

## Faith, friendship, and justice: Elements for a Christian social ethic

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**ABSTRACT:** To construct a vision of friendship and its significance for Christian social ethics, I begin with one of the earliest accounts: St. Augustine's discussions of friendship in *The Confessions* and *The City of God*. Augustine's political project, however, eventually comes to depend too much on religious coercion for its fulfilment, a development that can be traced in Augustine's *Letters*. The *Benedictine Rule* assumes a different setting for Christian friendship, and it describes a form of religious obedience that is freely chosen. Thomas Aquinas envisions a sacramental life that nourishes growth in virtue and friendship with God, and he tries to show how these virtues can build up the common good outside the walls of the monastery. Jean-François Lyotard notes, however, that the postmodern ethos is suspicious of all meta-narratives, including the Christian faith. Discussions of 'social capital' (bonding, bridging, linking) offer clues that might lead to a renewed appreciation of Christian friendship and the role it can play in building up the common good.

**Keywords:** friendship, justice, social capital, Augustine, Aquinas

### Why Friendship? Why Now?

Human beings are born with a longing for community and friendship. The film *Cast Away* (Zemeckis 2000) provides a vivid example of this desire. After Chuck Noland's plane crashes into the Pacific Ocean, he is marooned on a deserted island for four years. To cope with his loneliness, Chuck draws a face on an inanimate object— a volleyball— and he begins to talk to "Wilson" as though he were a long-time friend (Epley 2008, p.117). Eventually he enters into a heated argument with Wilson about whether they should risk leaving the island, after which they are "reconciled" with each other. Chuck finally does manage to break past the currents and waves that have kept him trapped on the island, but soon afterward a dangerous storm threatens to sink his make-shift raft. Wilson falls overboard, and Chuck breaks down in tears as he is forced to watch his "friend" drift further and further away on the waves.

So we have this desire for friendship, but we do not always know: is this desire more likely to be fulfilled or to be frustrated? Sociologists have recently described an 'epidemic of loneliness' in the United States. In the last thirty years, the number of people who say they have someone they can talk to about matters that are important to them has declined dramatically. In 1982, many people reported that they felt close to three people and could confide in them (Fischer 1982, pp.125-127), but respondents today are much more likely to say that they have only one person, or even none that they feel close to (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Brashears 2006, p.371).

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Psychologists measure loneliness by asking individuals to respond to statements such as those in the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Hawkley & Cacioppo 2010, p.218): 'I feel isolated' or 'I feel part of a group of friends'. The result is a continuum of scores that range from socially connected to very lonely. Most psychological discussions of loneliness regard it as a form of deprivation that can be analyzed in three dimensions. The first dimension is concerned with a person's immediate feelings of emptiness or abandonment. The second dimension has more to do with time and perspective: do people interpret their loneliness as something they are locked into forever, or do they have hope that it might change in the near future? The third component involves more reflective emotions – feelings of sorrow, sadness, shame, frustration, and desperation over being lonely (de Jong Gierveld, 1998). Masi (2011) identifies four primary intervention strategies for dealing with loneliness: (1) improving social skills at the micro level through simulation and practice; (2) enhancing social support from volunteers and neighbors; (3) increasing opportunities for social contact by venturing out to meet others; and (4) addressing maladaptive social cognition through counseling.

According to some researchers, belonging to a religious group and participating in religious activities can also have a buffering effect on feelings of loneliness (Rokach 2012; Pargament 1992; Paloutzian 1982). To be sure, no study of religious participation will ever be able to answer the epistemological questions we ask about religion (such as, is it true?). These studies do offer a clue, however, about the connection between the Christian faith and friendship. My thesis is that Christian traditions of friendship can make a valuable contribution to the common good by building up solidarity between people. Therefore, in what follows, I try to sketch a vision of Christian friendship and its significance for social ethics.

The first part of the discussion focuses on the key figures including Augustine, Benedict, and Thomas Aquinas. Augustine's early search for friendship finds its deepest meaning in the context of friends loving God together. Later in his career as bishop, however, Augustine came to depend too much on coercion, a very unfriendly approach, as a way of imposing order on those who disagreed with his vision of the Good. St. Benedict was content to establish smaller communities of friends, freely dedicated to loving God and neighbor, though these communities had considerably less influence on shaping the common good than Augustine sought. Thomas Aquinas envisions a sacramental life that nourishes growth in virtue and friendship with God. Aquinas believes these values can help build up friendship and the common good outside the walls of the monastery, in a way that depends more on persuasion and political argument than coercion. The postmodern context, dominated by the 'masters of suspicion', is especially challenging for the Christian faith, and the Christian account of friendship is not exempt from this challenge. While it will not be possible for me to "prove" that the Christian vision is "right", my aim is somewhat more humble: to show that the Christian account of friendship remains morally attractive and worthy of serious consideration.

### **Augustine: Loving God, loving friends**

In Book 2 of *The Confessions*, Augustine is prayerfully reflecting on certain sins committed during his adolescent years. At that stage of his life, he says, his will was not yet integrated by love for God, but 'dis-integrated'. He comes to an incident that happened when he was

sixteen, involving the theft of some pears. It was something done thoughtlessly, in the company of his friends (O'Daly, 2007, p.221). They were none of them hungry, and he himself already had plenty of better-tasting pears at home that he could have eaten. So, what was to be gained by stealing the fruit? Augustine cannot find a suitable answer to that question, and it is the very groundlessness of his act that strikes him as worthy of further reflection.

The same kind of disordered desire is evident to him when he recalls the peer-pressure that played a role in his early sexual adventures. Indeed, whenever this group of friends came together, they were overly concerned with acquiring goods of a 'lower' sort. Augustine's retrospective gaze reaches a similar conclusion about his father's ambitious plans for Augustine's education and his subsequent career in government (2.3.5). The stolen pears, his unruly sexual desire, and the father's ambition for his son's political glory, all show a neglect of the better and the highest good: the love of God and love for God's truth and law (2.4.9).

Augustine is suggesting, then, that the kind of friendship we ought to be most concerned about finding and keeping is friendship based on a shared desire for the *highest* good, the love of God. Several years later, in his early twenties, however, Augustine was still not ready for that insight. In Book 4, Augustine tells the story of his intense friendship with an unnamed young man in their hometown of Thagaste. They had known each other since childhood, but only as acquaintances. As young men, however, they discovered that their interests mirrored each other, and the bond between them grew quickly. They both loved the give and take of philosophical debate, and they were also united in their rejection of their parent's Christian faith. 'Seducing and being seduced' (*seducebamur et seducebamus* 4.1.1), such words would not be too strong to describe the way they distracted each other from embracing God as the highest Good (Wetzel, 2003:53).

The two friends were inseparable for just over a year (4.4.7), but then Augustine's friend was suddenly taken ill and died. Augustine was devastated. 'Black grief closed over my heart', he says. Wherever he looked, he half-expected to see his friend's face, though he knew that would never happen again. What troubles Augustine in this case of 'problematic friendship' from his past is his own narcissism and friendship that was idolatrous. There is no indication that the twenty year-old Augustine was able to conceive of his friend as an independent person with a life of his own beyond Augustine's self-centered gaze. Consequently, Augustine made the mistake of worshiping his friend and seeking ultimate fulfillment in their friendship. Instead, says the mature Augustine, he ought to have loved God above all, and loved his friend in the light of his love for God (Paffenroth, 1992: 131-133). Then he would have been able to enjoy both kinds of love in their proper relation and proportion, in spite of the inevitable earthly separation from his friend (Miller, 2011, p.395).

Augustine revisits the question of grief and its appropriateness in *The City of God* 14.9. There he is critical of the Stoic philosophers who follow the practice of cutting themselves off from feeling any emotional pain or sorrow when they suffer the loss of a friend. Such a life would simply not be human. Yet in Books 3 and 4 of *The Confessions* (3.4.2 and 4.5.9) he is equally critical of the 'pursuit' of grief that motivated him to attend the shows of the theater. Augustine recalls a particular instance when he was attending a performance of Vergil's *Aeneid*, and the time came for Aeneas to mourn the loss of Dido. Swept up in the flow of that aesthetic experience of friendship, Augustine found himself weeping for an imaginary character. In retrospect, he regards it as a very odd moment,

because he ought rather to have been weeping over his own separation from God and the similar predicament of his flesh and blood friends (Werpehowski, 1991, p.180). His grief over the death of a fictional character was inappropriate, another case of disordered love, because it did not lead him to seek friendship with God, nor did it move him to seek the spiritual good of any of his friends. How much better it would have been for the young Augustine to seek friendship with Christ: 'For he did not delay, but ran through the world, crying out by words, deeds, death, life, descent, ascension— crying aloud to us to return to him' (4.12.18; DiLorenzo, 2004, p.144).

In *The City of God*, Augustine tries to show that The City of Man, the first political society, is also founded on a disordered love. Cain, the one who murdered his brother, is the founder of the first city (*Genesis* 4:8 and 4:17). That *polis* is composed of all those who have dedicated themselves to the goals of the earthly city. For that reason, it reflects the worst elements of fallen humanity, especially the lust for domination over others (*libido dominandi*).

Yet Augustine also believed that many people then and now are motivated by a different set of loyalties. The pilgrim people of The City of God live virtuously in this life, while contemplating their permanent home in the heavenly Jerusalem. While living in families, religious communities, cities, and states, these pilgrims also dream that their earthly societies might come to imitate the ideal society of friends dwelling together in The City of God. They have embraced Jesus' teaching about loving God and loving neighbor (*Matthew* 22:37-39). Drawing out the further political implications of the love command, Augustine says:

Here also is security for the welfare and renown of a commonwealth; for no state is perfectly established and preserved otherwise than on the foundation and by the bond of faith and of firm concord, when the highest and truest common good, namely, God, is loved by all, and men love each other in Him without dissimulation, because they love one another for His sake from whom they cannot disguise the real character of their love. (*Letter 137*, 5.17)

So we encounter in *Letter 137* a more explicit account of the answer Augustine discovered to the problem of disordered love in the friendships of his youth: 'Let us love one another for God's sake'.

One serious difficulty with Augustine's vision of political friendship, however, is that the inhabitants of the earthly city are too diverse and too much oriented to their own private interests to build the kind of unified society that Augustine desires. Sooner or later, attempts to impose Augustine's vision on others will require forms of coercion that are distinctly *unfriendly*.

The development of Augustine's thinking about religious coercion can be traced in a series of letters he wrote during the Donatist controversy. The Donatist churches had broken away from the Catholic Church. They believed that too many Catholic priests and bishops had failed to resist the Roman Empire in the waves of persecution that happened before Constantine's conversion. Catholic leaders, they said, had made compromises with the state in which the Church's purity was irretrievably lost. In the early stages of this

controversy (392 AD), Augustine wrote a letter to Maximin, a Donatist leader who had publicly questioned the validity of baptisms performed by Catholic priests. Augustine asks him for a public debate on the issues, and he makes it clear that he opposes coercion in religious matters:

I shall not, however, do this in the presence of the soldiery, lest any of you should think that I wish to act in a violent way, rather than as the interests of peace demand; but only after their departure, that all who hear me may understand, that I do not propose to compel men to embrace the communion of any party, but desire the truth to be made known to persons who, in their search for it, are free from disquieting apprehensions. On our side there shall be no appeal to men's fear of the civil power; on your side, let there be no intimidation by a mob of Circumcelliones [Donatist vigilantes who attacked Catholics]. Let us attend to the real matter in debate, and let our arguments appeal to reason and to the authoritative teaching of the Divine Scriptures, dispassionately and calmly, so far as we are able; let us ask, seek, and knock, that we may receive and find, and that to us the door may be opened... (*Letter 23, 7*)

Almost ten years later, when responding to a polemical document that had been circulated by the Donatist bishop Petilian, Augustine again emphasizes the role of persuasion in settling the issues: *Ecce non agimus ferro sed uerbo*. 'See, then, that we do not act with the sword, but with the word' (*Answer to Petilian*, paragraph 154).

In a letter written in 405 AD, however, Augustine is beginning to waver on the question of persecuting the Donatists. He invokes Paul's justification for civil authority in *Romans 13* and its proper use in restraining evil:

The civil powers defend their conduct in persecuting schismatics by the rule which the apostle laid down: Whoso resists the civil power, resists the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil... You answer, perhaps, that Christians ought not to persecute even the wicked. Be it so; let us admit that they ought not: but is it lawful to lay this objection in the way of the powers which are ordained for this very purpose? Shall we erase the apostle's words? (*Letter 87, 7-8*)

In 408, when Augustine writes *Letter 93* to the Donatist leader Vincent, the shift in his attitude is complete. Augustine is now in favor of using religious coercion against the Donatists: 'It seems to me it would be advisable for them to be restrained (*cohiben*) and corrected (*corrige*) by the powers established by God'. He acknowledges that this is a change from the view he formerly held. 'For originally my opinion (*primitus sententia*) was, that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ, that we must act only by words, fight only by arguments, and prevail by force of reason, lest we should have those whom we knew as

avowed heretics feigning themselves (*fictos*) to be Catholics'. Now, however, Augustine believes that there are scriptural warrants for persecuting the Donatists (Scalise, 1996, p.498). In *Exodus* 32, Moses uses the sword against those who had worshiped the Golden Calf. In *1 Kings* 18, Elijah uses violence to silence the prophets of Baal. And in *Luke* 14, Jesus himself says, 'Compel them to come in, that my house may be filled' (*Letter* 173, 10).

So there is a serious fault-line between the account of friendship that emerges in Augustine's *Confessions* and the rationale for religious coercion that begins to take shape in his letters just a few years later. Therefore, however great an affinity I feel for the rest of Augustine's religious thought, I part ways with him on this question of religious coercion. I myself hold fast to the teaching of *Dignitatis Humanae*, Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom: 'all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others...'

### The Rule of St. Benedict and monastic friendship

Nearly a hundred years after Augustine wrote *Confessions* and *The City of God*, St. Benedict (480-547 AD) was keenly interested in building up communities of Christian friendship, but in a way that was very different from Augustine's political project. Benedict's *Rule* seeks to form Christian friendships, but it does so without imposing it upon many unwilling citizens across the wide geographical area of an empire (Mitchell, 2011, p.174). In the Benedictine tradition, monks voluntarily join a small community, and it is in this context that they commit themselves to live as loving servants of the Lord and loving servants of one another.

In a recent study, Brian McGuire (2010) argues that a discussion of friendship is absent from Benedict's *Rule*, but in fact two of its chapters have a special bearing on the practices of Christian friendship. Chapter 71 bears the title 'That They Be Obedient to One Another', and Chapter 72 is 'On the Good Zeal Which the Monks Ought to Possess'. The key words for describing Christian zeal in these chapters are *ferventissimo* (most ardently), *patientissime* (most patiently), and *certatim* (eagerly). Benedict also uses three important words to describe the love the monks should show in their words and in their deeds: *amor* toward God himself, *diligere* toward the abbot, and *caritas* toward the poor and those in need (Fortin, 2009, p.52).

With respect to more specific roles performed in the monastery, the cellarer shows friendship by preparing food for the monks. The infirmarian is a friend to those who are sick. The porter welcomes guests as friends, bearing in mind that in *Matthew* 25, Christ comes to his disciples *incognito*, as a stranger. The monks take special vows of integrity and stability, too, as these are needed in every friendship that is to be centred on the Good.

How should we assess the difference between the Augustinian view of friendship in society and the kind of friendships found in Benedictine monasticism? The difference can be described as hinging on a distinction made by Max Weber in his essay, 'Politics as a Vocation'. Weber sees a difference between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility. Augustine eventually came to believe that it was his *responsibility* to impose his vision of Christian friendship on others. Benedict represents instead an ethics of conviction that remains faithful to the *convictions* embodied in The Sermon on the Mount

(Verstraeten, 1995; Starr, 1999, p.416). Benedict believed with all his heart that the world desperately needed the values of Christian friendship, but he did not seek to impose them on those outside the monastery.

### **Thomas Aquinas: Friendship, justice, worship**

When Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) reflects on the meaning of friendship, he begins by recalling Aristotle's discussion in Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The ancient Greek philosopher had distinguished between three forms of friendship. First, there are instrumental friendships, in which we befriend someone, not for his intrinsic qualities, but because we hope he will be useful in helping us reach some goal outside of our friendship itself. When we reach that end, however, such a friend is no longer of use to us, and we are likely to hurt him by turning our backs on him. If that is how we behave towards the people in our lives, we have not yet learned what true Christian friendship requires of us.

Secondly, there are friendships between people who take delight in similar activities or pleasures. The friendship of team-mates in sports can often be like that. We might be friends so long as we are united in a campaign to win games in a sport that we enjoy. However, since pleasure is more fleeting than character, it is likely that these kinds of friendships, too, will be temporary—say, only for a season or two.

Thirdly, there are friendships based on a shared love of the Good, and we can expect that these will be the deepest and longest-lasting kind of friendships (*Summa Theologica*, II-I, question 26, article 4). In these kinds of friendships, the focus is not on what I hope to gain *from* my friend, but on the good that I want *for* my friend for her own sake. To love her is to will her good (*amare est velle alicui bonum*), especially where her growth in the Christian experience of faith, hope, and love is concerned. By itself, this goodwill is not enough to build a friendship, because feelings of benevolence might remain asymmetrical and altogether one-sided. Yet, goodwill is the point from which friendship starts, a point after which we hope to enjoy intimacy and reciprocity with a person—taking delight in each other's presence, growing in our knowledge of each other, and sharing in the same joys and sorrows (*Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 28, a.1).

This third kind of friendship comes to the fore in St. Thomas' discussion of *John 15:15*. Jesus is having his last meal with his disciples, on the night before he is handed over to suffering and death. What does he say to them in this dramatic hour? 'I will no longer call you servants... but My friends'. 'If you love me', says Jesus 'keep my commandments'. And what is his commandment? 'That you love one another'. The goal of Jesus' words and deeds is to bring about *caritas* – love of human beings for God (*Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 24, a. 2), and in light of that *caritas*, to build up friendship (*fundari amicitiam*) among his followers. Choosing to feel compassion for others and being willing to act for their good are important elements of this friendship – as when Jesus heals the sick and casts out evil spirits from those who are suffering (Cates, 1997, p.228). Moreover, Jesus means for the radius of this circle of friends to keep on growing, because he laid down his life not only for his friends, but also for those who at present are still his enemies. He anticipates that his enemies, too, will one day become his friends (*Commentary on John 15*, lecture 2, paragraph 2009).

These '*John 15* friendships' have a special role to play in the quest for justice and the common good. Aquinas defines justice as always giving to another person that which is due

him (*Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 58, a.1). The paradigmatic way we come to know about what it means to 'render what is due' to another person is through the obligations of friendship. 'It is by learning how to seek the good of another in friendship that we gradually acquire the skill to act rightly toward every person with whom we come into contact, respecting their dignity, acknowledging their rights, and fulfilling our responsibilities toward them' (Wadell, 2002, p.153). Moreover, Christian friends have excellent reasons for working together for justice in society. They meet regularly at the Lord's Table, where the Eucharist is celebrated. The consecrated bread and the wine are distributed to all the friends who are gathered there. This most sacred rite, then, also suggests a range of very practical actions. The sharing of food and drink is the first of those actions that lead to the goal of distributive justice, in which all of God's children are meant to flourish together in friendship.

Sceptical observers, however, have sometimes been more impressed by cases in which they have seen 'friends' conspiring with each other to act unjustly. A prayer from seventeenth century England laments that the outcome of court cases can be 'fixed' by offering bribes to judges, and earnestly asks God to 'Remove from them covetousness ... Let neither rewards be in their hands, nor revenge in their hearts' (Prest, 1991, p.75). More recent discussions of "cronyism" seek to shine a light on situations in which friendship and personal loyalty triumph over the principles of openness, fairness, and merit. In international business, Americans have been known to express frustration when they are unable to make deals with businessmen in China, because they are more willing to trust family members than outsiders (Fukuyama, 1995, p.74-78). In Middle Eastern countries, 'wasta' is a term that describes the deeply rooted social practice of granting jobs and social privileges to tribal relatives rather than to strangers, no matter how deserving those strangers might be (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993). In American politics, too, there is a form of cronyism in which those who have been "loyal friends" to a political dynasty, such as the Bush family or the Kennedy clan, can expect to be given special consideration for government contracts, or to receive official appointments, even when they lack proper experience (Bellow, 2003). It is tempting to conclude, then, that friendship and justice are in conflict with each other. This has come to be known as 'The Inverse Proportionality Thesis', and it can be stated succinctly as: 'Justice and its circumstances are inversely related to friendship and community' (Badhwar, 1993, p.258).

For St. Thomas, however, the circumstances of friendship must *not* be allowed to cancel the obligations of justice (Porzeczanski, 2004). As St. Thomas understands it, love of the highest Good fulfills the desire of our hearts. Those who love God are given the virtue of temperance, and this virtue of temperance has a special relationship to justice. Temperance is that virtue that guards our souls from *pleonexia*, the desire to obtain more than our just share (Balot, 2001). Moreover, love of God includes love of neighbour, and if we love our neighbours, we recognize that actions that might result in harm or injustice to them are not permissible.

There is another kind of argument that asserts that justice has no place in friendship: Where friendship exists, making demands based on 'my rights' seems out of place (Sandel, 1982). This kind of reasoning is prominent in *1 Corinthians* 6:6, where St. Paul teaches that Christians should not resort to the courts to settle their disagreements. However, Aquinas rejects the view that Christians must never go to court. After all, did God not appoint Moses as a judge in *Deuteronomy* 1:16? Aquinas recognizes that court action may further harm the fraternal peace that should exist between Christians, but there are times when inaction

would lead to an even worse result. He discusses several illuminating examples in *Liber Contra Impugnantes Dei Cultum et Religionem*: (1) It is a work of charity (*ad officium caritatis pertinet*) to go to court to defend and restore the property of the poor, if it is stolen or under threat of unjust confiscation. That is why the prophet Elijah confronts King Ahab after he has murdered Naboth and taken possession of his family's vineyard (see *1 Kings 21*); (2) It is a work of charity to use the courts to free the oppressed from their oppressors; and (3) It is also a work of charity for Christians to defend religious freedom in court when there are forces that would encroach upon religious liberty. So, again, the circumstances of friendship do not cancel the obligations of justice. Indeed, it is possible that the solidarity of Christian friendship can offer a very *strong* motive for seeking justice by legal or political means.

### **Postmodernism: A Challenging Context for Christian Friendship**

Jean-François Lyotard (1984) has described postmodernism as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'. Why this attitude of suspicion toward religion in postmodernism? Part of the answer to that question is that on account of our globalized outlook, we are more aware of religious pluralism than any generation before us. We know that each of these many religions makes its own imperious claims and competes with other religions for followers. There is a generalized perception that religious 'consumers'— if indeed they still care about religion at all— may 'shop' for their faith. In the religious marketplace, all religions appear to be equally plausible/implausible. Epistemologically, it is very unlikely that we will be able to agree and gather around the kind of unequivocal truth that Augustine thought it was possible to find. Perhaps the best we can hope for is that, in a context of toleration, I will find my answer, one that is 'true for me', and you will find your answer, one that is 'true for you'. Yet, if toleration is all we can expect from each other, the prospects for deep and lasting friendship cannot be very promising (Silverman, 2012, p.189). People who are merely tolerant of one another have physical proximity, but they might feel little mutual affinity for each other.

Or, if a more agonistic or polemical mood prevails, offers of friendship that come with a strong religious element might be rejected because they are infected by an ideology that serves entrenched economic interests (Marx's critique of religion). When Biblical commands are deconstructed, they might be taken merely as efforts by 'the herd' to restrain a gifted person, to keep him from discovering his powers of self-expression (Nietzsche's view in *The Anti-Christ*, section 5). Religious symbols might be regarded as nothing more than an illusory desire for consolation amid the harsh realities of life (this is the position taken in Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*). A feminist critique of patriarchal advantage might reject religious teaching as just one more way society seeks to dominate and control women (the approach taken by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1898).

If postmodernism is suspicious of friendships formed around some vision of the Good, what will shape them instead? In Zygmunt Bauman's account, it is commercial advertising that now offers the most powerful images of social cohesion. If I have paid enough attention to commercial advertising throughout my life— and who can escape it?— it is likely that I have developed loyalties to a narrow range of consumer brands. Eventually, perhaps without my even realizing it, I will choose or reject people as my friends according to whether they are loyal to that same range of consumer brands. Through my purchases of

*this* car, *these* clothes, a house in *this* neighborhood, I am constructing an identity that says to prospective companions, 'This is how I want to be known by my friends'. Consumer conduct is now "the cognitive and moral focus of life, and the integrative bond of society" (Bauman, 1992, p.49).

The postmodern context in which we choose our friends is shaped by another kind of narrowing. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis De Tocqueville observed that newspapers were instrumental in building up civil society and a sense of national identity. 'Newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers' (Tocqueville, 1840). Their coverage of political life and current events continued to play an essential role in public discussion throughout the nineteenth century. Then, from about 1920 to 1950, radio broadcasts took up that integrative function. The film, *The King's Speech*, provides a memorable example of how BBC Radio could be effective in uniting people separated by great distances. From 1950 to 1990, that unifying function shifted from radio to television. In the early years of television, when there were not many channels, a relatively small number of messages were 'broad-cast' to many people. To take one more example from film, *The Right Stuff* shows how NASA space missions provided images and stories that captured the imagination of nearly all Americans in the 1960s.

Today, however, there are many more media channels and there is a strong trend for them to be aimed at reaching niche audiences. Programs on cable and satellite television, political talk radio shows, blogs and RSS feeds are designed to present a very specialized message to a targeted community. This array of choices means that viewers can now be more selective, choosing to watch only those channels and commentators who reinforce and intensify the views they already hold (Katz, 2000, pp.126-127). It is possible now to live in an echo-chamber of opinion that resembles a monologue more than a dialogical discussion. 'Members of my e-group on nineteenth century American history are connected to me only in terms of *that* topic, unlike my neighbour, who may also meet me at the supermarket, in church, or on the ball field' (Putnam, 2001, p.178). But if participation in local neighbourhoods and civic life is displaced by 'narrow-casting' and virtual friendships that are restricted to an electronic niche, where and on what basis should we expect the bonds of true community and civic virtue to be formed?

Recent discussions of 'social capital' might hold important clues to a renewed appreciation of Christianity's vision of friendship. Social theorists speak about three basic types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. 'Bonding' social capital is said to be horizontal, among equals within the same community. In a close-knit Christian community, friendship, trust, and cohesion are usually built up through the performance of shared rituals, and especially by participation in sacraments such as Baptism and Eucharist. This is sometimes described as the priestly dimension of faith, when fellowship and healing are most in view. 'Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ', says Paul in *Galatians* 6: 2. But prophetic challenges and calls to repentance can also spring from these symbolic resources. It is in The Temple, in a liturgical context, that the prophet Isaiah says, 'Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts'.

'Bridging' social capital involves building networks of friendship between people who belong, not to the same religious community, but to various other communities, or indeed, to no discernible community at all. Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel describes a stranger who acts as a friend when he sees a man on the road beaten and left

for dead. Similarly, Peter befriends Cornelius (*Acts 10*), bridging a gulf between Jews and Gentiles. Bridging capital can take many forms, as when church members volunteer to reach out beyond their walls to make friends with the elderly via Meals On Wheels; with families who do not own a home by participating in Habitat for Humanity; with immigrants and refugees who need help in a new country; with children and their parents through church-sponsored schools and daycare centers (Baggett, 2002, p.431). Typically, these friendships are not as deep as those formed in the context of religious ritual, yet they are very meaningful in forming the kind of strong communities in which people can flourish.

Discussions of 'linking' social capital have more to do with encouraging political participation and engagement. In some respects it focuses on the weakest bond among these three types, but it can sometimes yield the most valuable outcome, providing access and connection to power structures and institutions. It is linking social capital that is most characterized by exposure to and development of new ideas, values, and perspectives. It may be this 'linking' type of social capital that is most effective in bringing about social change. 'Let justice roll down like waters', says *Amos 5:24*, 'and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'.

The documentary film, *A Village Called Versailles*, shows how all three forms of social capital might work together (Chiang, 2009; Airriess, 2008; Hawkins and Maurer, 2010). Versailles is a community in New Orleans, made up mostly of refugee families who came to the United States in the 1970s in the wake of the Vietnam War. The Catholic Church forms the center of their community in the sense of *bonding* social capital, seen especially in their celebration of the sacraments. In the upheaval following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when many homes in New Orleans were destroyed, the people of Versailles reached out to the wider community. They fed many displaced persons, and they helped organize medical care and projects for rebuilding homes— good examples of *bridging* social capital. Meanwhile, in 2006, the city of New Orleans made plans to develop a waste dump in their neighborhood, but the people of Versailles organized and protested— an exemplary use of *linking* social capital. As a consequence, their elected officials saw the wisdom of developing an alternate plan. At all three levels of social interaction, then— micro, meso, and macro— Christian friendship can play a vital role in building up the common good.

### **Continuing the dialogue: Pluralism, irony, and the common good**

The practices and discourses of hatred and division are never far from us. We can tune into them or give ourselves over to them at any moment in time, if that is the way our hearts are inclined. In recent memory, political commentator Lou Dobbs kept up a steady drumbeat against Mexican families who had entered the United States illegally. It did not seem to matter that the great majority of them were working hard to support their families, and making the social fabric of the United States more colourful, more vibrant as they did so. If I follow Dobbs' lead, then what kind of 'neighbour' am I destined to become? Similarly, if I take my cues about love and justice from one or the other of America's two main political parties, the chances are good that I will be alienated from the other 150 million people in the United States. What possibilities will be left to me, then, for building communities of friendship?

Or, suppose I accept uncritically the ideological story that capitalism tries to tell me about the world and economic realities. Perhaps I will be unable, then, to imagine any kind

of life other than one that is devoted to accumulating more and more possessions. It seems to follow, then, that I would also feel compelled to defend these material possessions the way an animal would, according to some form of 'the territorial imperative'. In that case, I would never know anything of true friendship. My world would be divided instead into short-term allies who can help me acquire what I want, and a host of adversaries who stand in the way of my desires.

If I interrogate myself further and ask: How did this *other* vision of friendship begin to take shape in my imagination? The answer that comes to me is: from scripture, from worship, from works of love undertaken with Christian friends for the good of others. *The Psalms* are a particularly rich resource in this respect. They summon us to worship together as a community of friends: 'I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord' (*Psalms* 122). They encourage us to live together in peace and friendship: 'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion' (*Psalms* 133). They show us a path for the friends of God to follow: 'He executes justice for the oppressed. He gives food to the hungry and freedom to the prisoners. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind and raises up those who are bowed down. The Lord watches over strangers. He relieves the fatherless and the widow' (*Psalms* 146). And the Psalms teach us to keep hoping and working together for justice: 'I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living' (*Psalms* 27).

In a pluralistic society, however, I am surrounded by 'strangers' who do not see what I see, or hear what I hear in the context of worship. As a consequence, Christian communities have developed several models for relating to these strangers, but each model has its own set of limitations and challenges for the meaning of friendship.

One way Christians try to deal with 'strangers' is by adopting a sectarian approach to their faith. Many Anabaptist and Mennonite groups pursue this option. A rather strict line is drawn between the Beloved Community and 'the world outside'. Friendship exists primarily within this bounded community, and great care is taken to avoid 'friendship with the world'. Perhaps we catch a glimpse of this inside/outside dynamic in Peter Weir's film, *Witness*, in which an Amish community is threatened by violent intruders (Hansen, 1986, p.137). An important variation on this theme has been elaborated by Stanley Hauerwas. For Hauerwas, the Christian community practices a specific set of virtues informed by scripture and tradition. Much of the focus is on 'getting it right amongst ourselves', and then on hoping that people outside of our story-shaped community will begin to take notice and decide that they want to become part of that project too (Burroughs, 2013, p.45).

Reinhold Niebuhr represents a very different approach to faith and social ethics. In the 1930's, Niebuhr abandoned the Christian pacifism of his youth. The political evils he saw in totalitarian governments of the left and the right were so great, that he became an advocate for the use of American military force to vanquish them, or at least to hold their ambitions in check. As Christians have a responsibility to establish a rough kind of justice, they need not be overly concerned about always maintaining 'clean hands and a pure heart' in American foreign policy, for example. Believers who follow Niebuhr's approach will often make common cause with friends who are not Christians. Having beheld tragic circumstances that cry out for justice, these dis-similar friends see the value of working together to bring about a more just outcome in an imperfect world (Lovin, 2005, p.460).

John Rawls favours yet another model for the relation between religion and politics. Rawls is primarily interested in describing the work of deliberative justice in a procedural framework. He regards religious discourse with considerable suspicion because of its historical record of fostering division and violence – as in the wars of religion in the sixteenth century. For Rawls, those who speak and act in the public sphere need to be discouraged from explicitly citing their faith as a motivating factor for their involvement in politics.

A basic feature of democracy is the fact of reasonable pluralism— the fact that a plurality of conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious, philosophical, and moral, is the normal result of its culture of free institutions. Citizens realize that they cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines. In view of this, they need to consider what kinds of reasons they may reasonably give one another when fundamental political questions are at stake. I propose that in public reason comprehensive doctrines of truth or right be replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable addressed to citizens as citizens. (Rawls, 1997, p.765-766)

If I have religious reasons for pursuing certain policy goals, then, Rawls asks me to set them aside and argue for my proposals using only secular reasons. If I am unable to use that kind of reasoning, then I am asked to refrain from speaking at all. For Rawls, the goal of political deliberation is the building of a broad-based, overlapping consensus (Rawls, 1987, p.1). In light of that goal, Rawls hopes that strangers might yet become friends, if they are willing to keep their religious commitments private, never bringing them into public discussion.

The main problem with Rawls' proposal for Christian social ethics, however, is that he describes a very 'tame', a very privatized version of religious faith (Langan, 1977, p.352). If the prophet Elijah had been so 'polite' about proclaiming God's judgment, there would never have been a confrontation between him and King Ahab or Queen Jezebel. Had Jesus been so meek about announcing The Reign of God, he would never have offended the Roman order, and there would have been no reason for Rome to condemn him to a violent death on a cross (Cahill, 2005, pp.18-19; Shaffer, 1993, p.1865).

When Pope Benedict XVI spoke to British political leaders and diplomats in Westminster in September 2010, he advocated a more dialogical approach to the relationship between religion and politics than the one described by Rawls:

The central question at issue, then, is this: where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers – still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion – but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the

discovery of objective moral principles...This is why I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization. (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010)

That is why my imagination keeps coming back to *John 15* and the promise that alienation will eventually give way to communion; to those words by which Jesus calls his followers to keep looking for ways to build up the common good: ‘No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends...’

### About the author

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