public space for constructive theological reflection and civil dialogue—and we need to do this on the Internet. The founding of institutions would seem to be the last item on anyone's agenda with respect to the Web. But it is an inescapable demand of our times to look at how we can institutionalize standards that actually allow the best to emerge from our online platforms.

There is a myth about the Internet: that the existence of limitless platforms for speech and discussion creates an infinite opportunity for all voices to be heard. But this is a fiction. Without organizational and institutional parameters to protect public space, the loudest and meanest voices predominate, while more thoughtful voices are drowned out or silenced. What began as a public garden quickly turns into a zone for snipers or a site for dumping trash.

It's worth the effort to keep up the garden. The church needs public spaces to which a wide variety of readers may turn for accurate information, well-grounded opinion, and civil conversation about theological subjects. Websites, blogs, online magazines, and more can become part of an "ecology of institutions"[16] that forms Christians and Christian communities for a life of faith. But they will only deliver on their promise if we tend to their problems.

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Commonweal, praytellblog.com, *The Yale ISM Review*

[16] In his classic work on Christian education, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* John Westerhoff III described an "ecology" of six institutions that functioned in early twentieth-century US Protestantism to produce religious education, five of which had disappeared or were radically diminished by the last quarter of the century. One of these was religious publications. I think the idea of an "ecology of institutions" is a useful one and applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Catholic population as well. See John Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 13.

Public Theology: An Ever-Changing Task

Public theology involves political and rhetorical engagement in political debates about the social consequences of Christian commitment, and prudential attempts to judge and form public debate with Christian theological

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and moral principles. It has consequences for our understanding of Christian discipleship as much as it does for public debate.

What Is Public?

David Tracy has defined public theology in relationship to a particular understanding of the public sphere, which brings with it corresponding criteria for truth assertions.[17] Such approaches are illuminative, but they provide limited guidance for engaging the cultural and structural particularities of the public sphere. In his early work, Jürgen Habermas was attentive to the material spaces and practices that constructed modernity.[18] The nature of the public sphere changes profoundly depending on whether it takes place in café culture debating essays by Enlightenment *philosophes*, the myriad editorial perspectives of early twentieth-century newspapers, twentieth-century television network news in the age of consensus, or twenty-first-century Twitter feeds.

While discussions of the limits placed upon religious expression by liberal modernity have their place, it is abundantly clear that such formalistic censures do not describe the nature of public discourse in the contemporary United States. The presence of religious language in the public sphere in the United States is not simply acceptable; it plays a fundamental role in politics. (I write this in the wake of a public assurance by Rev. James Dobson that Donald Trump has recently "accepted Christ."[19])

The most significant debates do not concern the admissibility of religious arguments; they are about what is legitimately religious. Since the 1970s, the religious right has organized around what have come to be known as "culture war" issues such as abortion and sexuality. The enormously influential 2004 voting guide by the *Catholic Answer* emphasized aspects of Catholic moral doctrine that supported culture war positions by introducing the term "non-negotiable" to distinguish the political difference between intrinsically evil acts and other grave moral evils.

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[17] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and The Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

[18] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). For a more extended discussion of the role of media in the construction of civil society and religion, see Vincent Miller, "Media Constructions of Space, the Disciplining of Religious Traditions, and the Hidden Threat of the Post-Secular," in *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public Life*, ed. William Barbieri (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 162–98.

[19] http://talkingpointsmemo.com/edblog/dobson-trump-just-recently-accepted-christ.

The religious right has, over several generations, successfully framed the public relevance of religion around culture-war issues. The power of this frame is evident in the fact that its premises are accepted by all sides of the debate: conservative partisans, their liberal opponents, and the secular media. Abortion and homosexuality are accepted by all as properly religious, while religious engagement in other matters—economics, health care, and the environment—must offer a justification.

The power of this frame was shockingly evident in the hours that followed Pope Francis' visit to the United States. His address to Congress powerfully and publicly broadened the range of Catholic political concern. It challenged both parties, but decisively refuted the culture war captivity of public Catholicism. Francis' visit was quickly reframed by revelations that he met with Kim Davis, a county clerk from Kentucky who had been briefly jailed for refusing to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Fears quickly grew that this was a secret gesture that revealed his true commitments. The Vatican clarified that Francis had met with many people that day, and that the only actual "audience" was with a "former student." The student, Yayo Grassi, shared a video of the meeting featuring Francis embracing him and his same-sex partner of nineteen years. This tumultuous coda to Francis' visit showed the enduring power of the US culture wars to frame even the most carefully scripted public religious engagements.

Changes in the Public Sphere

The nature of the public sphere is a changing reality dependent upon material and cultural factors. Three recent changes are particularly significant: changes to communication technologies, generational changes in the experience of religion, and changes to economic structures.

Changes to Communication Technologies

Twentieth-century mass media granted a limited number of voices a large, homogenized audience. Thus, one of its fundamental disciplining powers was censorship. Access to the press, mic, or camera was an important site of political struggle. On the negative side, the mass media constructed a nationwide public sphere attuned to majoritarian concerns. On the positive side, it provided a site for political organizing and poesis. Those who could organize a social movement, form a compelling argument or creative work, or employ celebrity in a provocative manner could break through and be rewarded with massive attention that could further political change; some examples are Martin Luther King, Daniel Berrigan, and Muhammad Ali.

These modes of public engagement still capture our imagination, but technological change has fundamentally changed the physics of civil society. So-called new media such as Twitter (now ten years old) invert the bullhorn of mass media, granting a mic to anyone, but providing no shared audience. Twitter has more than 300 million users; Facebook, more than 1.71 billion (more than either the membership of the Catholic Church or the population of India). But neither is a group or a coherent audience. They are platforms that allow users to affiliate by choice. No one is deprived of access to the "press." But the nature of the audience is very different: fragmented, assembled by individual choice and affiliation.

This new context disciplines us in a different way from mass media. Contemporary audiences grow increasingly polarized, as no homogenizing gatekeepers exist to check facts and to establish a rhetorical baseline. The media no longer function as a unifying space within which debates can be had. Indeed, those mass media have been reworked themselves. Major media outlets now host myriad blogs and forums that have the patina of the mass media, but work according to the rules of social media.

Public theology remembers the great moments of twentieth-century engagement: the Barmen Declaration, King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," the Catonsville Nine. But we now live in a world where our professional authority and the authority of the traditions from which we speak guarantee no hearing or impact. We are offered a mic that speaks by default to an audience of our like-minded colleagues and the few stray followers that we pick up.

Few of us think retweets will change the world. Social media seduce public theology in a more subtle manner. A conversation with friends over dinner holds no conceit of public debate; a Twitter exchange of the same scale and composition does.

We need to develop new political strategies that address the fact that we are disciplined not by censorship and exclusion, but through the freedoms of speech and choice. This poses a particular problem for minorities and prophetic critiques because it privatizes the exclusion of majoritarian politics. No gatekeeper or media establishment cuts off the mic; rather, millions exercise their freedom to pay no attention either by turning to their chosen "no-spin zone" of preferred facts or by watching GIFs of kittens while, for instance, the streets of Ferguson burn.

We need a new political strategy to engage this society, which remains as closed-minded as ever, but whose members don't have to attend to anything beyond what they choose. New media can certainly be used as part of more strategic campaigns. But they do not achieve audience or impact by default. Whereas once it was necessary to organize in order to be able to speak,

now we must attract an audience in order to be heard. The political art of rhetoric returns with new urgency.

Generational Changes

Over the past decade, an important task for Catholic theologians involved in public theology has been fighting against the culture war reduction of Catholic moral concern by making the full range of Catholic moral concern available in public debate. At times this project has been enormously successful. It should be noted, however, that it addressed a very specific audience: people who identified as Catholic and were formed sufficiently to have inchoate knowledge of the tradition, even if they could not articulate the doctrinal basis of their concerns. This group could be helped greatly by the public work of theologians who could connect their moral intuitions with the church's moral traditions. Deploying concepts such as the preferential option for the poor, solidarity, the consistent ethic of life, or even prudence could have significant impact.

This audience was composed of baby boomers and Generation X members who identified as Catholic and were convinced that their faith had a place in public life. Younger generations are different in three very important ways. First, they have a lower level of identification with their religious traditions. Second, they have a thinner religious formation, and thus lack an inchoate grasp of doctrines beyond what is being argued at the present moment. Third, their religious understanding has been formed in an age dominated by the religious right. Many among the younger generations accept this view of Christianity as authentic, but rather than embrace it, they are likely to reject Christian faith as a whole. These are the "nones" described by Robert Putnam and David Campbell, who argue that the cultural dominance of the religious right engendered a reaction in the form of a decline in religious identification, especially among younger generations. They document that the generation that came of age in the 1990s during the height of the religious right's influence report "no religious preference" at rates as high as 30 percent, twice that of generations that came of age in the 1980s and six times that of generations of the 1950s and prior.[20]

As a result, public theology faces an additional task with younger generations. In addition to seeking to evaluate and form public policies with Christian moral principles, it must also educate the public on the very existence of these principles and convince them that they are worthy of

[20] Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 123.

pursuit. Matters of public debate provide an opportunity to sketch the full range of Christian concern for those more concerned with policy than religion. *Laudato Si',* for example, is important not simply because it brings the Catholic theological and moral tradition to bear on environmental questions. It is also important because it shows the relevance of these teachings to a generation that cares about the environment.

Changes to Economic Structures

One of the temptations of public theology (shared with theology in general) is to imagine that political dynamisms are driven primarily by ideas. This assumption is particularly ill suited for engaging the neoliberal revolution of the past forty years. There certainly is a neoliberal ideology that reduces all possible decisions to market mechanisms, views government as incompetent and counterproductive, and even views collective political decision-making as nothing more than rent seeking.[21] Yet a half century into neoliberal hegemony, it remains a stealth ideology. It has colonized common sense, not through intellectual argumentation, but through structural reengineering of the lifeworld: transformations of pensions into individual retirement accounts, and education grants into individual loans; the destruction of organized labor; the erosion of social safety-net programs.

These facts on the ground create a world in which the common good increasingly becomes hard to imagine. It is not simply that people have been deprived of the idea of the common good, but rather that the structures that once made solidarity and the common good practicable have been systematically dismantled. This deprives policy debates about such matters of a connection with lived experience.

The neoliberal dismantling of social democracy has political consequences beyond policy debates. The common good is always a precarious achievement. Absent structures to support it, it is difficult to extend solidarity beyond immediate circles of kith and kin. The social democratic policies of the postwar period created an expansionary political economy in which a rising tide could not only raise all ships, but provide a sense of security in which minorities and marginal communities could fight for justice and a fuller realization of the common good. The individualizing laissez-faire policies enacted in the neoliberal revolution have constricted solidarity as individuals feel increasingly on their own. Resurgent racism and xenophobia continue long and deadly traditions, but are surely driven as well by the real vulnerability

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[21] See Daniel Rogers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap, 2011).

of the working class in a deindustrialized world intentionally wrought by neo-liberal globalization.

These material-structural underpinnings of our politics illuminate another task for public theology in addition to necessary debates about fear, scape-goating, and racism. We must also seek out and support technical policy pro-posals that can create a world where solidarity and the common good are not simply heroic moral commitments, but principles that are supported by and practicable in society.

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Public Theology as "Bridge Building"

Introduction

Guest: When is it going to end, Pete?
Pete: What do you mean?
Guest: When's it all going to end? The poverty. The homelessness. I'm
     about out of hope.
Pete: I don't know.
Guest: You all do what you can and you all are lifesavers. But it doesn't
     look good from out here.
Pete: I know.[22]

This exchange between ethicist Peter Gathje and one of the guests of Manna House of Hospitality (Memphis, Tennessee) points to the task of the public theologian. Gathje serves at Manna House, sharing meals and prayers with its guests. Through his blog *Radical Hospitality* he echoes and responds to the theology of the people he serves, and their deep questions about justice in our world. In this dialogical movement he enters the locations where he serves meals and prays with his "public," who in turn ask for a justice that seems all too elusive from their vantage point. His "public," the guests and others who pass through Manna House, are sources for theological

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[22] Peter Gathje, "Love and the Specter of Poverty and Death," *Radical Hospitality*–A Blog of Manna House of Hospitality, June 15, 2016, http://radical-hospitality.blogspot.com/.

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