The Privatisation of the *Cultus Publicus*

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This essay is developed from an oral presentation made to a joint meeting of the faculties of theology and education on Luther Campus. It is an attempt to join the stimulating conversation begun by the contributors to the book, Called and Ordained (Fortress, 1990)

In Oz cultures, in our politics and economics, in our very social fabric, we share no God.

The inevitable result of such a God-less society is disintegration, incoherence, and a focus on the individual instead of the community (Berger: 137). When God is removed from the public arena, each person becomes his or her own god. *Ubi est meum* (what's in it for me)? is the motto of the secular pluralist who encourages the cult of individualism (cf Smark and Whelan: 33).

Sociologist Robert Bellah and a team of researchers have analysed a segment of middle-class USA, and concluded that individualism is ripping apart American society. Individualism promotes such values as autonomy, the right to be different, the primacy of the individual over the collective, the right to pleasure, the right to be one's own judge of one's own ends, and the right to submit all authoritarian norms and values to a rigorous evaluation on the basis of one's own standards (Chagnon: 150). This individualism, says Bellah, is both instrumental and expressive.

Instrumental individualism expresses itself in a utilitarianism which emphasises the pursuit of personal success and one's own interests. The focus of concern is not the common good, but private comfort, 'ontological individualism', that is, the belief that 'the individual has a primary reality, whereas society is a second-order, derived or artificial construct' (Bellah: 334).

Instrumental individualism is rampant in Australia. We want the benefits of living in society, without the commitment. Any social action we engage in tends to be not for the sake of the common good, but for our individual personal benefit. Such strident individualism is blatantly selfish in orientation. One has to ask how a Christian can be party to it.

Expressive individualism — the second form of individualism — highly values personal experience and feeling. Richard Sennett calls it the 'ideology of intimacy'. Basic to this ideology is the conviction that '*social relationships of all kinds are real, believable, and authentic the closer they approach the inner psychological concerns of each person'* (259).

Sennett believes that the triumph of the 'ideology of intimacy' will mean the demise of public culture and the codes of behaviour which allow for a variety of social relationships (259- 261). In the end, social elements which involve impersonality, public distance, and so forth, will be practically meaningless; public space will be abandoned as 'empty' and 'dead', sterilised of all significance (12).

Indeed, chimes in Richard Neuhaus, the public square is already naked; it has been emptied of all moral and religious values. Neuhaus joins Sennett, Berger, Bellah, and a

long list of students of Western society in accusing the Christian church of having contributed to the formation of what Bellah calls the 'culture of separation'.

Ever since the Enlightenment, the church has withdrawn from participation in the public discourse. Christianity has been privatised.

One could argue that it was the process of the secularisation of society which has pushed the church to the periphery of the public conversation, so that, as Thomas Luckmann pointed out 25 years ago, the church becomes just one of many purveyors of values from which people pick and choose as they go about constructing their own private system of meaning (Luckmann: 97, 113). But the church meekly participated in this transfer of religion from the public to the private arena. Inasmuch as the church cooperated in the privatisation of Christianity, it has contributed to the growth of the 'culture of separation'. The church gave up the opportunity to take part in public discourse, and in so doing it lost the right to do so.

II

You reap what you sow. The church's silent participation in the development of the 'culture of separation' has had a trickle-down effect: the church has absorbed some of the dynamics which are at work in secular culture. The effect has been detrimental to our life and being as church. In speaking now of 'church', I refer in particular to the Lutheran Church of Australia.

The Privatisation of Public Worship

Individualism, subjectivism, and the privatisation of belief and religious practice is a cancer infecting and affecting the worship life of the church.

Corporate worship is public; public worship is corporate. In public worship Christians together confess their faith before God and the world; together they are served by God; and together they pray for the world — also in the sense of 'on behalf of' the world.

In public worship Christians also participate, together with 'angels and archangels and all the company of heaven', in God's judging and saving activity in the world. Furthermore, in corporate worship the people of God provide a social model for the world, inasmuch as they practise that signal characteristic of Christian conduct: mutual subordination (Eph 5:21).

There is among us a tendency — not a strong tendency, but a tendency nonetheless — to privatise and individualise worship, so that it is neither corporate nor public. The focus is on self: what I need, what I want, what I like, what I feel. Given the current focus in Australian cultures on individualism, it is not surprising that 'I' language dominates much modern hymnody. What is truly alarming is the lack of theological critique, *'so that the implicit values of a self-based culture enter the church's liturgical life without being corrected by the gospel'* (Doran & Troeger: 203).

Francis Mannion's comments on the effects of the ideology of individualism were meant for the North American church scene, but they fit Australia pretty well. Mannion observes that the sacred is now being located within the 'self', so the liturgy is seen *'as a resource for getting in touch with the inward God or for celebrating inwardly constituted faith'* (106). Not unexpectedly, then, the performance of liturgical rites takes on the flavour of experiment and improvisation, for the search for liturgical expression which fits the interior disposition, the personal crisis or need, is never-ending. Inherited liturgical forms are of little value compared with the new forms, which are 'more authentic' because they

arise from the experience of individuals and groups in particular moments and circumstances.

In middle-class USA many Christians regard the church as a friendly gathering-place for individuals who have experienced the divine or holy in their lives. It is 'an association of loving individuals' or 'a communion of empathic sharing' (Bellah: 228). Mannion worries that people with whom we can't achieve intimacy will be squeezed out, so that the church becomes a place for persons of like status and class and disposition. The misfit is welcome, but not welcomed.

Furthermore, Mannion warns (113), the dynamics of the process of privatisation are becoming increasingly evident in popular conceptions and practices of the liturgy. Where small groups are seen to be the ideal shape of the liturgical assembly, a high priority is placed on the promotion of intimacy, closeness, and familiarity. The public work of the people of God is no longer the primary model of the sacred. We want intimacy, not liturgy. Concomitantly, personality rather than rite tends to become the preferred medium of liturgical communication and performance. The personal qualities and gifts of the liturgist become crucial factors in the success or failure of the 'worship experience'.

Australian Lutherans seem to have an inbuilt suspicion of traditional liturgy and ritual. Religious ritual is a system of prescribed acts. That sounds like legalism, an attack on the freedom of the gospel. Augustana 7 said that rites and ceremonies are human traditions and don't have to be everywhere the same. This has been interpreted to mean that when it comes to rituals, I can do what I like.

We seem not to have realised that rituals not only express our religious belief, but they actually generate some of our deepest faith-experiences. Take away the traditional rituals and you lose unique corporate religious experiences. For, as Mary Douglas observes, specific religious acts of a particular group are 'the only means of expressing value; the main instruments of thought; the only regulators of experience' (38; cf Lindbeck: 30-41).

What is needed in the Lutheran Church of Australia is for judgments concerning worship and liturgy to be based, not on subjective reactions, personal tastes and preferences, or individual experiences, but on sound theological premises, on authentic evangelical Lutheran praxis, on what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. It will be a disastrous day for the church if we reach the stage where pastor and people are so imprisoned in the culture and so conditioned by secular liberalism that they can't challenge the assumptions of the culture and rise above them in making liturgical judgments.

There is also urgent need for us to sort out what is the appropriate relationship between culture and liturgy. We are not entering uncharted waters in this matter; Christian churches everywhere have had to face, and still must face, the challenge of properly relating culture and cult while retaining the integrity of both (cf Wainwright: 388-398).

What we must realise is that efforts to adapt liturgy to culture will end in the death of liturgy as the *leitourgia*, the public work of the eschatological people of God, that is of people who are called to transcend particular cultures in order to demonstrate the relevance of the gospel to all cultures. The only legitimate strategy is for the church to adapt culture to liturgy, and not vice versa (Senn: 290).

The Privatisation of the Public Ministry

Further evidence for the infiltration of the ideology of individualism in the church is found in what I shall call the privatisation of the public ministry.

Lutherans have always been sensitive to the dangers inherent in any move to internalise or privatise the gospel. According to Augustana 5, the gospel comes to us from outside, through the external word. Someone has to speak the word, administer the sacraments (the visible word) publicly, not privately and in a hidden, esoteric way.

God wants the gospel 'publicised', so he instituted the office of the ministry, an office which one cannot arrogate to oneself. It is a public office; public ministry is not a private matter. As Luther said, while all Christians share the same power of word and sacraments, no-one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior' (LW 36:116). So Augustana 14 declares that no-one should preach or teach publicly unless called to do so. *Publice* here means in public; with legal authority; with doctrinal liability; and to all, for God wants all to be saved.

Since all Christians naturally want the gospel to be publicly proclaimed, and since Christians are concerned with maintaining good order, they call qualified people to exercise the office of the ministry publicly, speaking to and on behalf of the community. The call is crucial. The call into the office (*rite vocatus*) and the public nature of the office (**publice docere**), serve to distinguish the ministry of word and sacrament from the priestly service of all believers (cf Maurer: 198-204; KaIb: 310,311).

The trouble is that Christianity, instead of being a *cultus publicus* as it is supposed to be, has become a *cultus privatus*, a private cult. By eroding the traditional understanding of the **public** ministry of word and sacrament, we are playing into the hands of the secularists, who delight to see the church giving up its public voice without a fight, and 'going private'.

Is the public ministry indeed being privatised? I wish to reflect now the thoughts of Gerhard Forde, presented in that excellent anthology, *Called and Ordained*, and in a subsequent essay.

Since in the Western world Christianity no longer has the status of a *cultus publicus*, Forde argues, the public ministry of word and sacrament loses its *raison d'être*. If Christianity is a private affair, why can't just any Christian perform the functions which are normally assigned to the pastor? This is becoming a pressing question, because we are learning that lay people are as competent in 'ministry' as are the clergy.

Usually we take refuge (in seeking for a rationale for the public office) in the one obviously-public act left: the Lord's Supper. But even there, noises are made which sound like privatisation: the church needs to be a support group; we need personal 'sharing'. It is very meaningful to have the Supper distributed by a close friend or by someone who needs to be affirmed. Forde observes:

> *It is supposed to mark a great advance in lay participation in ministry to have the un-ordained do virtually everything but 'preside'. Why the laity cannot preside remains, of course, something of a mystery. Isn't it just a matter of saying the proper words? Since the words are in the book, should that not be much easier to do without mistake or heresy than praying or imitating a sermon*! (1990: 127).

Some pastors are themselves contributing to the privatisation of the public ministry. They privatise the pulpit, making it a place where they put on display their personal opinions, beliefs, emotions, and experiences, instead of proclaiming the *publica doctrina* of the church. Or pastors invest most of their efforts in private counselling or in administration. So the important thing is not the public exercise of an office, but what 'personal skills' one has, or what kind of person one is. Since ordination does not impart these skills and

personality traits, why ordain? Properly trained and equipped and sensitised lay people can do the job just as well, if not better.

So in different ways the office of the public ministry of word and sacrament is eroded, eroded. If we support this erosion, we are letting the dynamics of secularism determine the church's place in the public arena. The church has no public voice; Christianity is a private affair.

But God gave the public ministry to the church as the channel through which the word will do its work in the public arena. If we forsake the public arena, we don't need the public ministry; if we want to reclaim our place in the public sphere, we need the full public ministry of word and sacrament exercised in public worship. Christian worship provides the primary 'public' context for the preaching office. That is first and foremost what is meant by the *publice docere* of Augustana 14 (cf Maurer: 198,199). Augustana 7 already makes this clear when it speaks of 'the assembly of saints **in which** the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments administered rightly'.

III

Robert Bellah's uncovering of the ravages which the secular ideology of individualism has wrought in USA society — leading to a 'culture of separation' — moved him to issue a call for what he named a 'culture of coherence'. He asks people to change attitudes and values, to learn a 'second language' of moral discourse which commits them to the common good (in contrast to speaking the 'first language' of private comfort).

Bellah asks the churches to become partners in developing a 'social ecology'. Just as natural ecology recognises and works with the interdependence of elements of nature, so a social ecology works with all the interdependent elements of a society (Bellah: 284). For a social ecology to succeed, there must be a sustained effort on the part of important institutions within a social structure. Here, surely, is the church's opportunity to re-enter the public sphere and to contribute to the common weal. A society without a unifying centre is doomed.

> *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*
> *Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...*

Christians ought to be vitally interested in developing a 'culture of coherence'. In the remaining section of this presentation I want to explore briefly two actions which the Lutheran Church of Australia might take in order to oppose the 'culture of separation' in its own midst, and to contribute to the development of a 'culture of coherence'.

The Trinity as Model and Dynamic

First, we need to teach or re-teach the doctrine of the Trinity as a model and dynamic of unity and coherence. This means re-establishing contact with our Greek patristic roots, especially with the Cappadocians (Braaten: 112).

In the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow is a 15th century icon by the Russian monk Andrei Rublev. The icon, done in honour of the Russian saint, Sergius (1313-1392), is titled, The Holy Trinity. It represents the three angels who visited Abraham and Sarah at Mamre (Genesis 18), as an OT foreshadowing of the Trinity (Baggley: 112,142). The three divine angels sit at a table on which rests a single cup, representing fellowship and communion. There are three figures, but their body language and the way they are seated suggests that they are not at all separate. They seem to be totally given over to each other, without a trace of self- consciousness. It's hard to describe.

Henri Nouwen, in a beautiful meditation on this icon, points out that Saint Sergius wanted to unite all Russia around the Name of God, so that the hatred of the world would be overcome 'by contemplation of the Holy Trinity' (Nouwen: 26). Certainly, prayerful contemplation of Rublev's The Holy Trinity produces vivid reminders that the blessed Trinity is no mere collective or collection of individuals. God is, rather, a communion of unbroken personal relationships.

'Personal' does not mean 'individual' apart from membership one with another. God's very being is fellowship. The 'persons' of the Trinity exist in relationship (cf Pannenberg: 57-60). The Son is Son of the Father, and the Father is 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Eph 1:3). The Spirit is the Spirit of God and of Christ (Rom 8:9, 10). The three persons are one, sharing not only common 'substance', but also one mind, heart, will, and attitude towards us. In the Godhead there is no isolation, no secretiveness, no hidden agendas.

As the people of God we are not individuals, for the Christian faith is not a private affair. The church, Cyprian said, is 'a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit'. And this unity of the church is, in turn, a microcosm of the great cosmic unity which God plans to bring about in Christ (Eph 1:9, 10).

The church, then, is called to share God's life. This means that the Trinity is not only a model, but also the dynamic for our life together in the church and the world. We faithfully reflect life in union with the Triune God when we act as 'members one of the other'. We remind ourselves that we are made in the image of God as a restored community: there is a 'we- ness' about the restored image. For those who reflect the image of God, the Holy Trinity becomes a model, not of narcissism but of love-for-the-other (Plantinga: 27).

Furthermore, our baptism in the threefold divine Name will mean that we think 'family', whether it be Christian, Lutheran, synodical, or congregational. We consider the common good, not simply our own good. This is the mind of Christ (Phil 2:1-10). And when we pray and worship, we address God the Father through Jesus Christ, in the Spirit. We worship no one person in isolation. For, as we confess in the Athanasian Creed, 'the catholic (!) faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity' (for a fuller discussion of the so-called 'Social Trinity' see Plantinga: 26, 27).

In sum: reflection on the inner trinitarian communion of the persons of the Godhead, and on our participation in the life of the Triune God, will help to counter the movement towards privatisation of the Christian faith and the 'sacralisation of self' (to use Roland Chagnon's phrase).

Ministry and Vocation

The second move which needs to be made involves re-educating pastor and people concerning three doc trines of the church: the public ministry, the priesthood of all believers, and vocation. In discussing these matters, I follow, in part, the line of thought developed by Marc Kolden in several essays.

To every Christian has been committed the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18), the good news of peace with God and life with Christ. If Christians do not proclaim this message, no-one will. Proclaiming the gospel to the world is a task unique to the church.

Periodically in the history of the church the notion develops that this ministry of reconciliation has been committed only to certain segments of the church, that is, to the

clergy, the extra-pious, the professionals. Also periodically in the history of the church, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has been re-discovered — as happened, for example, at the time of the Reformation. So Luther wrote (to cite one of many instances):

> *There is no other Word of God than that which is given to all Christians to proclaim. There is no other baptism that the one which any Christian can bestow. There is no other remembrance of the Lord's Supper than that which any Christian can observe and which Christ instituted. There is no other kind of sin than that which any Christian can bind or loose. There is no other sacrifice than of the body of every Christian. No one but a Christian can pray. No one but a Christian may judge of doctrine. These make the priestly and royal office* (LW 40:34, 35).

Unfortunately, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has often been used to denigrate and dismiss the office of priest or pastor. The doctrine has been distorted to support a kind of religious individualism, and to encourage ideas of status and privilege instead of service. Luther also wrote:

> *There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes, and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do* (LW 44:129).

'But they do not all have the same work to do.' Pastors differ from the laity in that they exercise the priestly functions publicly, which means, as I have said already, 'in public; with legal authority; with doctrinal liability; and to all, for God wants all to be saved'.

Pastors have been called by God through his people to exercise publicly the functions which are the common right and duty of all Christians. This is the pastor's vocation and task. Pastors should not confuse this task with other duties and responsibilities which are often foisted on them, or which they take upon themselves, on the grounds that they want to be more than 'just' a preacher of forgiveness, or that others want the pastor to 'do something practical for a change'. Pastors are called into an office which God himself has given to the church just so that, as Augustana 5 says, people may obtain that faith which justifies and saves. It is a necessary office, and it is necessary that people are called to this office and placed in it in an orderly way.

What, then, of the laity? The playing off of clergy against laity reflects a misunderstanding of the vocation and tasks of both. The way to go is not to confuse roles, but to distinguish and affirm both.

Confusion is almost inevitable when we use slogans such as 'Everyone is a minister' or 'Everyone is in ministry' and even 'Everything is ministry'. The trouble is, if everyone is a minister, no one is a minister; if everything is ministry, nothing is ministry. Kolden identifies the fundamental confusion here of being due to a failure to distinguish between God's creative and redemptive work. The ministry of reconciliation has to do with God's work of redemption. We'd be wise, Kolden says, to reserve the word ministry' for that work, that unique work which only Christians perform (1987: 35). For activity in the area of creation, we could resurrect the good old Lutheran doctrine of vocation' and 'stations in life'.

Life is not devalued if we don't call everything in it 'ministry'. We don't need that word to make our activity in creation significant. Through the eyes of faith we see that our 'stations' in life (as father, mother, child, citizen, student, friend, and so forth) are places where God calls us to serve in his creative work. This service, the fulfilling of our many

tasks in society, is no less service to God and his ongoing creative work, than is our service in the specifically redemptive work of God.

So Christians in their vocation should actually form a vast diaconate. For their vocation does not lead them away from daily life, but keeps them focussed on those creaturely aspects of life which God calls 'good'. Thus, Kolden concludes,

> *the solidarity of God's creative and redemptive work is nowhere more clear than here. The gospel's work itself will not be completed without vocation. The ministry of reconciliation leads to vocation and vocation completes ministry* (205).

If pastors teach the doctrines of vocation; if Christian people live their vocations; and if the public ministry of the church is re-publicised, then the church as a witnessing community will take its place once more in the public square. The result will be blessing, not only for the church, but for the family, the community, and the nation.

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