Paul Michalec
Religion in the Public Square

The Arts as a Bridge Across the
Religious/Secular Divide

John Dewey (1938) begins his classic text *Experience and Education* with the

observation: "Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its

beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors,* between which is recognizes no intermediate possibilities." (p. 17)

The dualisms Dewey wrote about were prominent across the social and political sphere of his

time including: Democratic/Republican, liberal/conservative, public school/private school, and

progressive/traditional forms of education.   In framing tensions as *Either-Or* Dewey was

addressing the social context of the 30s, yet his perspective is a fair critique of many of the

authors we studied in the course *Religion in the Public Square.*

As noted in the course syllabus, the primary question organizing our weekly

conversations around the tension between religious and secular sources of knowledge in the

public square is: "What role should religious claims and justifications play in this discussion?"

Most of the scholars we read approached the question of religious by excluding it entirely from

public spaces (Rorty, 1999); hesitantly and with strict boundaries sequestering religion as a form

of cultural background knowledge (Rawls, 1993 and Habermas, 1984); or provided evidence to

suggest that the daily forms of lived religion can be divided into narrow categories that lack

meaning and standing in a court of law (Sullivan, 2005). Jeffery Stout (2004) holds the most

affirmative stance toward religion contributing to the health of the American social fabric.

However, nowhere in the course did we read an articulation of the private and public, as Dewey

invites, that offers a strong and compelling *Both/And* response to the question of the secular-religious divide in the public square.

In this paper I will argue that the either/or of religion-secular can be transformed into the both-and of public-private by framing discussions around an aesthetically informed notion of understanding in action. Moving away from the confines of *Either/Or* is important because it offers a way to move beyond the religious/secular debates as mostly a form of academic discourse to practical action in the world. I will begin this essay with an overview of the divide as articulated by the authors in this course, particularly Richard Rorty, John Rawls, and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan. I will then offer a working definition of the aesthetic and link it to the description of religion in the public square articulated by Jeffery Stout. I will end with a practical example of what an esthetically informed both-and approach to religion in the public square could look like. In this concluding section of the paper I will focus on Parker Palmer's past work in *Courage to Teach* and his recent focus on Action Circles as articulated in *Healing the Heart of Democracy* as a practical example of using the aesthetic to advance public discourse through framing the religious-secular as both/and thinking.

The Either/Or of the religion/secular divide

John Rawls (2005) and Jurgen Habermas (1984) establish ground rules for democratic deliberation and "justice as fairness" based on an either/or standard of participation in public discourse; *either* you have made a defensible argument worthy of inclusion *or* you have not achieved the minimum threshold for voice in the public square. And by defensible is typically meant a rational argument that is recognized for its rhetorical power or linkage to universally accepted truth claims. It is only after meeting these prerequisite standards of reasonableness that

a well-crafted argument can find room to maneuver and argue its point of view in the public square.

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan (2005) writes about the story of how either/or thinking can pit religion against itself in a search for religious truth in a court of law. The potency of her narrative draws from her experience as a witness in a Boca Raton trial testing the legal standing of the Florida Religious Freedom Act (FRPA) designed to protect religious freedom in the public square. The presiding judge weighed the memorial practices of the plaintiffs against a two category model of religious rituals developed by Nathan Katz, an expert witness for the city. Katz argued that religious rituals fell into either the category of "high tradition" or "little tradition". By 'high tradition' he means the textual-legal side of religion… by 'little tradition' is meant the folkways and home-centered observances, usually orally rather than textually transmitted." (p. 74) Judge Ryskamp regularly silenced the voice of the "little traditions" of the plaintiffs by holding that either their practices fit into the historically established norms of the "high tradition" or they didn't. And in the face of this threshold the arguments of the plaintiffs never found fertile ground in his courtroom; their case for legal protection of their private memorial practices was denied.

In the final example of either/or thinking, Richard Rorty presents the clearest and most precise criteria for answering the question of the role of religion in the public square. He eliminates the existence of an "or" tied to an "either", by arguing that only the secular has the ability to sustain open conversation around meaningful public discourse. He fears that because religious sources of knowledge can never be defended or overturned with a reasonable argument religion therefore, by its very nature, is a conversation stopper.

The Both/And of the religion/secular space

There are a few notable counter narratives to the tendency in course readings to endorse an either/or framing of the norms of interaction between religion and secularism. For instance John Rawls (2005) articulates the concepts of "reasonable and rational." (p. 51) By *reasonable* he means discourse that is public and available for critique and by *rational* he means interests that are more personal and the domain of individual agents in a democracy. Furthermore, the public and private are not competing concepts, and religion (private) in particular, is not caste as a threat to the viability of the public sphere. Instead, according to Rawls the reasonable and rational (public-private) are viewed as supporting his broader agenda of "justice as fairness".

He avoids setting up the terms as antagonistic, by aligning them through the power of paradox or what he calls "complementary terms." Each term is dependent on the other for the fullness of its native powers. For instance, the reasonable (public) characteristics of a liberal democracy, if left untethered, can lean too heavily toward decisions that are best for society as a whole; excluding the inherent individual interests of citizens. As Rawls states: "… merely reasonable agents would have no ends of their own they wanted to advance by fair cooperation…" (p. 52) In a similar fashion if unchecked by the overall goals of society the rational (private) impulses of individual members of a democracy will lead to decisions that are solely or almost completely ego driven and motivated by self-interests. As Rawls notes: "Rational agents approach being psychopathic when their interests are solely in benefits to themselves." (p. 51) But when arrayed as a paradox the "reasonable and the rational" act as a sort of check and balance for the lesser angels of each concept, thus allowing for greater strength and power as a complementary unit.

It seems that the democracy Rawls envisions as "This reasonable society is neither a society of saints nor a society of the self-centered" operates most effectively in a state of undivided productive tension between the private and public. (p. 54)   His formula calls forth the gifts of empathy and tolerance in the face of conflict and discord by appealing to community interests; and he creates a space for the truth of individual knowing to speak directly to power by granting agency and voice to solitary citizens.

This potential for both/and thinking to illuminate novel solutions is also evident in the Boca Raton trial judging the competing interests of the city and its citizens. The presiding judge held that either you ground your argument in the high religious traditions of your faith or you focus your attention on the daily activities of the faithful. But why force the separation? Clarity in concept is perhaps gained, but at what expense? Stout (2004) seems equally suspect of division and separation when he encourages citizens working toward social change to constantly ask: "Whose commitments are actually being expressed here?..." (p. 286) I wonder if given Ryskamp's tendency to rely on his personal "lived religion" as a litmus test of truth, if a more complex framing of both the "high tradition" and the "little tradition" in productive tension would have brought the discussion of cemetery practices out of the shadows and more fully into the public light? This more inclusive framing seems more likely to have opened up conversation than the lopsided religious commitments of the judge.

Aesthetics as a binding agent

What is it about art that it offers a novel way of sustaining a robust relationship between secular and religious sources of wisdom in a way that it holds the tension in a generative rather than conflicted space? By art I mean all the forms of artistic expression including, dance, poetry,

visual arts, music, drawing, and sculpture, but for the purpose of this essay I will confine my discussion and examples to primarily the art form of poetry. Justo Gonzalez (2005) argues that the word *theologian* can be traced back to the Greeks who believed that the poets where the original theologians because of their ability to speak to the gods and convey that wisdom to their fellow citizens. The gift of the poets as artists is to see and interact with the world in ways that can bridge the religious/secular divide by seeing both ways at once. How might this gift work? Emily Dickinson observes that the best truths of the world, the ones that really matter, are often too dazzling and bright to approach directly. Her advice then is to: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant."

How might *telling truth at a slant* facilitate conversation between religion and the secular as interlocutors in the public square? It is often the case that truth told straight-on is either deflected by the listener's urge for self-preservation or requires the listener to make dramatic changes in beliefs that are untenable in the long-run; resistance is the dominant response. A truth that enters at the periphery of the listener's consciousness can be examined from an engaged-distance while allowing for an adjustment of personal beliefs that is more palatable and sustainable; consideration of alternatives is the norm. Truth told at a slant can be acknowledged for the fullness of its claim (its reasonableness) while also allowing it to take on personal meaning (little traditions). Truth at a slant is more relational while truth told straight on is more confrontational and dismissive of the other's reality. Parker Palmer (2007) describes truth telling at a slant, using poetry, as a poetic Rorschach test. Listeners are invited to hear words, images, or phrases that speak to their deepest questions and points of conflict with self, others, and the social context.

Telling truth at a slant, through the wisdom of the poets, can address a major shortcoming of Stout's project to develop a more robust civic discourse. He proposes the creation of a *community of ethical judges* as a working collaboration of citizens bound by the interactive rights and perspective of both the self and the community. Stout (2004) notes that the collaboration of others embodies the hard work of democracy in action and as such it requires a unique source of generative energy. In traditional or contemporary forms of democratic discourse the energy arises from the passions associated with argument for argument sake (two hardened positions) or at best from a charitable sense that one side of the argument is right and just needs to find more reasonable ways of converting the views and ways of thinking of the other side.

Stout's description of a *community of ethical judges* is sound and convincing but he struggles with the development of concrete representations of this collaboration of peers. He leaves key questions unexplored. How does one gain access to this community? How might the competing interests of overlapping communities be resolved? How are the interests of local communities weighed against those of national communities? In response, Stout offers a paradox of structure and openness in community discourse that supports the community's interests while also allowing for a wide array of outcomes. For civic discourse to work the individual must also represent the community's interests. The citizen is like a player in a game who is both an individual with concrete roles and responsibilities and a game-participant who helps monitor and enforce the collective community norms of score keeping, fouls, and fair play.

A close read of Stout (2004) suggests his affinity for aesthetics as a possible vehicle for guiding the collaborative work of citizens navigating the give and take of a *community of ethical judges.* Stout lifts up Dewey, Thoreau, and Whitman and their articulations of a fully functioning community of democratic discourse. In particular he seems drawn to Whitman's poetic

sensibilities: "But it was demonstrably part of Whitman's project to ask how the *poets of democracy* (emphasis mine) ought to conceive, and respond to, the sources of our existence and progress through life." (p. 36) What Stout means by the *poets of democracy* is left up for interpretation. But in a more robust discussion of the guiding lights of democratic discourse, Stout references Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man.* According to Stout, Ellison's "raft of hope" is better suited to floating the social critique of African Americans than the more challenging and direct language of Louis Farrakhan. Although never stating it directly, it can be argued that Stout believes that Ellison is better at telling truth at a slant and therefore more the poet worth listening to than the more confrontational speech of Farrakan.

Brian Walsh (2011) argues for a similar role of artist as gifted story teller and social critic of the places and ways that democracy has become divorced from the wisdom of its higher angels. In support of his thesis, he points to the musical work of singer, song writer, and social critic Bruce Cockburn. Walsh calls Cockburn the embodiment of artist as prophet and he defines the prophet's role by drawing on the words of a well-known critic of democracy: "Bono has called the psalmists the rock-and-roll artists of ancient Israel. They gave voice both to the secured vision of the community and to the pain and disappointment when that vision was so devastatingly left unrealized and the hopes unfulfilled." (p. 19)

Walsh invites all artistically and aesthetically inclined citizens to be social critics and prophets by generalizing Bono's observation to include: "This is an art that is clearly rooted in and a reflection of contemporary experience while also possessing an *awakening prophetic power*, a power of awakening in the midst of our slumber, a prophetic power that will nurture, nourish, and evoke an alternative vision and way of life." (p. 36) And by artist as prophet, Walsh means an artist who "…insists on seeing beyond the range of normal sight, not allowing our

imaginations to be limited by a sense of the inevitability of the present state of things." (p. 34)

Bruce Cockburn is everything and in all ways the embodiment of "artist as prophet" and his

music frequently offers guidance on how to bind the disparate impulses of the religious and

secular into productive both/and tension. The answer to moving forward is (both) an

acknowledgement of the trouble we are in (and) a sense of an alternative more holistic life/social

structure we live into.

Democracy and habits of the heart

When confronted with the very practical question of what the *community of ethical*

judges would use as norms to guide its practice, Stout is often vague beyond a general sense that

the details of interaction could and would be worked out in time. He does offer three core

considerations: respect for the community member on the other side of debate is paramount over

a requirement for an agreed upon point of departure; the ability to both argue your point of view

while also remaining open to persuasion by your interlocutor; and insisting on the presence of

well-articulated virtues as essential to a productive discussion (p. 85). Even so, Stout admits that

he has no clear sense of how to move beyond these general guidelines for organizing the work of

community members: "I know of no set of rules for getting such matters right. My advice,

therefore, is to cultivate the virtues of democratic speech, love justice, and say what you please."

(p. 85)

Parker Palmer (2007 and 2011), like Stout, is also keenly interested in inviting

American's and civic society back into productive discourse, democratic participation, and care

for fellow citizens. Yet unlike Stout, Palmer outlines the practical boundaries of a rule guided

community that is *both* bounded by clear norms and touchstones for discourse *and* open to a

multitude of competing philosophical, religious, political, or intellectual centers of knowing. Palmer is an educator-prophet who specializes in naming the multitude of ways that contemporary forms of democracy are fostering brokenness across the social-political landscape. He is a witness to the myriad ways that teachers, lawyers, health care workers, and clergy begin to live divided lives where their inner qualities and calling to help others become separated from their outer skills and competencies associated with a high degree of professionalism. For Palmer this is often the source of professional burnout and limited engagement in democratic participation.

The way back to wholeness for individuals as well as our democracy, for Palmer (2007), consists of a two stage process. The first step is outlined in his "movement model of social change" (p. 172). His inspiration for this model comes from the lived-lessons of the civil rights movement and the struggle for racial and economic equality in America. The four stages of the model are:

> *Stage 1*. Isolated individuals make an inward decision to live *"divided no more,"* finding a center for their lives outside of the institutions.
> *Stage 2*. These individuals begin to discover one another and form *communities of congruence* that offer mutual support and opportunities to develop a shared vision.
> *Stage 3*. These communities start *going public*, learning to convert their private concerns into the public issues they are and receiving vital critiques in the process.
> *Stage 4*. A system of *alternative rewards* emerges to sustain the movement's vision and to put pressure for change on the standard institutional reward system." (emphasis in original) (p. 172-173)

It is striking the similarities between Palmer and Stout along the theme of coming together in community to live a less divided and isolated life to struggle in community to refine goals/mission, and to raise concerns in an overtly public venue open to critique and intellectual refinement. Religion in the public square took the form of the churches which were a key site for the "communities of congruence" to come together and refine their message.

In Palmer's (2011) most recent book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy* he develops a series of guidelines or organizing principles for going public after the community of congruence (Stout's *community of ethical judges*) choses to enter the public square to present its critique. Palmer distills his vision of a robust interactive social sphere that invites a multitude of competing religious or intellectual traditions to the paradox of "chutzpah and humility." (p. 43) Taken together this way of being in critical dialogue that honors the self and the other is termed the *Habits of the Heart* and consists of the following norms:

- *We must understand that we are all in this together.*
- *We must develop an appreciation of the value of "otherness."*
- *We must cultivate the ability to hold tensions in life-giving ways.*
- *We must generate a sense of personal voice and agency.*
- *We must strengthen our capacity to create community.* (pg. 44-45)

For Palmer the emphasis is less about structure and more about ways of being together in community that propels all participants into speaking truth aided by the voice of poetry and aesthetics.

How might a conversation bounded by the Habits of the Heart take place? Who is empowered to lead these sessions? What is known about whether it might work or not? Fortunately, Palmer's articulation of the Five Habits has been turned into a curriculum and dialogue model called an Action Circle. The full curriculum guide and resource materials produced by the Center for Courage and Renewal (2012) can be downloaded at http://www.couragerenewal.org/programs/democracy . There are currently hundreds of Action Circles operating around the country and several organizing in the Denver metro area.

As the curriculum guide suggests, the purpose of the Action Circles is to bring people together from a broad spectrum of religious, social, and political backgrounds to work through issues of shared concern.

We couldn't be more thrilled that you've joined what we hope is a fresh, meaningful experiment in reconnecting to our communities and rehumanizing our democracy. We hope that the crew you've assembled will become a provocative and comforting circle for these next six months, challenging you to think more deeply about your own role as a citizen and your shared vision for a better world… You are part of community being created all across America and around the world. Neighbors, congregants, colleagues, and students are gathering all over the country to explore the habits of the heart … It's going to take all of us—minds bright and hearts broken open—to restore this country back to its potential, and we think these circles can be a wonderful contribution to this effort. (p. 2)

Each meeting begins with a "Show & Tell" session inviting participants to report on their experiences living into the Habit they explored in the previous meeting. To get the conversation rolling, guided questions are often introduced by the facilitator, for instance around the Habit of *An understanding that we are all in this together*: "What was most surprising about the person you spoke with? What prevents you from having these kinds of conversations on a more regular basis? How has this exchange changed your daily interactions with this person?"

After the Show and Tell the session moves into a detailed description and reflection of one of the Five Habits. Of critical importance to the success of this phase of the discussion is the use of poetry, story, or video to create an aesthetic space where the truth of the Habit can enter the consciousness and hearts of participants without shutting out conversation or dialogue with self or others. For instance, the second Habit is *appreciation for the value of otherness* is introduced with the short video called The Other Wes Moore: http://bit.ly/wFxZfn. Afterwards the facilitator encourages participants to respond to the following questions: Wes Moore says, "The tragedy isn't just that my story could have been his, but that his could have been mine." Whose story could have been yours? Whose story could yours have been?"

In another example the Action Circle curriculum invites participants to consider the story *Wondering Around An Albuquerque Airport* by Naomi Shihab Nye (2007) through the theme *We are all in this together*. A few excerpts from the full story will help to illustrate how Nye's

narrative invites the reader to share a personal story about being included or excluded from the civic majority. Her story explores the pain of isolation and the value of recognizing our shared humanity in a way that can be heard without adopting a tone of proselytizing and evangelizing a predetermined outcome. Nye knows how to "tell all the truth but tell it slant."

> An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress,
> just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. "Help," said the flight service person. "Talk to her. What is her problem? we told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this."
>
> I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly. "Shu dow-a, shu- biduck habibti, stani stani schway, min fadlick, Sho bit se-wee?"
>
> Soon after, she pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies -- little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts -- out of her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate.
>
> To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman from Laredo -- we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.
>
> And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, "This is the world I want to live in. The shared world."
>
> Not a single person in this gate -- once the cries of confusion stopped -- was apprehensive about any other person.
>
> They took to the cookies. All I felt like hugging everyone else.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I've argued that by shifting the terms of debate away from Either-Or to Both-And the nature and tone of discourse in the public square can change to one approaching inclusion rather than exclusion and defensive enclaves of partisan values. Central to

13

making this shift in the civic landscape is the use of the arts and aesthetic impulses to invite the sharing of personal stories and frames of understanding. It is the distractive quality of the arts that no other discipline offers that makes it uniquely placed as a necessary companion to democratic discourse. As T.S. Eliot once argued: "The chief use of the "meaning" of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be… to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog (Eliot, 1933, p. 151) *The Use of Poetry*. And what might be in most need of distraction are the overly argumentative rational reasons of impassioned citizens. Once distracted, the mind might be more willing to yield the field long enough for the heart to speak and form a human-bound between citizens that grows from a shared love of country, God, and citizenship.

Truth, in this sense comes from the heart and can be easily felt and understood by all and not as defined by some abstract principle of justice, community, or theory. In this Both-And approach energized through the arts in close alignment with Stout's observation that: "I argued that we would all benefit from fuller expression of whatever ethically relevant commitments our religious and nonreligious neighbors harbor. In a religiously plural society such as ours, it is even more important than in other circumstances to bring into reflective expression commitments that would otherwise remain implicit in the lives of the religious communities." (p. 112)

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