

Faith in the Commons

they may have more in common than we thought

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Let me begin by acknowledging that the practice of religious faith in the context of the commons is widely perceived to be a contradiction in terms. By definition, so it seems, a faith community could never be genuinely affirming of a religious or theological commons. Faith communities, it is often understood, consist of groups of people gathered around divinely-revealed truths which can broach no discussion of those truths without violating their relationship with the divinity which has supplied the community with the inviolable truths. Such a faith community draws its very essence from its experience that its revelation is unassailable. Like-minded believers congregate together as a congregation, but are unable to affirm the commons in which no group may claim an ultimate authority. Their reception of that divine authority, the abandonment of which constitutes the ultimate apostasy, cannot allow the sanguine acceptance of other claims to truth within the equality which is the essence of the commons. Yet, if we remove the sense of the absolute nature of the divine from the centre of the faith community, it's not clear what would be left that could be called a faith community. It appears that a faith community would by necessity attempt to subvert the commons either by using it as an opportunity to further the agenda of that faith minority, or by attempting to co-opt the commons to become a larger embodiment of that particular faith community.

We might think that this difficulty for faith of participating in a commons is particularly an issue for those other religions – the “right wing” conservatives of whatever religion. Surely modern engaged liberal congregations would have no problem participating in the commons. However, even a faith community that is liberal, accepting and respectful towards other faiths must surely do so on the basis that their revealed faith requires them to participate, but not on the basis that their faith is open to serious challenge and even rejection within the commons. A liberal faith community might well participate in discussions such as this conference, from a position of silently knowing that their understanding of God is superior to other faiths and to those of no explicit faith. However, they would do so in order to model the goodness of God, while remaining silent about their superior revelation and pretend to participate as equals hoping that nobody will guess what they really believe – all in order to demonstrate the integrity and love of their God! Whether liberal or conservative, it appears at first that faith communities cannot genuinely participate in a true commons without abandoning their central identity as the recipients of an absolute divine revelation.

But one might be struck by two peculiar coincidences which press us to look beneath that initial contradiction between religious faith and the radical equality demanded by the commons. First, it is a curious fact that the commons is a space in which people freely congregate, but the noun for such a gathering – a congregation – denotes the formal gathering of a faith

community. Second, faith communities all hold a vision for global community. Even though that vision has been betrayed when religions have attempted to impose their particular community upon the globe, the vision of a community of equals in which humanity expresses its greatest maturity remains a central vision for communities of faith.

As a member, and indeed a leader, of a faith community, I need to think through how this apparent contradiction can be resolved. Growing up in B.C., and attending this very secular University in its early years, imbued me with a deep sense of the normalcy of communities of no explicit faith. So much so that a substantial portion of me feels right at home in the world without explicit faith commitments. I am thus fortunate to have many potential places to feel at home in this city in which 93% of the population do not normally participate in any faith community. The commons feels very right, even visionary, yet so does the faith in which I live and work and so the task of understanding the relation between religious faith and the commons is both personal for myself as well as urgent for a congregation and for the wider faith community.

I would propose that there is one way in which a faith community can participate in the commons, respecting both its own integrity as the recipient of divine revelation while respecting the integrity of the commons as the locale for radical equality. Logically, this participation can happen only if the radical equality upon which the commons is founded can be understood as central to the divine revelation received by that particular faith. To suggest that the divine is inherently committed to engage in a conversation of radical equality is to suggest a profound humility on the part of the divine. A faith community could only participate in the commons if it believed that its divine revelation could so participate. Only if a faith community thought such humility on the part of the divine was possible could that faith community participate in the commons. This discovery, or re-discovery, of the gracious and radically equal nature of the divine is a very significant contribution which the experience of the commons can make to the community of faith.

What would be the implications of a divine revelation which at its core had such engagement in a relationship of respect and equality? For faith, it would present a very real choice between modelling the self and the community of faith on the principle of engagement or on the principle of power and control. Since our perception of the divine is to some extent a reflection of our perception of ourselves, it makes a significant difference which style the faith community chooses to follow.

From the perspective of faith, the commons is the ultimate reality. The universe, even existence itself, is the common space in which all are at home. The universe is the ultimate free gift – not one of us invented it, not one of us can ever privatize it. Ultimately we are brought into life by such a commons, live our life within it, and conclude our lives within it. Indeed, that ultimate commons is graciously accepting of all who live here – “God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust” – the gift of existence is provided by the cosmic commons with gracious equality for all. Such an image of the divine, of God, of the radically equal context of our lives, has the potential to move faith communities beyond the concept of God as a being. As a being, God could indeed be commodified, but as the reality of the ultimate

commons, God cannot be enclosed. Centred in that concept of the divine, religious faith has greater ability to resist its own tendency to commodify religion and relations with society.

But there is more to this than the practical implications for a particular faith community in its relationship with the commons. The implication for faith of participating in a conversation of radical equality at the behest of the divine is that all people, whether of explicit faith or not, who engage in such converse must also simultaneously be engaging in the divine. Although such arguments have been used in non-gracious ways to assert intellectual, if not social, control over those who do not belong to a faith community, that need not be the implication of asserting that all who participate in the commons are participating in the divine. Such an insight is not about convincing people that they are really people of faith when they are not, but is rather a way of stating that claiming common space is more than simply forming another alternative community with which to range ourselves over against the oppressive communities which would appropriate our lives for their own purposes. Common space thus has its own inherent value, quite apart from the instrumental value we may see in it as a social construct enabling more equal relations between people of disparate social power. The commons is not just a good way of ordering social relations, faith would suggest it is also an expression of the deep reality that lies behind all that is. This may be a significant contribution which faith can make towards the construction of the commons.

The danger in constructing common space is that those of us who value it may come to imagine it as a space meeting our needs, and exclusive of those who do not value it. A safe space from the marauding exploiters! But that would be for us to take on the very exclusivity for which the commons stands in opposition. Yet how can one construct a common space in which there really is room for all? This is where the faith perspective can provide an important contribution. If the equality of the commons actually reflects some deep reality which is more than simply a social organization which happens to suit us, or even which could be demonstrated to be life-giving for humanity, the significance of the commons changes. It is not utilitarian, however lofty its intent, but rather it is important because that is just the way things are. It makes an enormous difference, just as within a faith community, whether one decides that the commons is a clever, even inspired, invention or whether it reflects the deep reality behind the world. In the former vision the commons is optional, in the latter it is essential.

The perspective that the commons is an expression of the divine can address a very practical issue as we reclaim the commons. Several speakers in the forum have referred, some explicitly and some obliquely, to a sense that reclaiming the commons is an exciting visionary task which may be of doubtful outcome in face of the enormous energy ranged against it. However, if we understand the commons to be in some way an expression of the divine, our energy to reclaim the commons will not be so dependent as it would otherwise be upon the degree to which we expect to be successful in removing the enclosures. From a faith perspective, our energy to reclaim the commons can arise not from our expected success, but from the fact that the commons is who we already are. To agitate to reclaim the commons is not an act of generosity or even of radical care for the colonized (even including ourselves), but is simply an act of self-expression. To get our energy for reclaiming the commons from some other source is to agree to take our identity from some other source. But since our identity is to have existence as a free

gift, then to reclaim the commons is simply to enact our own identity. To act from any other motivation is to agree to colonization – not the commodification of some particular product, but the commodification of our own self. In both senses, faith in the commons is an essential act if the commons is to be reclaimed.

I suggested earlier that the commons implies that the nature of the divine is so gracious, so radically inclusive and egalitarian, that such a concept of the divine is problematic for traditional faith. There is a delightful contradiction about an absolute divine revelation which requires absolute radical openness and equality as the only way to enact the divine. The same problem and internal contradiction is true for all who work to reclaim the commons.

In fact, the presence of such contradictions is the final test as to whether the commons we are constructing is real. I suggest there are four such tests of inherent difficulty – two for our social relations within the commons and two for communities of faith.

The first test is how we respond to the presence in the commons of people very unlike ourselves. No one is immune from the desire to colonize, and encountering people who have social behaviours, priorities or life histories very unlike our own is the only way we can be sure we are inhabiting a commons. If the only people we meet are of similar social class, similar life expectations and similar perspectives on the commons, we can be sure we are not living in the commons. Constructing a commons is not constructing an ideal world. Or, if ideal, it is ideal in the sense that only through challenging and even disturbing interactions with others in the commons can we be nudged into the maturity of people who really desire the commons. For any of us to enact such a radical degree of graciousness and equality will involve a significant degree of discomfort. But only through assimilating such discomfort and growing past it can we become really at home in the commons. That is the first test.

The second test of a true commons is to reverse our own internal desire to colonize. The most effective, and perhaps the only way to do that, is to enter into actual relationships with the poor and marginalized. If the commons we reclaim seems inhabited entirely by people comfortably like ourselves, then our work at constructing the commons will turn out to have been an attempt, even if kept secret from ourselves, to impose a subtle form of commons-colonization onto others. To enter into a relationship of respect and equality with a marginalized person is to de-colonize my own inner self. The poor therefore are the only persons who can become our teachers as we learn to live in the commons. It is not simply that there is a healthy psychological change going on in our inner self, it is that in allowing the poor to be our teachers we are ensuring that the commons is not a social construct secretly erected to serve our own needs. Are we engaging with people in the commons with whom we had never had prior connection? If so, then indeed this space is a real commons.

The attitude of faith, that the commons is an expression of the ultimate reality, provides an essential perspective from which these disturbing experiences can be embraced. Without that foundation, the internal desire to colonize, which lurks within us all, will influence us more than we can be aware. The cultivation of the perspective that reclaiming the commons is not primarily about us, but about living in integrity with creation, provides a foundation from

which those living in the commons can approach the significant challenges with which the commons faces us.

Now two tests for the faith community.

The first is that in the commons the faith community will experience itself as poor, even powerless because without any special status it has no special power. The faith community becomes one of the poor. As with an individual, this isn't a lovely idea. If a faith community insists on remaining a powerful force, whether theologically or politically, that community will not be engaging in a gracious model of radical equality. Enacting such equality is not to be a demonstration of how self-effacing a faith community can be, because that is the way to regaining power and oppression – see, we are better at being poor than your community is! This is why the radical equality in the commons as an expression of the divine is so important – a faith community becoming one of the poor is enacting its true identity. Everyone in the commons is poor. Nobody owns the commons, and in this universe the commons is all there is. But by one of those remarkable contradictions, the moment private ownership is given up, the moment a community accepts its poverty, at that moment everything falls into place, and life in the commons makes complete sense. If the commons is a new and clever context for faith communities to find a new role and importance, that isn't really the commons. A faith community must enter this new form of life accepting that it is theologically and socially powerless. Having done so, that community will be in touch with its deepest identity, and can be an expression of the divine revelation which calls for the radical equality of the commons.

The second test for a faith community entering the commons is whether it hears the call to prophetic speech, and the accompanying vulnerability. If indeed the faith community hears that the divine revelation is about radical equality, then that community will find itself speaking out publicly against the various forms of enclosure. It speaks, not from a position of strength, since the community has allied itself with the poor, but speaks from the perspective of the poor. And that is always a perspective of oppression. To stand against the enclosures is to stand from a position of powerlessness against the very powerful. For most faith communities that is a terrifying call. But if it is not the path we are on, we can be sure that the faith community has not entered the commons. And if it has not entered the commons it has lost touch with the divine revelation which is at its core.

Speaking of cores, it is in the downtown core that my particular faith community is located. We are half a block from the Alix Goolden music Conservatory and the same distance from the former Upper Room and Open Door, from AIDS Vancouver Island and the needle exchange, from the new arena and the Victoria Police Services. I would like to conclude with some reflections on our particular location and a story about one particular kind of commons.

The inner city is a particular type of common space – it is in the downtown that the symbols of a city are located, not in the suburbs, it is in the downtown that common decisions are taken, it is in the downtown that the history and cultural identity of a city occurs. Yet the downtown is also the region of a city most likely to cause distress. Precisely because the downtown is a kind of common space, that is where people who don't fit life in the suburbs find a space of their own. The more that chaotic or threatening behaviour becomes evident in the downtown the

more the distrust grows. In that context, faith communities located in the downtown provide a unique opportunity to uphold that common space. Such communities, although located in the downtown, tend to draw their congregations from outlying areas rather than from the immediate community. As a result, a substantial number of people who might otherwise go into the downtown only for commercial reasons such as shopping or for entertainment, find themselves participating in a kind of commons for the sole purpose of congregating.

In doing so they have a unique experience. These congregants drive into the downtown on a weekly basis to spend a couple of hours at a time of the week when there is least economic activity, and they are likely to encounter on the sidewalk a number of people of very different economic and social circumstances. The fact that these suburbanites voluntarily encounter people, often of a disturbing nature, on their way to experiencing communion with the divine cannot be lost on them. It doesn't mean that there is a naive level of acceptance, nor an unqualified affirmation or engagement, by suburbanites with the social issues of the inner city, but it does mean that week by week there is the opportunity of exposure to very different people in the context of seeking the divine. The particularly dramatic nature of these encounters ensures that certain issues of common space cannot be ignored. To step over needles to get into the church, to be panhandled, to encounter bleary-eyed people who have slept the night in the church garden is an enormously important experience. It means that in the common space of the inner city there really is a true congregation taking place. Just as a faith community whose identity is about the superiority of their divine revelation cannot participate in the common space, so the residents of the city who manage their engagement in the city so as never to encounter people unlike themselves also are unable to participate in common space. The danger is that the city fractures, to the detriment of all. But those who voluntarily choose to engage, even in limited ways, even if only by being physically present, provide a foundation for a healthy relationship. Faith communities in the downtown are probably unique in their ability to build bridges across the social and economic divides which continually grow in order to prevent participation in open space. Faith communities which worship in the inner city have a unique opportunity to plant the concept of the commons in the lived experience of people, many of whom are in a position to provide leadership in the direction of the wider society.

Now the story. Our church has a very small common space. It is a memorial garden in which some people choose to have their ashes buried at their death. But it is designed with no external indication of the particular locations of burial plots, and so with a bench and a sundial it was intended to be also a comfortable place to spend a little quiet time. Spending quiet time each Sunday in the close presence of her deceased husband is what one of our quintessential little old ladies does every week. She comes early to our second service, so she told me, and goes to the further recesses of the garden where she spends some time in silent communion at the place where her husband's ashes were interred some years ago.

On one such morning she became aware she was not alone. Someone was standing near her. When she looked up she saw a bedraggled man offering her a syringe. When she demurred, he insisted. As she said to me several times, being diminutive of stature, she decided not to be afraid and told him that she didn't do drugs. "I just want to be with my husband." "That's OK." he said. "Well", he said, after a pause, "What do you want me to do with it?" She decided again

not to be afraid, looked around, and saw a tin can with sand in it for people to butt out their cigarettes. "How about over there?" she suggested, very pleased with herself for her bravery. He did so, and she reported to me how well she had done. This was her encounter with the poor in the commons. What she didn't know was that the user had mistaken her, bending over the back of the garden, as one of the volunteers from the needle exchange, who go around the downtown tidying up needles and drug paraphernalia. The only reason in his mind for someone to bend over in the recesses of the garden was to look for needles. Why she wouldn't take his needle, which he was responsibly attempting to dispose of, must remain an unsolved puzzle for him. But if she thought it was to go into the cigarette can, well, why not.

These two encountered each other in common space. The one learned from the encounter that she was far braver than she had imagined. The other learned that when you are patient, people can help you be responsible about your addiction even when they don't understand you. The fact that neither to this day understands what was really going on, matters very little. But something magical happened because in different ways they both had faith in the commons.

I trust that if we follow their example we too can have faith in the commons and things beyond what we can imagine will happen.