: there is an "ordering" faith alongside "saving" faith. There is a *justitia civilis*, a civil righteousness, in which God can be actively served by people who know not God; this righteousness differs from the one which avails for salvation, but it belongs to the care of the same God. The *dynamis tou theou*, the power of God unto salvation that is the Gospel is matched by a power of God unto the care of the neighbor that is visible in the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law.

Alongside this theological interpretation there has to be an intention to "go public." If I may indulge in stereotype by decades: in the 1950s, American religion prospered by "going institutional." In the 1960s, it "went political," living off the spiritual capital from the past but helping effect important change in political life. In the 1970s, American religion "turned private," during necessary recouping in the form of spiritual journeys. Today in the 1980s the call is to "go public with the message" and life of the church, to restore the public order in which personal faith finds luxuriant home and political religion can work effects. But religious groups have to intend this; it does not come naturally.

The public expression of faith demands a polity which is other than that of the theocracy for which the nostalgic seek or the anomic which the private types are content with. Somehow the republic becomes a *communitas communitatum*, a community of communities, of what Johannes Althusius called *symbiotes*, groups which give life to each other even in contention. It is clear that this is an Aristotelian and Madisonian notion, imperfect though they be politically and unsatisfying though they might finally turn out to be in the personal faith expressed in subcommunities.

Public religion demands an ethos. I have long looked for something better than tolerance, the wishy-washy live-and-let-live approach of those who believe in nothing very much. The most attractive alternative, though it comes in an inelegant term-shroud, is "counter intolerance." My God is not then a God of prey and pounce. But I use my own deep faith commitment as a warrant for assuring such a commitment on the part of those with whom I disagree, precisely because I know what it means and must mean.

Some have come to despair of any meanings beyond the private, the personal, or the parochial. Yet in a complex society like ours the public order has many bases of nurture. We have a common memory, not only in our specific biblical faith but in the "chords of memory" Abraham Lincoln evoked. There was the sacral aspect of settlement as immigrants consecrated this landscape and cityscape by their commitments. The growth of liberty in acts of independence and the fearfully expensive shedding of blood in the Civil War become part of this shared memory and story.

There is shared "affection," meaning nothing sentimental to Jeffersonians. Instead it means that there is an employment of the affections, the emotional aspects of life, among those with whom one is locked in a civil life. There are at least some shared principles, prefigured in the Declaration of Independence. There are bases for shared action and shared hope in the common life of a republic.

Those who advocate a recovery of the public have reason to be frustrated. In its modern, private form, religion is "everywhere but nowhere," hard to see or grasp or use or avoid. The schools do not know how or care to use the story. The media avoid it, serenely ignoring its claims. Higher education is only beginning to reassess and give weight to the power of religion in world cultures, including our own. Yet some of the neglect is certainly the result of religious people who have forgotten leaven, salt, and light. You cannot claim that "religion is a private affair" and then complain that the culture is secular, unmindful or disdainful when it comes to the spiritual and religious spheres.

The Cushwa Center is eager to play its quiet, scholarly role in restoring public life. If any is to occur, there has to be a repertory of options, and many of these come from choices made in the light of good and bad examples of the past. The historian helps the believers at large in acts of selective retrieval, so there be models for action. Life is more than retrieval or archival work, scholarly debating and publishing. People are called to plunge into their separate traditions and communities, and to follow them to such depths that they reach out beyond them to the common human concerns to which most of these communities profess to point.

The traditions and communities, faithful to their past, are dynamic and innovative. They cannot be confined to past models. They need the attention of new generations. What gives one a measure of cheer on a bleak landscape is the survival of personal faith, often lived out on the parochial level. Less cheering but strong enough to remain a presence has been the survival and beginnings of renewal in public life and its vision. The impatient have the patience to stand with the prophets, to repeat an affirmation often voiced in the American past: "For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie; though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come . . ." (*Habakkuk 2:3*).