

THE CATECHESIS OF POLITICS: HOW POLITY SHAPES PERSONHOOD.

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Catechesis and Congregational Studies

Wesleyan ministers and counselors who deal with congregational leadership often discover an interesting observation when reviewing the history of their own founder, John Wesley. When surveying the early primary documents that govern Methodist practice, many theorists realize that the Question and Answer format used by Wesley when compiling the Larger Minutes of Methodist conduct (the polity guidelines for early Methodist leadership) resembles certain catechetical models intended not only to instruct but also to form novices into the Christian life (Wesley, 1872, 1986; v.8, pp. 278-338). The term, catechesis, describes approaches to ongoing Christian formation, where church leaders and ministers seek to shape persons into distinctly Christian character (Westerhoff and Edwards 1981). This educational format raises the question whether certain structures within church polity implicitly form Christians into particular expressions of Christ-likeness or into some other antithetical expression. Does polity provide a catechetical process comparable to other church practices including Sunday school or small group discipleship?

With the current predilection for changing organizational structures in congregations based on business management theory, careful consideration needs to be given to the role of polity in shaping the spiritual lives of persons. Other theorists recognize the concern. Current spiritual formation literature addresses how church boards might be shaped into spiritual communities (Olsen 1995) and how churches employ spiritual practices for discernment and decision making (Morris and Olson 1997).

The field of congregational studies, however, provides a different vantage point in asking how community polity communicates certain theories of personhood and faithfulness. Theorists and practitioners often perceive the field of Congregational studies as an alternative to church growth movement, where practitioners explore various aspects of social life and their impact on persons in the church as well as upon the congregation as a whole. Theorists in the field consider a number of perspectives that influence the life of the congregation including the various social contexts (from global to local... as well as historical), congregational culture, aspects of power dynamics or processes that enable program implementation, and the resources (financial and human) needed to infuse life into a community (Ammerman et al. 1998). Often these studies reveal a series of “family resemblances” that allow theorists to characterize congregations for the sake of comparative analysis (Dudley and Johnson 1993). Much of this information is used to guide leadership within a local congregation in both forming and transforming the church.

Critical Concern: Identify Formation and Agency

One often unexplored aspect of congregational study might warrant our attention under the concept of identity formation and agency. Theorists sometimes fail to ask just how the more immediate culture of leadership practice (understood both within and beyond the domain of the church) might form the identity of those who participate in decision making for good or for ill. It may well be those certain administrative practices, and the accompanying images of the

organizational structure that inform practices, influence the identity of those engaged in leadership. Indeed, certain images under girding the organizational/political life of the church board may either reveal if not actually engender certain images personhood. In this manner church “politics” (the governance of a congregation) may create a model of catechesis that shapes those participating in the political process.

This exploration attempts to bridge aspects of collective congregational (and by extension cultural) identity with the influence of group practice and personal identity, a daunting blend that combines two often perceptually disparate fields of sociology and psychology (Abrams and Hogg 2001). While questions remain how specific small groups (including leadership groups) actually influence personal action, group action provides a gateway to exploring the intersection of social norms and personal agency (pp. 425-27). In addition, recent research combining social psychology with what was once understood as ego psychology might provide a beginning point between certain social expectations and personal responses (Côté and Levine 2002).

Determining how to discern more faithful models of leadership and governance might rest in discerning the representations of organizations that lie underneath small group leadership and, more importantly, their representational appeal to certain root metaphors like that of reciprocity or grace. To elaborate on this issue the paper will offer a concrete case study that highlights the issue, explore at least one theory that might reveal how identity is formed in the negotiation of broader cultural forms, and compare this theory to the author’s own approach to “practiced” identity at the fulcrum of negotiating self and social norms. The paper then suggests at least one comparative criteria for judging the faithfulness of any polity that guides leadership within the congregation.

Catechesis of Compassion Outsourcing

An example of this paper’s primary concern surfaces in a case study. While examining the life of a congregation one minister noted the following:

One year ago our church reached out to a lady who, along with her two children, had been living for three months in a domestic abuse shelter. Driven from her home more than a thousand miles away, she landed in our city. As a church, we had an empty rental house on our property...completely paid for...just sitting there. I recommended that we place this lady in the house. The board said, “no.” They felt that it was poor business to give a potential income-producing opportunity away.

At the time, we also were forming Loving Heart Charities, an auxiliary arm of our church that cares for those in need. Loving Heart Charities decided to raise the money from individual donors and thus make it possible for this lady to get out of the shelter and into a home. The board agreed to those terms. She was given one year rent-free (as the rent was being paid by donors).

Recently, I returned to the board with two requests: first, to allow this lady and her kids to continue in the house rent-free (without raising the money to cover what would be a fair rent) and, second, to donate a truck we own to a new church plant. (Our 16-foot box truck was used by Calvary when it was a church plant but is no longer needed since

moving into new property.) Since it is a part of our mission to engage in assisting other church plants, I felt this was a good way to address that part of our mission. We have had this truck for sale for two-and-a-half years, with no success in selling it, despite the fact that it is an excellent truck in very good condition. A little over a year ago the board determined that the sale of the truck, if it could be sold, could be used to pay off an insurance debt of \$7,000 which had occurred.

Both of my requests were denied. The board believes it would be poor stewardship to allow someone to live rent-free in an income-producing house. They commissioned a study that would assess a fair market value rental fee, with the plan being to charge rent. I met with the lady (an active member of our church and now our church custodian) and ascertained that she had no money to pay for rent. She is a full-time student (elementary education) on scholarship and her only income is what we pay her for cleaning the church. Loving Heart Charities is seeking to raise money once again to assist her.

The board felt the truck should not be given to the church plant but, rather, that we should continue to try and sell it and use the money toward the insurance debt. A motion was made to offer the truck for sale at \$3,500, deducting \$250 per month from the sale price until it sells...or until its value reaches \$2,000, at which time the board will consider donating the truck to the church plant. An amendment made to the motion offered another option: that Loving Heart Charities can buy the truck now for \$2,000 and donate it to the church plant.

During a debriefing of the case study the minister remarked that the church has strongly supported Loving Heart Charities, seeing this as a vital church ministry. In addition he noted that when he explained the decisions of the church to charity leadership one of the primary board members remarked that he might have suggested a similar approach if he had been a member of the church board rather than the charity board.

We concluded that the church, amazingly, preferred to “outsource” its compassionate ministry rather than accepting personal responsibility for the family or freely giving away the van. While many in the church remained supportive and at times sacrificial when supporting Loving Heart, the leadership could not cross the line as a collective board to mirror similar compassionate activity. While there may have been multiple reasons (all explored in the debrief) the primary conclusion remained that the church board could not perceive itself acting in a compassionate manner in its decision making processes around specific economic decisions for the life of this church.

Left unexplored (until now) were leadership assumptions surrounding the board’s decision-making process. Leadership in both settings (the leader of the charity being a well known business leader) seemed to assume that decisions made by a “charity” and a “church” were guided by different guidelines. The inability of church leadership to take a different perspective suggests a strong working image of the political oversight of the church that imaged something different from “charity work.” The language suggested economic categories dominated the decision-making (similar to leadership within corporate business settings). In short the church board could not disconnect basic economic considerations from more personal

issues of hospitality and compassion. Was this inability due to a particular formative process occurring both in business and ecclesial worlds that could not translate into charity work?

Identity formation and cultural influence

Exploring how organizational life, the cultural polis of given community, shapes group decisions and individual practices often surfaces in various forms within social and organizational psychology. Notably these explorations include how organizations might identify a quality fit between organization and worker preferences (James and Mazerolle 2002) and even how companies manifest or nurture certain corporate personality traits (Chernis and Goldman 2001, Whetten and Godfrey 1998). Such theorists often assume some level of influence on the part of the organization in each worker's life for good or for ill (Ketts de Vries and Miller 1985). Yet influence alone remains insufficient unless it reveals how identity and agency interact with organizational norms. While one might quickly critique certain models of business leadership for shaping persons in ways contrary to ecclesial leadership, this analysis falls short if it does not take seriously the mutual influence of personal agency and social expectations. One theory provides both a multidisciplinary description while also exposing a deeper issue that might guide future discernment on the nature of what differentiates appropriate and inappropriate approaches to leadership.

Social theorists James Côté and Charles Levine (2002) offer a theory of identity formation that seeks to take seriously a sense of personhood and social influence. Noting the work of Erik Erikson as a foundation (pp. 14-17, 91-118), these theorists offer an elaboration of identity formation that posits three major domains: ego identity, social identity and personal identity. In their approach, the PSSP, or Personality and Social Structure Perspective, (pp. 131-40), the authors contend that personal identity mediates, or serves as the interactionist representation of the self, between deeper self understandings (ego or personality) and the cultural norms given by society (social identity). Côté and Levine contend that the personal identity, the location of interaction between deeper self understandings of personhood and social constructions of personhood, provides the clearest point for understanding the formation and discernment of the self. For instance, a person might think of himself or herself as altruistic or charitable, but only the consistent actions (objectifications) of that person in interaction with social contexts and norms of altruism will reveal whether this self representation is true or false. Similarly, a social norm for a group might include altruism but if the group employs coercive means of interaction or formation the subjective appropriation of this goal might result in a less than desirable subjective appreciation for charity.

Côté and Levine's theory does leave space for positing of a sense of interiority concerning the self, something they concede is often lost in postmodern theory... but needed for a full conversation other aspects psychological theory (pp. 76-79, 118). Indebted to Erikson, the authors' use of ego psychology may prove less desirable for some current theorists utilizing cognitive psychological models. Yet the necessity of acknowledging some sense of self-referencing, some aspect of the intrapersonal awareness, appears relevant for any consideration of identity formation. Whether other theories, like narrative representations of the self, better describe the interior "world" of persons, the positing of an ego identity proves helpful in acknowledging a multidimensional model of identity formation. Even as social theorists, the authors remain discontent to offer a strictly social determinism in the formation of persons.

Instead they allow the mediating dimension, personal identity, to best describe what we can know about people and how they are formed in their identity. The theorists also posit the presence of “identity capital” that conjoins intrapersonal strengths that project a sense of ego stability in interaction (such as resilience, articulateness, motivation) with cultural social norms (pp. 141-47). This theory will be revisited shortly, for now it reveals a new language describing the nature of personal identity as a form of interaction.

In addition, Côté and Levine’s description of the importation of business models (particularly Total Quality Management or TQM) in college education proves instructive for this study. They write:

In many settings, especially locally funded ones, the student is increasingly treated as a “consumer,” sending the message that knowledge is something to be consumed in the same fashion as other items common in late modernity, like fast food, action entertainment, and fashions that change every season. The “student-as-consumer” model of education paradoxically does not always encourage students to maximally benefit from their education. To the contrary, it can encourage various forms of passivity, where some students expect to be “served” and therefore are not meeting their educational environments half-way in bilateral relationships that would foster active engagement and involvement with course and faculty members (p 149).

According to these theorists TQM, as an expression of social identity, provides a root metaphor that strips motivation while other models of educational social identity (education for the sake of obtaining a specific career, doing humanitarian good, or pursuing personal-intellectual development) offer a stronger cultural base to move personal identity into active modes of engagement (p. 150). In this circumstance, the social practice of a particular form of educational delivery (either consumer based or personal development) can impinge upon the personal identity and may ultimately affect ego identity as well.

PSSP, Identity Capital, and the Practicing Self

While the PSSP model of identity formation and agency provides a helpful initial framework, there are root assumptions within the model that expose a place of critique as well. Elsewhere I have argued that a postmodern approach to identity may rest in the notion of the practicing self (Blevins 2005) where personhood emerges through ritual social interactions (including theological interactions such as liturgy) that empower a sense of self. Through practice (practice being more than mere action but activities containing a sense of internal and external continuity) persons gain a sense of reference (or narrative) in regards to the exterior world. Admittedly aspects of this description appear reminiscent of Côté and Levine’s depiction of personal identity... though the practicing self reveals more than a personal presentation of the “true” (insulated) ego through prescribed roles in regards to the social world (reminiscent of Erikson and to some degree Côté and Levine’s understanding). Instead the practicing self’s “ego,” or intrapersonal world, emerges through a series of interiorized ritual practices of self-referencing, a way of negotiating our many “selves” intra-personally. There must be resonance between intra-personal practice (self understanding) and interpersonal practice (in regards to cultural expectations or Côté and Levine’s social identity) to encourage continuity in the

practiced self. When there is discontinuity between expected practices and self referenced practices, change must occur... which might be described as formation or catechesis.

To this point then identity formation remains similar between the practicing self and Côté and Levine's approach through the interactions of personal identity. Whether the intrapersonal remains defined as ego psychology or presented as narrative self may be open to interpretation (Angus and McLeod 2003, pp. 167-70, Capps 2001). The habitual engagement with the broader culture does engender change. However, even the process of identity formation (the way in which change is articulated or negotiated) provides a practice that influences our understanding of cultural or social identity. At this point the description of PSSP and practicing self differ.

Côté and Levine's critique of an economic model of leadership (TQM) may be accurate yet their understanding of the nature of the exchange between persons and social expectations remains equally indebted to economic paradigms as they draw from critical social theorists (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 1990; pp. 82-83) that employ the notion of "capital" to describe differences between personal agency and social gaps (Côté and Levine pp. 142, 156-59). Later in their text the authors examine identity capital as a "resource" that is capable of "exchange" for the sake of the person or for social expectations. From a personal perspective, identity capital gives individual access to certain identity contexts (jobs, relationships, church) where, reciprocally, individuals may garner more capital through enriching relationships (awards, recognition, enrichment). Côté and Levine write,

The basis of [identity] capital refers to what constitutes it, namely resources garnered through previous investments. As noted, the resources can be tangible or intangible. Tangible resources are the more visible attributes that signify personal or social identities, or which "buy" an identity. In order to be exchangeable, these resources must have some socially recognized attributes (ascribed, achieved, or contrived). Intangible resources involve the psychological wherewithal to know what to do to gain access, or what attributes to have, as judged by others (i.e. the "right stuff" in reference to both personality factors and behavior) (p.159).

While Côté and Levine critique educational leadership theories anchored in consumer modes of leadership, their own depiction of what is needed for the personal self to thrive remains equally economic. The overall root metaphor remains one of economic exchange.

Practice and Economic Catechesis

The combined appropriation and critique of the PSSP approach provides at least some insight in the "misguided" practice suggested in the case study. Simply put, models of leadership based on economic exchange remain difficult in social contexts built on aspects of love, altruism, and grace. This does not invalidate all aspects of economics (or *oikonomos* as household stewardship), however it does help to define boundaries. What remains problematic rests in how economics reveal something about the nature of social expectations and their final impact on identity. This interpretation does not have to mean that congregations must organize and enact one specific polity in order to "be" church. Biblically and historically there have been multiple expressions of the church, including in contemporary form as congregational studies reveal (Volf 1998, pp. 21-22).

In addition, models of leadership drawn from business and other social arenas portray different “images” of the organization that imply different practices to maintain continuity. Gareth Morgan (1986) identified several of these classifying organizations as mechanisms or hierarchies of mechanized decision-making (like the military), or organizations as organisms, or political systems, or learning organizations, or tribal cultures, or oppressive families. Each of these forms of organization carry with them a series of embedded practices that reinforce certain personal identities that ultimately influence the intra-personal narration of the self in particular ways. In a highly compartmentalized polity for instance, leaders may classify themselves and other persons in language consistent with the controlling metaphor. Upper-middle management and “workers” may become the parlance of pastors and laity. Generals and soldiers may ultimately define the nature of personal identity, and perhaps even deeper ego identity in the form of characteristic responses of passivity, compliance or unthinking obedience. Pastors who adopt ritual practices reminiscent of CEO language might find themselves engaged in battles with lay leadership using the language of “hired hands,” all the while not realizing just how consistent both descriptions of personal identity emerge out of the same social/cultural expectations. In this sense the pastor may have “schooled” a group of leaders into a polity that results in the pastor’s undoing.

Yet this critique, while in many ways obvious, may not be the final place for setting criteria for exactly what forms of polity prove more faithful to ecclesial practice than others. The underlying root metaphor may rest in the deeper resources of Côté and Levine who insist all gatherings of human community maintain some sense of structure (pp. 152-53). While Côté and Levine seek to maintain some sense of interaction between culture and personal integrity (to avoid a pure social construction of the self) they acknowledge that the most evident point of transaction, the personal self, provides the best place to understand identity (and identity change). Yet the “means” by which identity is secured, changed, formed, or educated surfaces through the language of economic exchange for the sake of gains or losses. Perhaps this economic language gives us a primary hermeneutic for discerning faithful practice.

Reciprocity and Grace

It appears that economic language provides a language of utilitarian reciprocity. In the ancient world utilitarian reciprocity might be defined proverbially as “skin for skin” (Job 2.4; Jamieson Fausset Brown) ...or in modern parlance “tit for tat.”¹ In this economic social world,

¹ Jamieson Fausset Brown define “Skin for skin” as a proverb. They write:

It is defines a “Supply,” or “He will give.” The “skin” is figurative for any outward good. Nothing outward is so dear that a man will not exchange it for some other outward good; “but” (not “yea”) “life,” the inward good, cannot be replaced; a man will sacrifice everything else for its sake. Satan sneers bitterly at man's egotism and says that Job bears the loss of property and children because these are mere outward and exchangeable goods, but he will give up all things, even his religion, in order to save his life, if you touch his bones and flesh. “Skin” and “life” are in antithesis [UMBREIT]. The martyrs prove Satan's sneer false. ROSENMULLER explains it not so well. A man willingly gives up another's skin (life) for his own skin (life). So Job might bear the loss of his children, &c., with equanimity, so long as he remained unhurt himself; but when touched in his own person, he would renounce God. Thus the first “skin” means the other's skin, that is, body; the second “skin,” one's own, as in Exodus 21:28.

exchange for the sake of common interest appears as the root metaphor for cultural or social identity. This depiction of social identity does not surface from Côté and Levine's depictions of social identity from the pre-modern to modern and later postmodern social orders; which portray a movement going from an ascribed, to an accomplished, and later to a managed approach to social identity (pp. 123-31). However, utilitarian reciprocity may well describe the tenor of social practices, and even intra-personal practices, through as simple a metaphor as the (modified) "golden rule" of "doing to others as you expect they do to you."

This form of social identity remains dangerous due to the necessity for fair, if not profitable, exchange in all relationships. In a more precise form, reciprocity revolves around the premise of the least common denominator, where failure to maintain reciprocal relationships result in contractual dissolutions. Many corporate business models operate on utilitarian reciprocity, either for profit or out of consumer choice. Leadership presupposes fair or at least reasonable exchange by all persons in "business-like" fashion. Politics formed with this assumption would expect fair exchange for effort and would work to enable and even adjudicate what was indeed a fair exchange in all circumstances. Personal identity formed in conversation with social identity would embody a sense of reciprocity as a result of this approach. Persons would expect that a certain form of life remains deserved based on personal resources and social opportunity. In crass forms this reciprocal view would validate success in the form of personal or social gains. The more explicit utilitarian reciprocity drives the leadership, the more direct the expectation of a "return" upon efforts. Even acts of altruism and compassion are done because they are "good" for the practitioner (in other words, they "return" some sense of satisfaction or well being for the benefit of the giver).

In contrast ecclesial politics anchored in grace or love might maintain a more altruistic view. Grace, by definition, is not based on utilitarian reciprocity from the sense that grace becomes earned. One does not "give" grace in order to obtain a prescribed response, nor does one marshal ego identity strengths to "gain" love. There may be reciprocal responses (love does tend to engender love) but not for utilitarian gain. Response to grace is often forgetting one's reciprocal expectations in an outflow of love or compassion. This view remains reminiscent of certain depictions of the Trinity that do not portray utilitarian reciprocal relations but define the Godhead through ecstatic relations of overflowing love. Personal identity, anchored in grace, would see life more out of a sense of overflowing response rather than reciprocity, stewardship rather than success.

Here careful deliberation and decision making are not made for the sake of corporate or personal benefit but out of a sense of commitment to the grace and opportunities already presented. Leadership models that stress utilitarian reciprocal interests might provide a form of social identity that invites Côté and Levine's underlying "capital" motif. Persons would be formed not strictly from these group processes alone, but would employ personal resources (ego strengths) in ways, through the personal identity, that resonate with social norms of reciprocity often under the guise of "what's fair." It remains important that intra-personal abilities are acknowledged (to avoid a crude cultural determinism) but the interaction or "practice" of these abilities remain formed with an expectation of "return" for the abilities employed. The practice of utilitarian reciprocity both discloses and guides social and ego identities as the personal identity emerges from this ritualized activity. In place of the formation of holy tempers that

Wesley envisions, political practices would engender both social and ego norms inconsistent with grace (Strawn and Brown 2004).

If churches employ politics that mirror economic life they risk providing or endorsing existing social structures (and their accompanying practices) that reinforce reciprocal relations. In the case study the role of the church leadership seemed to model this view where even acts of charity were misaligned to insure some sense of reciprocity (either rent or purchase price) for the church. However, outsourced compassion, might be seen as “good” for the church. Similarly, persons habituated under this view might indeed see their own intra-personal narrative (or ego) as a resource for exchange rather than as a gift from God. Once grace is introduced as the root metaphor for practice, intrapersonal abilities and social norms resonate with a sense of outpouring, altruism, compassion for the sake of giving. Personal identity, the interaction or practice that mediates intrapersonal and social life, now redirects or forms a different understanding of gracious politics and graceful persons.

Conclusion

Admittedly this article may overstate the differences of reciprocal and gracious practice, creating a false dichotomy between reciprocity and grace. There may also be other root metaphors that guide the polis and personal practice of individuals. Côté and Levine provide a helpful means for understanding how identities are formed in a multidimensional manner. Their theory leaves open the deep implications concerning the interaction or practice that surrounds personal identity which may ultimately shape personhood. The politics of leadership disclose how crucial focal practices may be at this level, particularly as they either model grace or utilitarian reciprocity. Careful consideration of these dynamics may help to see either consistency or inconsistency of decision making for the future, and more importantly the resultant formation of leaders in the midst of these practices.

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