Power, Protest, and Perichoresis

On Being Church in a Troubled World

Mary Doak

We have entered the twenty-first century with global systems of communication and trade binding the world’s population together more thoroughly than perhaps at any other time in history. Unfortunately, this globalization is also presenting unprecedented challenges to human survival and flourishing. Our increasingly global economy holds out the hope that all might participate in the benefits of economic development; yet thus far this economic system is evidently more inclined to increase inequality, resulting in a small group of super-rich and massive populations of deeply impoverished people. And many of these poor today find that the local resources that at one time provided at least subsistence levels of food and shelter for their families and communities have now been appropriated for the global economy. Perhaps even more alarmingly, our economic system is dependent on practices of production and consumption that are unsustainable in their current form, and that are effecting a global change in climate, threatening the conditions of life on this planet. Together, climate change and a globalized economy are increasing rates of human migration, destabilizing established communities through large-scale shifts in populations.

Given these urgent problems, the task of developing an appropriately Christian theology of democracy may not seem compelling. After all, these global problems exceed the control of the nation state and will not be solved by tinkering with forms of national government. Besides, democracy often appears to be broadly accepted as the most legitimate form of government today, even to the point that dictators at times feel compelled to hold
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elections that mimic the procedures of democracy. Isn’t providing a theology of democracy at best a case of theology showing up—yet again—a little breathless and a little late to provide a Christian defense of what everyone has already accepted anyway?\(^1\) At worst, as some argue, efforts to provide a theological defense of political democracy risk prolonging the failed project of liberal Christianity, continuing the misguided effort to baptize the ethos of secular society at the cost of a distinctively Christian perspective.\(^2\) Rather than further defending what the world (especially the secular world) has already embraced, some argue that theological energies should be focused on the distinctively Christian perspectives and practices that offer hope for a real alternative to the suffering and oppression of this world.

Before deciding too quickly that attitudes toward democracy are irrelevant to the grave problems the human community faces today, it might be worth noting that current processes of globalization involve a system of power analogous to the imperialism that Christianity has too often embraced in the past: The world is being united in an economic system that is directed by, and for the benefit of, a very small group of human beings. Further, the ethos of our current form of globalization and the effects of total global climate change are thoroughly undemocratic: What affects all is most definitely not being decided by all! In fact, democratic practices of working together for the common good are seriously undermined by the magnitude of global systems that far exceed local control, while at the same time electronic media foster interactions that are definitely atomizing (and often narcissistic). Texting, Facebook, and whatever other electronic network is briefly the rage, take time and attention away from face-to-face encounters with the real, embodied, and diverse people with whom we share the structures and conditions of our lives. To overcome the imperialist globalization that imposes uniformity and undermines collective agency, humanity today needs renewed commitment to diverse, participatory communities and to practices of inclusive decision-making that value the distinctness of each person. To the extent that democracy involves people coming together to order their common life, we need more, not less, democracy.\(^3\)

Empire, it is now clear, has not disappeared but rather has mutated into new yet no less virulent forms. Faithful Christian resistance thus requires that we continue to reexamine critically “the shadow of Constantine” and the often unacknowledged dream of harnessing imperial power to create a world order that serves the interests of elite Western Christians.\(^4\) To be sure,
democracy is no guarantee of justice, and tyrants can be elected. Yet as Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith have argued (conclusively, in my judgment), the best guarantee that policies will serve the general welfare is a structure that ensures that the broadest possible number of people are involved in determining who will govern. Further, and no less significant from a theological perspective, inclusive communities that foster recognition of human dignity and a person’s right to contribute to society are valuable ends-in-themselves. Democratic forms of community are not only the means through which people can join together to combat poverty, inequality, and environmental destruction, then; participatory, democratic communities are also in themselves a countercultural alternative to atomization, uniformity, and the global disregard by the powerful of the value of ordinary people.

Christianity, with its concept of the person fulfilled in community, has the resources to contribute to movements in opposition to imperialist globalization and social atomization. As many have argued, Christian eschatological hope for ultimate harmony calls us to develop increasingly democratic structures that foster (however imperfectly) participatory communities in civil and political society. However, as I will further argue, this Christian ideal of reconciled, harmonious communities must be understood in a way that does not preclude responsible engagement with the realities of power, conflict, coercion, and domination. The same theological resources that challenge Christians to seek more inclusive forms of community can too easily prevent effective Christian opposition to injustice, especially if the hope for ultimate reconciliation is understood as an immediate possibility that delegitimizes Christian engagement with conflict. In brief, we need a theology of democracy that will enable Christians to resist the ongoing temptation to be “court chaplain to the pride of nations,” without becoming so afraid of power that Christians refuse the opportunities—and the responsibilities—to oppose the destruction of human beings, their communities, and their environment.

My discussion here proceeds in three steps. First, I begin with a brief assessment of the growing theological consensus that the mission of the Church is to witness to, and to work toward, the goal of divine-human communion. I argue that the Church’s mission as thus understood calls Christians to oppose the antidemocratic forces of imperialist globalization and societal atomization that divide and oppress rather than unite humanity. More explicit engagement with this widespread and ecumenical under-
standing of the Church’s unifying mission would enable political and
liberationist theologies to defend inclusive, participatory political structures
with the resources of Trinitarian theology, contemporary ecclesiology, and
the sacramental practices of the Church.

I then turn to the main focus of this essay, which relates power, conflict,
even coercion, to the ecclesial goal of ultimate harmony. As Marcella
Maria Althaus-Reid has aptly noted, theologies that emphasize inclusion
risk reinforcing current power structures by neglecting the role of conflict
and confrontation in the pursuit of liberation. While Christians cannot
and should not give up the eschatological hope that exclusion and mar-
ginalization will be overcome in God’s reign, a political or liberationist
theology that seeks a more humane and liberating society will need to pay
particular attention to theologizing the relation of power and conflict to
this hope for ultimate unity. A clearer articulation of how conflict can serve
the goal of harmony might overcome the resistance to liberation theolo-
gies of some of the privileged, though well-meaning, theologians and
church authorities who currently reject as divisive liberationist (and espe-
cially feminist) theologies.

Finally, I will conclude with a brief reflection on the importance of form-
ing Christians to deploy power responsibly and gracefully in this world.

Communion and Democracy

As a Catholic theologian committed to a strongly ecclesial, nonindividu-
alistic form of Christianity, my approach to political theology is based on
the mission of the Church as proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council:
The Church is to be the sign and instrument (that is, a sacrament) of union
with God and unity among humanity. This is stated early in Lumen
Gentium and provides the theological basis for that document’s account of
the nature and internal structures of the Church. More important for our
purposes, this sacramental understanding of the Church is also proclaimed
in Gaudium et Spes as the basis for the Church’s mission to the world and
the principle of Christian activity in all spheres of culture and society. We
should note that the Church, as described in these ecclesial documents,
is called to be both sign and instrument: The Church is to witness to divine-
human communion in its ecclesial life; at the same time, the Church is to
work extra-ecclesially, to serve as “an instrument” cooperating with God’s
intention of increasing harmony throughout the world.
This emphasis on the Church’s mission to foster divine-human communion in the world is by no means unique to Catholic Christianity. Divine-human communion, or theosis, has been and continues to be central to Orthodox theology, and indeed Orthodox thought has been identified as the source for the renewed emphasis on communion at the Second Vatican Council. Furthermore, the mission of the Church to be a sign and instrument of the union of all in God has been recently affirmed in the World Council of Churches’ document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, and is presupposed (for example) in the otherwise quite different theologies of John Milbank and Miroslav Volf. Indeed, the centrality of the goal of divine-human communion to the mission of the Church has become the prevailing consensus in contemporary Christian ecclesiology in recent decades.

Orienting the mission of the Church as witness to and in service of communion helpfully integrates a commitment to this world with a hope that transcends history: The Church is called to further the unity of all in God that can be experienced in part now but will only be given in full beyond history. This is therefore an eschatological perspective as well as a thoroughly sacramental (indeed, Eucharistic) approach to the mission of the Church, acknowledging that the telos of harmony within the divine life gives value and orientation to, but cannot be identified with, historical projects. God’s grace is at work in this world, but the final perfection of our life within the Triune God cannot be achieved in this world, as Reinhold Niebuhr consistently—and rightly—maintained.

The theological significance of divine-human communion has been further clarified by the explosion of Trinitarian theology in Western Christianity in the late twentieth century. This renewed attention to the doctrine of the Trinity emphasizes that humans are made in the image of a God who is not an identity in stasis, but rather distinct persons in a perichoretic communion of self-giving love that is fundamentally other-directed, bringing new beings into existence and into the life of the Triune God. Humanity is thus made for, and only fulfilled in, inclusive communities of love in which distinctness is valued and diversity enriches the whole. As so many have argued, a Trinitarian perspective reminds us that each human person contributes uniquely to the human (and ultimately divine) community while, at the same time, finding his/her fulfillment in participating in that common life.
Christianity thus has obvious implications for efforts to resist a globalization that appropriates the benefits of the global economy (and wrecks the planet) for a small percentage of the human population, while treating the majority as disposable. Where once hierarchy was defended by invoking a monarchical view of the one God over the universe and one absolute ruler over society, it is now more commonly—and appropriately—argued that Christianity calls for human communities that seek to model the divine community of nonhierarchical, other-directed, loving harmony that is the source and the goal of human life. Instead of legitimizing an imperialism (including the imperialism of global capitalism) that imposes uniformity for the benefit of a powerful elite, a consistent Trinitarian Christianity supports inclusive, diverse communities modeled on the mutual self-giving of the Trinity, communities in which people work together for the common good and are mutually enriched through each other’s unique contributions.

This recovery of an emphasis on divine-human communion provides the basis for a political theology thoroughly rooted in the central beliefs and practices of Christianity: Belief in a Triune God, salvation through Jesus Christ, and the eschatological goal that is proleptically experienced in the Eucharist all inform the Christian view of the person as oriented to communities of mutuality. Christians are thus equipped to engage issues of public life—and democracy—with the substance of Christianity, informed by essential Christian beliefs about what it means to live as people called to communion with God and with all else that God has created. Rather than being paralyzed by, for example, the false dilemma of either productive engagement with a secular public life or the formation of communities for a distinctly Christian witness, Christians must recognize that their mission, as Christians, is to image the Trinity in openness to others for the greater good of all.

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the matter in detail, it is worth noting here that Western Christians have much to learn from Orthodox Christianity about how to return the doctrine of theosis, or divine-human communion, to its proper place as central to the Christian account of creation, sin, and the redemption of humanity. It might then become clearer, for example, that Catholic social thought is not in fact an arbitrary list of rules derived from moral principles several steps removed from essential Christian doctrines. Instead, this body of thought strives
to articulate what it means to live in society as persons oriented toward community and harmony with one another and with God. When one considers how seldom Western Christians (including American Catholics) recognize the centrality of divine-human communion to Christian faith, or offer a faith-inspired resistance to the rampant individualism of US culture, the importance of current theological work—including theological dialogue with Orthodox Christianity—on the Trinitarian, ecclesiological, and sociopolitical implications of communion becomes especially evident.

The Ambiguity of Power

To further the project of developing a more adequate Christian political theology based on divine-human communion, I would like to explore here one particular challenge that should interrupt any too easy focus on harmonious community: the stubborn persistence and even prevalence of human conflict in this world. John Milbank is right to insist that Christians understand harmony, not conflict, to be the ultimate reality, but this does not absolve Christians from acknowledging the role of conflict in human relations this side of the eschaton. I fear that, without sufficient attention to power dynamics and to the reality of human conflict and coercion, a theological emphasis on harmony may undermine Christian efforts to achieve more justly structured and diverse communities. After all, creating a more inclusive and participatory common life is never a simple, cooperative process in this world (whether in matters of statecraft or even on parish councils!). Rather, efforts to achieve the common good usually require that we struggle with and against those who oppose that good—or who have a very different idea of the common good—and such struggle involves the deployment of power. As Robin Lovin has recently stated, “Hope cannot overcome oppression without acquiring some countervailing power.” If a commitment to harmony inclines Christians to avoid conflict and eschew power, are we likely to proffer any significant resistance to the life-destroying oppression all around us?

Perhaps the difficulty will become clearer if we briefly return to the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly as the source of the Christian ideal of harmony. As argued above, the Trinity is the divine perichoretic communion of self-giving love and, as the source and goal of human life, the
Trinity is the model of mutual love that properly inspires our work for harmonious and diverse communities. But a Christian praxis intent on modeling the divine harmony would seem to leave little room for agonistic engagement; after all, there are no power struggles among the persons of the Trinity.

Must Christians then affirm that the use of coercive power, even to protect the vulnerable, is a cooperation with the logic of sin? Should hope in God’s reconciling grace lead Christians to refuse all conflictual politics, and respond to violence by simply refusing to recognize its existence, by persisting in a commitment to “act as if . . . sin is not there”?

To be sure, violence is not the ultimate power, and a practice of breaking the cycle of sin with a forgiveness that refuses to retaliate is indispensable. Nevertheless, we must ask: If Christians refuse in principle to interrupt the violence and domination in human life and social structures, whose interests are served? Does such intentional blindness truly lead to the harmony Christians claim to seek, or is it more likely to support the false harmony of an oppressive status quo, which often asks only that we pretend that this deployment of violent power is not happening?

It may be that women are particularly attuned to the potential for tension between protesting injustice and seeking reconciliation through self-sacrificial love. The ideal of loving harmony is frequently invoked to argue that women should give up “selfish” demands for their rights and refrain from disruptive conflict and opposition, even when the intent of the conflict is to attain a more just world. Feminist political theories have for this reason not only emphasized relationality, but also dissensus, conflict, and self-assertion as essential to the achievement of more just communities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such feminist theories have been criticized by the Vatican for presuming that conflictual power dynamics exist between the sexes and even within intimate family relation. I submit that this ecclesial critique lends further support to suspicions that the ideal of communion may be wielded to delegitimize struggles for justice and thus to support oppressive power structures.

To be sure, the points of coherence between the Christian ideal of divine-human communion and feminist theories of relationality (especially with a feminist focus on affirming difference in relation) give reason to hope in the ultimate coherence of a thoroughly feminist and communion-centered political theology. Yet an adequate feminist political theology cannot be
achieved without further theological attention to the appropriate role for
dissensus and conflict even (especially!) within a Christian praxis of modeling and working for more harmonious communities.

Some developments within communion ecclesiologies in the Catholic tradition provide further evidence that an emphasis on divine-human communion can be invoked in support of unjust power structures. Gerard Mannion has rightly described as “authoritarian” the communion ecclesiology that defends a hierarchical harmony in which the laity is united in unquestioning obedience to the magisterium, as implied in the “Petrine” and “Marian” structures advocated by communion ecclesiologies influenced by Hans Urs von Balthasar. When the communion of the Church is understood as comprising a harmonious union between the initiatory leadership invested in the official (Petrine) hierarchy and the loving reception of this leadership by an obedient Marian laity, there is little room for the laity to engage in valid criticism of the hierarchy (even when the hierarchical abuse of power includes covering up the rape of children). Instead, and notwithstanding protestations that the Marian principle is of greater value, this model of communion suggests that when the laity question or challenge their leaders, they have failed to be appropriately receptive and are damaging the communion of the Church. Imagine the implications if that approach were to be followed in public life!

This interpretation of communion becomes even more troubling when the Petrine-Marian division of roles is applied to the relations within the Trinity. Instead of presuming that Trinitarian nonsubordinationism entails a mutual equality-in-difference as the Trinitarian ideal of community, David Schindler, for example, builds on von Balthasar’s work to defend a thoroughly gendered concept of initiation and reception proposed as a description of the inner relations of the Trinity as well as a theological rationale for the different roles of the clergy and laity, and of men and women, in church and in society. For Schindler, obedient reception of hierarchical authority is not merely an ecclesiological principle but one that is inscribed within the Trinity and so is both fundamental to human relations (especially between men and women) and the basis for all harmony in society. As noted above, many communion theologies (rightly, in my judgment) refute this explicitly authoritarian concept of social harmony; nevertheless, Schindler’s position reminds us of the importance of attending to how concepts and images of communion actually function politically in the world. Communion no doubt requires leadership and authority, but
if there is no room to challenge abuses of power in the hope of a more perfect union, we are in deep trouble! Indeed, it would seem that we have come full circle here, having returned to the previously rejected idea that political domination reflects the dominion of God.30

In brief, a focus on communion with and within the Trinity should interrupt injustice and contribute to the development of diverse, participatory communities. Yet at times the goal of harmonious communion in the image of, and ultimately within, the divine is invoked instead to encourage acceptance of unjust structures and power in the name of harmony, whether by explicitly enjoining obedience to authority or simply by failing to make room for conflict within a Christian witness to unity. Given this very real danger of supporting an unjust status quo (from which educated theologians and church leaders often benefit), Christian political theologies cannot prescind from the task of determining the proper role of power and the place of conflict in the service of greater communion.

In considering this question of the use of power and conflict in an unjust, fallen world, it is important to avoid conflating power, which is the capacity to effect something, with violence (a physical attack on person or property) or coercion (the attempt to compel). As Reinhold Niebuhr knew well, power in itself is not evil since power can be positive or negative, defensive or offensive.31 Indeed, power in feminist theories is usually a good that women desire, in opposition to the evils of violence and domination that have denied women their proper power.32 The primary theological difficulty here is not, then, power per se, but rather the appropriate response to the reality of conflict and the use of coercion in Christian witness to the goal of harmonious community.

I intend to set aside here the more narrow (and difficult) question of the use of violence by Christians. Not all coercive power involves physical attacks or threats of such attacks, and I am convinced that that we must first come to terms with conflict and coercion in themselves, before dealing with the more thorny issue of the Christian use of violence. Even nonviolent coercive power can make Christians uneasy and, in fact, can be horrifyingly destructive (especially when it involves psychological coercion). Nevertheless, coercive power can also be deeply inspiring, as when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously refused violence and instead deployed not only rhetorical power and the power of suffering witness, but also the coercive power of boycotts and strikes that remained nonviolent in the face of terrifyingly violent opposition.33
One the one hand, we must ask whether a responsible commitment to the goal of a just and harmonious community is possible without engaging in political coercion and navigating what is rather redundantly called “power” politics (since all politics is concerned with power). On the other hand, coercive power to attain the goal of one party against the goals of others, at least on the political level, seems antithetical to the ideal of reconciliation. The question still haunts: Are we perhaps denying our true vocation as Christians when we participate in the conflict due to sin, rather than exemplifying the eschatological harmony possible in part now? However much the world follows its own dictates, shouldn’t the Church do otherwise?

While I cannot fully answer these complex questions in the space of this essay, I would like to suggest that a sound basis for integrating the ambiguity of power into our understanding of divine-human communion can be found in Paul Tillich’s classic work on love, power, and justice. There is much still to be gained from Tillich’s insightful account of the relation between love and justice—and of the role of power in each—particularly as his perspective is predicated on the goal of divine-human communion.

As Tillich argues, the goal of love is union: Love seeks to unite what is in fact (but should not be) separated, while justice preserves what love intends to unite. Justice and love are thus integrally related, though not identical: Without the preserving work of justice, the unity that love seeks cannot be achieved. Tillich further contends that, in extending forgiveness, love fulfills the demands of justice, while ultimate justice will be found in the reunion of all in the reign of God.

Tillich thus provides a theological basis for explaining that a harmony without justice is a perversion of—and not a witness to!—the communion we seek, because without the preservation of what is to be united, there is only a false peace that obliterates, rather than reconciles with, the other. A love without justice, as Tillich further warns, destroys the one who loves as well as the one who accepts such love. Unfortunately, the destruction of the other is one of humanity’s deepest temptations, since in finite existence we continually face the threat that the other will not make room for us, and, in turn, we fear making room for that other. Those who benefit from the status quo—including Christians—may thus be especially tempted by appeals to a false harmony that, without justice, destroys the other as well as the harmony Christians claim to serve. Insofar as Christianity calls us to live (in church and in society) in hope for true unity, the
Church’s mission requires that Christians seek a justice that permits genuine diversity and allows for the harmony in which all find they are more fully themselves because of their relationships with all others.

If love thus requires justice, then love must be consistent with the exercise of power, insofar as justice requires that we deploy power, even coercive power, against the destructive power of injustice. In classic Tillichian language, power is integral to all that is because power is ultimately the power of being (particularly its ability to overcome nonbeing). It is a mistake then, as Tillich noted, to identify love with the refusal of power, on the one hand, and power with the denial of love, on the other hand. To the contrary, he argues, love inherently acts with power to destroy whatever is against love, which is anything that would deny justice and thus annihilate what should instead be gathered into unity. Nevertheless, as Tillich further insists, love extends forgiveness, seeking always to preserve rather than to destroy the person who is acting against love.

In Tillich’s ontological analysis, power—as the power of being—is inherently good and comes ultimately from God, who is the creative source of all being and to whom power is properly attributed. Although love, power, and justice are ambiguous, separated, and at times in conflict in this world, they are, as Tillich maintains, united in the divine ground of being.

Tillich’s analysis thus reminds us that the divine, reconciling love is present in the world not only as a force of forgiveness but also as a power that destroys the injustice that opposes love and impedes the ultimate harmony of all. Perhaps, then, more theological attention should be given to the canonical stories of divine judgment that disturb any simplistic account of God’s love manifest directly in peace and harmony. Is not the story in Genesis 3 of the exile from the garden, now guarded with a flaming sword, a description of God acting with power to prevent human sin from becoming everlasting? Certainly the Jewish canon has insisted on remembering a history in which God repeatedly threatens destruction when injustice becomes ensconced in the life of the people. And, of course, there is no denying the role of coercive power in the New Testament imagination of Jesus’s return as judge to establish the full reign of God: There is much coercion and even violence in the Book of Revelation. Indeed, even while we rightly insist that the divine love suffers—and Christian love must also suffer—with all under our current conditions of unjust separation, it should also be remembered that Jesus is described as confronting unjust authority
and acting with power to restore to the community what society had abjected in the name of harmony. Had Jesus not been a real threat to the authorities of his day, it is hard to imagine why they would have bothered to crucify him.

A Trinitarian, communion-centered political theology might do well to remain rooted in the canonical stories of God’s power (and of humans called to use power) to right injustice, even while this theology focuses on the ultimate reconciliation of all in God. As John de Gruchy has similarly argued, a Trinitarian theology of God as a perichoretic communion of love must be complemented by the prophetic tradition of protest against injustice in hopes of a more perfect harmony.

Resisting any account of divine-human communion that stifles the demands of justice or denies the exercise of power necessary to achieve this justice will, I believe, be further aided by keeping in mind two key points. First, divine-human communion must be understood as an eschatological goal that is only partially achievable in this life, so that Christians grapple honestly with the fact that what is ultimately integrated in the divine remains separated and ambiguous in the world. An adequate political theology will not proceed as though ultimate harmony is irrelevant to this world, but neither will such a theology presume that this harmony is completely available here. The second point to keep in mind is that the Trinity is, and invites us to, a unity-in-diversity. Focusing on the fact that the goal is not a uniformity that obliterates otherness, but rather a unity enriched by diversity, Christians may yet be inspired to greater consistency in their rejections of false harmony and their oppositions to the injustices that are diminishing the human community—and thus all of us—today.

A Christian Ascetics for the Use of Power

In closing, I would like to mention briefly the importance of Christian formation for a discipleship that seeks harmony with justice. After all, a Christian witness to reconciliation that accepts responsibility for the use of coercive power in a fallen world requires growth in wisdom, prudence, and mature judgment, along with a willingness to risk oneself in love. However much people may yearn for a clear list of “dos” and “don’ts” to follow, there is no simple prescription for an adequate public praxis. But, then, most of us have learned that love seldom is simple. We don’t always know what is the best thing to do and, in any case, our motives are often not as selfless and
loving as we believe them to be. The use of coercive power in the service of love is especially fraught because we are all (including Christians) inclined to hide our self-serving intentions even from ourselves, and this is true whether our interests are served by using or by refusing power. Considerable spiritual wisdom is needed to negotiate the complexities of one’s own self-deception as well as the deceptions of the world.

The recent work of Aristotle Papanikolaou is especially helpful here in pointing to the need for disciplinary practices as formation of the capacity to love, particularly as Christians struggle to learn to love the stranger—and the enemy—inevitably encountered in public life. Indeed, it is rather surprising how little attention has been given to the need for such lay formation in the Catholic Church, even though the difficulty of resisting the individualism of our culture and the global economic injustice from which we in the United States often benefit is quite apparent. Papanikolaou’s insightful analysis reminds us that truth telling and forgiveness (both highlighted in sacramental confession) are essential to communion. Indeed, as he argues, “Free speech as truthful expression . . . can lead to relationships of difference that involve respect, mutuality, and friendship not previously imaginable.” At the same time, without the willingness to risk the conflict that so often results from telling an unpleasant truth, relationships (in society and in personal life) become distorted. Similarly, the ongoing need for forgiveness for ourselves, as well as for others, is essential given human failures, limitations, and the reality of continued conflict even in the struggle for deeper communion.

Given this significance of practices of truth telling and forgiveness for the development of loving relationships, including the development of deeper and more honest bonds in public life, Christian communities would do well to expand these practices beyond the confines of sacramental confession. Our churches might then better prepare us for the continual giving and receiving of forgiveness and for publicly speaking and hearing the truth as we seek an ever-greater harmony with God and each other.

Consideration should also be given to fostering occasions of attentive engagement with one another in Christian communities and families. If Christians are to grow in our commitment to inclusive, participatory communities, they need to have deep experiences of the unique contribution of each to the whole. This may be as simple as returning to such enduring church practices as potlucks and coffee hours (with electronic devices

turned off!) where Christians grow in relationships and learn to appreciate one another.

The broader Christian community might also want to consider the Quakers’ discipline of consensus seeking, rooted in a belief in that of God in everyone. While I wouldn’t recommend this process as an efficient decision-making practice for large groups, it deserves attention as a spiritual practice that springs from and reinforces a deep commitment to the idea that each person matters and has a unique perspective to contribute to the good of the whole. Such a practice might increase awareness of the ways this world’s political processes lead to the silencing or dismissal of many voices. This discipline of ecclesial consensus seeking might also strengthen resistance to the domineering political discourse so inconsistent with the ideal of an inclusive divine-human communion in which all are valued in their uniqueness.

Conclusion

Our highly interactive yet deeply divided—even atomized—world desperately needs people to come together to resist the increasing inequality and environmental abuse threatening the planet today. Even while democracy is widely touted, at least as a form of secular government, a very undemocratic economic imperialism dominates our planet and imposes conditions of suffering and dehumanization on many for the benefit of a privileged few. It is generally acknowledged (at least theologically) that these destructive conditions are contrary to Christian beliefs about the good of human beings and indeed of creation, yet the Church as a whole has not yet offered the sustained and powerful witness of resistance that Christian faith calls for. Recovering the centrality of the eschatological goal of divine-human communion may prove to be an invaluable resource for forming Christians to resist the new forces of imperialism, provided that we have the wisdom to imagine power in the service of justice and love, and the discipline to accept and use such power appropriately.

Notes

1. The critique of theology as “showing up a little breathless and a little late” is especially familiar to students of David Tracy, who has used the expression in public lectures. See also the use by Matthew L. Lamb, “Liberation Theology and Social Justice,” Process Studies 14, no. 2 (1985): 102–22.


4. The immediate source for my use of the phrase “the shadow of Constantine” is the apt title of the 3rd Patterson Triennial Conference, “Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine,” hosted by Fordham University’s Orthodox Christian Studies Center. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to take part in this conference and this essay is enriched by the feedback received from the conference participants.


8. Due to the limited nature of this essay and its focus on democracy, the perspective developed here is more anthropomorphic than Christianity ought to be. What is presented here is by no means intended to be a fully adequate treatment of Christian hope, which would require more attention to the inherent dignity and value of nonhuman life.


11. “The Church recognizes that worthy elements are found in today’s social movements, especially an evolution toward unity, a process of wholesome socialization and of association in civic and economic realms. The promotion of unity belongs to the innermost nature of the Church, for she is, ‘thanks to her relationship with Christ, a sacramental sign and an instrument of intimate union with God, and of the unity of the whole human race’” (Gaudium et Spes, §42).


16. For a few of the most notable contributions to this theological conversation, see Leonardo Boff, Trinity and Society (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York: Crossroad, 1992); and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life (San Francisco: Harper, 1993); as well as Papanikolaou, Being.


See also the discussion in Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), especially 175–91.

19. While the emphasis on divine-human communion has been recently recovered in Western Christianity, it has remained a central concept in Orthodox Christianity. However, both Western and Orthodox Christianity for different reasons are currently exploring the political implications of a communion-centered Christianity. See Papanikolaou, *Mystical*, especially 9–12; Radovan Bionic, *The Orthodox Church in the 21st Century* (Belgrade: EKOPRESS, 2009); and Mathewes, *Theology*.

20. Of course, Catholic Social Thought can also be interpreted as a development of general moral principles available to all. Insofar as Christians believe that God made humans for communion, the principles that guide human flourishing will reflect this human orientation toward mutual relations.


24. Milbank, *Theology*, 411. To be sure, there is much to be said for the forgiveness Milbank advocates, even as a public alternative to cycles of violence.


28. It should be noted that the failure to confront the Catholic hierarchy over persistent patterns of sex abuse did the Church no good and caused great harm to countless children.

29. See, for example, the discussion in David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 237–74.

30. See especially the thoughtful discussion of Carl Schmitt’s monarchical and authoritarian political theology in Kalaïtzidis, *Orthodoxy*, 15–44.


32. See, for example, the discussion in Debra Dean Murphy, “Power Politics, and Difference: A Feminist Response to John Milbank,” *Modern Theology* 10, no. 2 (April 1994): 131–42, as well as the discussion of Hannah Arendt’s concept of power in Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations*.

33. Surely coercion is inevitable in the raising of children, since any limits (or “natural” consequences) that parents set involve the use of power to coerce behavior. A similar reality is evident in teaching: How many students would find the time to do all their assignments carefully if there were no penalty compelling them?

34. As Anthony Paul Smith astutely observes, “Politics is largely concerned with the organization of power” (Smith, “Judgment,” 69).

35. Among his many arguments for a distinctively countercultural church witness to the world, see especially Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2001), 205–41.


38. Tillich acknowledges that self-sacrifice may be necessary, but this self-sacrifice must be in accord with the demands of a justice that ultimately fulfills the self—even if beyond the limits of this mortal life—rather than a self-surrender that destroys the self and its development. See especially *Love*, 69, 83.


42. See, for example, John Dominic Crossan’s analysis of the meaning of Jesus’s healings in his *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1994), especially 85–114.
44. Papanikolaou, Mystical, 163–94.
45. My own Catholic tradition has developed extensive formation programs for clergy and vowed religious, but has largely neglected the formation needs of the laity who are theoretically most responsible for the public witness of the church. The recent increase in availability and popularity of lay spiritual direction may prove especially significant in filling this gap, particularly if this direction provides disciplined guidance that avoids an individualistic and therapeutic approach alone, and instead truly challenges Christians to grow in political wisdom and humility.
46. Papanikolaou, Mystical, 194.
47. At times, forgiveness may be especially necessary for a truth telling that is unduly harsh or, as Papanikolaou observes, demonic, in that it is wielded to destroy rather than to restore right relationship. See Mystical, 198.