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Of pagan festivals and meta-narratives: Recovering the awareness of our shared humanness

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Abstract

The notion of human commonness was a key interest of the nineteenth-century theologian-statesman Abraham Kuyper. As an orthodox Calvinist, Kuyper accepted the division of humankind into the categories of 'elect' and 'non-elect', but he was also convinced that this way of classifying human beings failed to account for the positive contributions of non-Christians. As a political leader, Kuyper was also concerned to enlist his fellow Calvinists in the quest for justice in the larger society and specifically focused on the ways in which Christian worship can nurture a sense of shared humanness that extends beyond the walls of the church. In our contemporary setting, where our loss of an emphasis on a shared humanness is becoming widespread, Kuyper's effort to ground human solidarity in the practices of worship has much to commend it.

Keywords: compassion, humanness, identities, Kuyper, narratives, Rousseau, worship

No one who knows anything about the life and writings of the eighteenth-century Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau would think to describe him as a Calvinist. It is a bit surprising then, that at one point in his best known work, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau pays a serious tribute to the Reformer for his influence in the city of Geneva:

> Those who know Calvin only as a theologian are poorly informed regarding the extent of his genius: the drafting of our wise edicts, in which he played a considerable part, does him quite as much honor as his *Institutes*. Until love of fatherland and liberty has been extinguished among us, we shall – changes time may bring about in our religion – go on blessing this man's great memory.[1]

The clues as to why Rousseau appreciated Calvin are right there in that accolade. Calvin established 'wise edicts' that nurtured a kind of 'love of fatherland and liberty' that is not easy to come by, given where both Calvin

[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Willmore Kendall (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1954), p. 43.

and Rousseau began with their respective understandings of the 'natural' human condition. For Calvin, to build a flourishing society meant forming a commonwealth out of human beings caught up in a shared depravity. For Rousseau it meant trying to figure out how human beings, whom he viewed as radically selfish individuals in his hypothetical 'state of nature', could take on the characteristics necessary for citizenship.

To become a citizen of a political community, Rousseau argued, cannot be expedited simply by engaging in a cost-benefit analysis based on rational self-interest. Something deeper must occur within the human spirit. In several familiar passages in *The Social Contract*, he emphasised the need for a rather dramatic transformation in the lives of individuals who are to become citizens with a commitment to the common good. 'The transition from the state of nature to the civil state', he remarked at one point, 'produces a quite remarkable transformation within man – i.e., it substitutes justice for instinct *as the controlling factor* in his behavior, and confers upon his actions a moral significance that they have hitherto lacked'.[2]

While Rousseau insisted on a large gap between our 'natural' selves and what we need to be like in order to take on the obligations of shared citizenship, he did not find it easy to offer a convincing explanation of how we can bridge that gap. On those rare occasions when Rousseau does directly address the question of how this transformation to civil consciousness might actually happen, he tends to get whimsical in describing the requisite expansion of our experiences of selfhood. And it should not surprise us that Rousseau – pagan that he was – would look to nature festivals to find ways to create the bonds necessary for civic consciousness. In one account, for example, he imagines how a sense of shared citizenship might be called forth during a community festival in a town where the leaders have planted 'a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square'; there the people can gather, he says, at a time when the sun's rays and some gentle breezes flow over all of the participants, energizing them in such a way that they 'become an entertainment to themselves', to the point that 'each one sees and loves himself in the others, and all will be better united'.[3]

There is much wisdom in what Rousseau is proposing here. He is insisting that an awareness of a shared humanity will not be generated by enlightened self-interest, nor will it simply happen by teaching individuals to accept a theoretical account of the essential features of human nature. The awareness of a shared humanity is just that: an *awareness* of what we have in common,

[2] Ibid., p. 19.

[3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to D'Alembert on the Theatre*, trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 126.

wherein, in his apt phrasing, 'each one sees himself in the others', so that 'all will be better united'.

Diverse narratives

Something very much like the dilemma Rousseau was wrestling with has resurfaced in the published concerns of some recent scholars. But in this case the worry is not just about a shared sense of citizenship, but about signs of the loss of an even more general sense of a common humanity. The loss of this grasp of a shared humanness in academic pursuits is described at length by the Princeton University historian David Cannadine in his 2013 book, *The Undivided Past: Humanity beyond our Differences*. Cannadine describes in detail the ways in which various 'identity' perspectives – those based on religion, nation, class, gender, race, and 'civilization' – have promoted polarized understandings of human nature. While not necessarily denying a shared humanity in any explicit manner, these perspectives have devalued the human experiences of persons not sharing the 'identity' in question. Thus: Christian versus Muslim, Israeli versus Palestinian, rich versus poor, male versus female, black versus white, First World versus Third World. In each case, one of the polarities tends to trump the other with regard to full humanness.

Cannadine's account of how these 'identity' perspectives get played out in historical studies is illuminating. And his concluding call for a corrective is compelling. '[W]e need', he writes, 'to see beyond our differences, our sectional interests, our identity politics, and our parochial concerns to embrace and to celebrate the common humanity that has always found us together, that still binds us together today, and that will continue to bind us together in the future'.[4]

Again, like Rousseau, Cannadine is clear about the gap – in this case between our sense of a specific 'identity' selfhood and the common humanity that binds us to people who claim a different specific 'identity'. But in the end all that Cannadine seems able to do is to call us to 'see beyond' those differentiating features in order to 'celebrate the common humanity' that we share.

How do we accomplish that 'seeing beyond' our differences to discern the humanity that we share with others? There are some thinkers these days who not only insist that such a 'seeing' is impossible, but they celebrate that fact. Setting forth any 'meta-narrative' about humanness in general – so the argument goes – is a disguised attempt to impose patterns of control by

[4] David Cannadine, *The Undivided Past: Humanity Beyond our Differences* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), p. 264.

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a privileged elite who are attempting to regulate the consciousness of the marginalised.

Before dismissing this approach, of course, it is necessary to acknowledge more than a grain of truth in the view that 'meta-narrative' type accounts of what it means to be human have indeed been used as instruments of social marginalisation – often in cruel and oppressive ways. The classic 'man is a rational animal' formulation serves as an obvious case in point. The insistence that 'rationality' is the defining feature of humanness as such has frequently been accompanied by the depiction of women as less than fully rational. The same 'rational animal' formula has been used to undergird racist beliefs and practices. It was not uncommon, for example, during the North American slavery period for whites to portray African-Americans as more 'animal' than 'rational'. In his study of the religion of black slaves, the historian Albert Raboteau documents the ways in which slave owners often refused to allow their slaves to learn to read, because the reductionist treatment of slaves as mere bodies to be bought and sold had to be reinforced by an understanding of the African-American as incapable of the kind of cognitive capacities possessed by their owners.[5]

There is no disputing the charge, then, that the standard definitions of human nature have served as instruments of social control, in the sense that they have reinforced exclusionary and marginalising practices. This should not surprise us, since the 'rational animal' formulation was set forth originally by Aristotle, who himself saw women and slaves as less than fully rational, and therefore as less than fully human. The important question to ask, though, is whether meta-narrative type definitions of human nature are *essentially* instruments of oppression, or whether they can be, properly understood, good conceptions that can nonetheless on occasion be made to serve evil purposes.

To be sure, the failure to foster a sense of a shared human nature is not always based on an outright denial of a common humanness. Sometimes it is simply a matter of emphasis – focusing on what differentiates one group of human beings from another, while failing to attend to the continuities and shared characteristics. At other times it has to do with what Hannah Arendt reported about the attitude of her fellow Jews regarding the trial and execution of the Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann. She cited the case of the philosopher Martin Buber, who confessed 'that he "felt no pity at all" for Eichmann, because he could feel pity "only for those actions I understand in my heart"'. Buber explained this lack of empathy by acknowledging 'that

[5] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: OUP, 1978), pp. 239–41.

he had "only in a formal sense a common humanity" with those who took part in the acts of the Third Reich"'.[6]

Buber's confession that he found it difficult to nurture a sense of pity for Eichmann is certainly understandable. Without wishing for something different from Buber in this particular case, then, his remark nonetheless provides an important picture of a gap between the formal acknowledgement of a shared humanity and the felt experience of that commonness. It is this gap that is often responsible for the kind of historiography that David Cannadine complains about in his observations about the disconnected 'multi-narrative' character of much present day historical scholarship. Persons writing with a focus on, say, a specific ethnicity or on gender relations may not be meaning actually to deny a shared humanness across races and genders, but on a practical level these foci tend to reinforce the sense of deep divisions within the human community.

Commonness and Christian commitment

I have been describing this failure to give adequate attention to our shared humanness with reference to *scholarly* pursuits, but the phenomenon is certainly very visible in the *broader* patterns of social interaction in contemporary life. The recent very public debates in my own country about race relations have featured explicit complaints about inhumane treatments of African-Americans, and it is easy to find parallels in European discussions of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, to say nothing of genocidal campaigns in the Middle East and on the African continent.

In exploring Christian remedies for this concern, what should we look for? One obvious requirement – beyond merely having a doctrine about a shared humannesss – is the nurturing of empathy, the actual *experience* of that common humanity. The challenge for Christian life and thought, of course, is how we *nurture* that kind of receptivity to a shared humanness in the Christian community. This was a question that was very much on the mind of Abraham Kuyper. And with good reason, since Calvinism has its own unique tendencies towards positing deep divisions within the human race, the most obvious having to do with the insistence upon profound differences between the elect and the non-elect – differences which have frequently been used to counter any tendency to entertain notions of a shared human solidarity.

A particularly disturbing example of this antipathy towards the notion of a shared humanness was set forth not long ago by a theologian representing a subgroup in Dutch-American Calvinism known for its adamant objections

[6] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 251–2.

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to the Kuyper's theology of common grace. The theologian confesses that while on occasion he is himself inclined to agonise over a particular case of suffering in the life of a non-Christian, he realises the need to hold that tendency in check by reminding himself of his Calvinist convictions. He then offers an example of a temptation that he had to overcome personally in this regard. Reading William Shirer's book, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, he reported, he came upon an incident where a group of Jews were lined up along a pit filled with bodies of their fellow Jews who had machine-gunned by the Nazis. Then this story:

> In the new batch of Jews lined up at the edge of the pit is a little Jewish boy, about ten years old. As the Nazis wait, cold, callous, even enjoying what they are about to do, cigarettes dangling out of their mouths, the little boy, not comprehending, but fearful, clings to his father. Looking down on his son's anxious face, the helpless father tries to comfort his child. In a moment father and son will go down into the huge grave, atop a mass of dead bodies, to be shot.

'Yes', the theologian confesses, such an incident 'breaks our hearts'. But, he quickly adds, it is important to recognise that 'the suffering of the reprobate wicked outside of Jesus Christ does not break the heart of God', for 'God acts through these despicable murderers and evildoers to punish the ungodly in righteousness'.[7]

Kuyper refused to take Calvinism in this direction, insisting instead on a divinely mandated sense of solidarity with all human beings in their suffering. This empathy for the suffering of others is linked in Kuyper's thought to his doctrine of common grace, which is meant to cultivate in Christians an appreciation for the positive contributions of unbelievers to our shared human life. In addition to the providential restraints on human sinfulness, Kuyper insisted, there are 'internal' gracious dealings with all human beings – albeit not salvific in nature – that we see on display 'wherever civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety leaven life'.[8] These phenomena are so obvious, Kuyper argues, that Calvinists must choose between two options: 'either surrender our confession of the deadly character of sin, or hold on to that confession with all our might, but then also confess along with it that there

[7] David J. Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to Richard J. Mouw's* He Shines in All That's Fair (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), pp. 47–8.

[8] Abraham Kuyper, 'Common Grace', in James D. Bratt (ed.), *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 181.

is a common grace at work that in many cases restrains the full, deadly effect of sin'.[9]

Worship and empathy

Kuyper is clear, then, about the need for a deep sense of Christian solidarity with the larger human community. But what is needed to *cultivate* this sense of solidarity? An obvious resource to consider in this regard from a Christian perspective is the *worshipping* life of the Christian community. This would not only be a fitting alternative to Rousseau's pagan festivals; it would also respond nicely to some recent scholarly proposals about strategies for promoting the common good.

An important case in point is the 1985 book by Robert Bellah and a team of fellow social scientists, *Habits of the Heart*, one of the most widely discussed academic books of that decade. Bellah and his associates argued at length – and backed their arguments with extensive interviews – that an increasing individualism in American life was making it more and more difficult for people to express the kinds of commitments that are necessary to sustain a healthy public life. The influence of older religious and civic visions of life was weakening, with the result that the public space devoted to civic dialogue was becoming increasingly crowded with individual interests. What is needed to correct this situation, they argued, is the recovery and/or reinforcement of existing 'communities of memory'. They observed that 'there are still operating among us . . . traditions that tell us about the nature of the world, about the nature of society, and about who we are as a people'.[10] And they singled out the churches and synagogues as having a special role in this regard, since it is in 'common worship', they said, where 'we express our gratitude and wonder in the face of the mystery of being itself'.[11]

This would seem to be an obvious connecting point for looking for help in Kuyper's thought. He wrote much about the practices of worship, and his discussions on these matters focus consistently on the very things the Bellah team calls for: the grounding of concerns about identity in an awareness of broad patterns of relationships – to say nothing of 'wonder in the face of the mystery of being itself'. It is not surprising, then, that the topic of worship has become a major focus these days for several of Kuyper's followers in North

[9] Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: Temptation – Babel*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2014), pp. 115–16.

[10] Robert Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 239, 281–2.

[11] Ibid., p. 295.

America, particularly in the writings of James K. A. Smith and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

The problem, however, is that these recent thinkers rightly see themselves as remedying an actual defect in Kuyper's own system of thought. In his dissertation on Kuyperian resources for present-day societal pluralism, Matthew Kaemingk gives a helpful overview of the recent worship discussions while also adding some important insights of his own. In particular, Kaemingk has observed that in Kuyper's extensive writings about worship practices and related matters dealing with what we today call 'spiritual formation', Kuyper did not say much about the implications of these matters for issues affecting the broader human community. As Kaemingk puts it, Kuyper and his immediate followers certainly 'knew that worship was *personally* important but they never explored how it was *publically* important'.[12]

This is a legitimate criticism of Kuyper, even though Kuyper did not completely ignore the relevance of spirituality and worship to public life. One place where he makes the connection is in his treatise *The Work of the Holy Spirit*. There he ignores the topic for over six hundred pages that focus on the Spirit's active presence in the life of the individual Christian and in congregational worship, discussing the many ways that the Spirit promotes and reinforces the bonds of love within the Christian community. But when he does get around, right near the end of his discussion, to the relevance of worship for our public lives, he makes his point with obvious passion:

> Humanity is one . . . It is a mighty trunk with leafy crown . . . Belonging together, living together upon the same root of our human nature, it is one flesh and one blood, which from Adam to the last-born child covers every skeleton and runs through every man's veins. Hence the desire for universal philanthropy; the claim that nothing be alien to us that is human; the necessity of loving our enemy and of praying for him, for he [our enemy] also is of our flesh and of our bones.[13]

Kuyper then goes on to insist that, while the loving bond that holds the Christian community together 'is much stronger, firmer, and more intimate' than the broader human bond, Christian 'unity is not independent of the fellowship of nature, but added to it'. This means, he argues, that we must be careful to recognize the '*double* root of fellowship'. What we experience so

[12] Matthew John Kaemingk, 'Mecca and Amsterdam: Christian Ethics between Islam and Liberalism' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2013), p. 262.

[13] Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), p. 645.

strongly within the Christian community is the second part of the 'double work of the Holy Spirit' which is also 'causing our hearts to be drawn to all that belong to us by virtue of our *human* kinship'.[14]

With this one very clear exception, it seems that Kuyper is quite content, when focusing on personal spirituality and worship, to pretty much ignore the implications for public life. But interestingly, he does not ignore the connection when he is moving in the other direction. When his assignment is primarily to address issues of public life, he seems compelled to ground what he is saying in matters pertaining to personal spiritualty – especially with an emphasis on the need for a heart-felt devotion to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This habit of Kuyper's is nicely on display, for example, in two major public policy addresses he gave in 1891: one his 'Maranatha' speech to the national convention of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, and the other his address to the first Christian Social Congress.

In the 'Maranatha' speech Kuyper moves from his overview of specific challenges in Dutch social-political life with an earnest call for 'the *spirit of the Compassionate One* [to] be poured out over our whole government administration'. Referring specifically to the hungry, the aged, the unemployed and widows and orphans, he expresses the hope that Christians can work for shaping 'a nation that has to take account of the human heart also in its dread and nameless suffering'.[15]

Kuyper expands his focus on the example of Christ's compassion in addressing the Social Congress. 'When rich and poor stand opposed to each other', Kuyper says, the Saviour 'never takes His place with the wealthier, but always stands with the poorer ... Powerful is the trait of pity, which is imprinted on every page of the Gospel where Jesus comes in contact with the suffering and oppressed'. And lest his audience get the impression that the compassion of Jesus is directed only to the 'believing" poor, he adds this observation: 'When the multitude hunger, *even though as yet they do not hunger for the bread of life*, He breaks the loaf into many pieces and gives them an abundance of precious fish'.[16] And then this remark from Kuyper, which suggests that he might have felt a special attraction to the twentieth-century ministry of Mother Teresa to dying lepers in Calcutta: Jesus, Kuyper told his audience at the 1891 Social Congress, 'does not hold back His hand from the touch of leprous flesh'.[17]

[14] Ibid., pp. 645–6, emphasis added.
[15] Abraham Kuyper, 'Maranatha', in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, p. 225.
[16] Abraham Kuyper, *Christianity and the Class Struggle*, trans. Dirk Jellema (Grand Rapids, MI: Piet Hein, 1950), pp. 27–8.
[17] Ibid.

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The importance of the 'double root'

What do we do with all of this? How can we use Kuyperian insights to contribute to a healthier sense of human solidarity in the broader patterns of present-day societal life?

To think about this we can go back to Rousseau and his pagan picnics. We need to be clear about the fact that Rousseau's prescription for promoting a sense of shared humanness was was no eighteenth-century idiosyncrasy. A Jewish scholar, writing recently in a Catholic magazine, offered a Rousseauian type recommendation in making a case that major sporting events can do much to promote an expanded consciousness of our shared humanness. The teams on the field, the writer said, inspire the spectators in the stadium to identify in almost a mystical way with their efforts. 'The players', he writes, 'are accomplishing their highest potential, and the fans are experiencing this vicariously. This offers what most humans desire: the capacity for self-transcendence. They [the fans] have *become larger than themselves* through identification with the players, the games and the community through this experience of the game.'[18]

While there is some plausibility in this way of viewing what happens in stadiums, the problem is that the 'self-transcendence' that might occur on such occasions can easily achieve something that actually promotes an experience that falls far short of a genuine sense of human solidarity as such. When, for example, the Dutch soccer team plays against Brazil in an international match, Dutch fans may well transcend themselves in experiencing, through a vicarious identification with the players on the field, a sense of a shared humanness with their fellow Dutch fans. But it is not likely that they will experience self-transcendence by means of a vicarious identity with the accomplishments of the *Brazilian* team. Indeed, viewing those accomplishments may actually create a more intense sense of alienation from the players and fans from Brazil.

A similar objection can be lodged against Rousseau's own picnic proposal. Citizens gathered in their city's public square, feeling the sun's rays and the gentle breezes, may feel a sense of unity with each other, but that experience of solidarity may actually unite them in a more intense hostility towards citizens gathered in the public square of a rival city.

To be sure, the same can happen in Christian worship. Calvinist worship may stimulate new feelings of hostility toward Muslims, or even toward Catholics. That Christian worship can serve to reinforce a self-transcendence of a rather limited scope should not surprise us.

[18] Martin Siegel, 'Good Sports: Getting Closer to God through Athletics', *America* (23 Feb. 2015), pp. 22–3.

The problem with looking to soccer games and pagan picnics, though, to foster a robust sense of solidarity with all human beings as such is that those venues lack the opportunities for removing the obstacles that restrict the experience of shared humanness to 'our team' or 'our community'. And it is precisely because Kuyper recognised the reality of those obstacles that he insisted on the 'double root' of our shared humanness. In this regard he insisted on the role of worship in promoting a sense of a shared Christian identity with believers in other times and places. What we share with each other within the broad Christian community is, Kuyper insisted, 'much stronger, firmer, and more intimate' than any other human bond. But, as we noted earlier, it is precisely because that bond is so fundamental to Christian identity that we must be very clear about the fact that what unites us as Christians 'is not independent of the fellowship of nature'. To fail to see that our Christian solidarity is built upon a broader *human* identity, the generic humanness of the common nature that we shared simply as persons created by the God of the Bible, is to sever our Christian unity from that which provides its necessary grounding: our fundamental *human* unity.

In a general way, Kuyper is following a pattern similar to the Aristotelian insistence that we can only arrive at a general sense of human bonding by going through earlier, more specific bondings. This begins in Aristotelian thought with *kinship*, where the young child bonds with parents and siblings and other members of the extended family. Then this sense of solidarity with others expands to *friendship*; we extend the experience of bonding experienced in kinship to persons with whom we have common interests and projects. But we only fully mature, the Aristotelian argument goes, when we move beyond mere kinship and friendship to *citizenship*, nurturing a sense of bondedness to those who, while strangers to us, are nonetheless seen by us as our fellow human beings.

In Aristotelian thought, the move through these stages is a fairly 'natural' process, the actualisation of virtues that we all possess potentially as human beings. Kuyper insists on a more complicated picture. As a Calvinist he recognises that because of our sinful tendencies these virtues must be intentionally *cultivated* in specific ways. And in giving so much attention to the nature of *Christian* unity, Kuyper was pointing to what such things as pagan picnics and sporting events cannot provide. Kuyper's elaborate writings about personal spirituality and corporate worship constitute what we might think of as *a pedagogy for the spirituality of shared humanness*.

It is not enough to hope that a broad-based experience of solidarity with others will somehow simply 'happen' in a communal event. That experience, even in its more restricted scope, does not even always occur at public picnics

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and at soccer games. What Kuyper insists upon is that we begin with a unity that a specific group acknowledges, at least in the expression of its worldview commitments. For Christians this means that believers can start with the shared confession that they belong to 'a holy Catholic church'. Then in the many aspects of worship that Kuyper discusses in his extensive writings, those who make that confession are 'schooled' in how properly to understand its *scope*. This is done in preaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the singing of hymns, the teaching of catechism and prayers for the universal church.

When all of this is properly understood and attended by the work of the Holy Spirit, says Kuyper, 'Communion of saints opens it arms as wide as possible'.[19] And having learned to open wide our arms in worship, we can go from that 'root' of our specifically Christian fellowship to the broader 'root' to which our Christian identity is inextricably connected: the 'root' of our shared humanity with all who bear the divine image. When in the life of the believing community each of us, to use Rousseau's phrase, 'sees and loves himself [and herself] in the others', we have begun to nurture the kind of consciousness that allows us also to see and love ourselves in all our fellow human beings.

The philosopher Richard Bernstein, in the course of explaining Hannah Arendt's notion of public community, wrote about the worship-type character of a gathering of African-American participants that he – Bernstein is himself a secular Jew – personally witnessed during the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

> The experience I want to relate occurred in the Morningstar Baptist Church, the headquarters [of the Mississippi Summer Project] for the Easton precinct of Forrest County. Many of those who came to Mississippi this summer knew that they would be returning to the safety of their homes at the end of the summer. But no one then knew what would happen to the local blacks who identified themselves with the civil rights movement. It took an enormous amount of courage and risk [for them] to participate. After several weeks of voter registration, the moment had arrived when it was up to the local blacks to meet and publicly elect their representatives. That meeting was one of the most impressive political gatherings I have ever attended . . . As you might imagine this gathering had something of the quality of a religious meeting. And there were two things that deeply impressed me – that I was witnessing the creation of just one of those public spaces that Arendt describes, and that what

[19] Kuyper, *Holy Spirit*, p. 551.

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> gave the participants the courage, hope, and conviction to participate was informed by their religious communal bonds.[20]

In explaining this occurrence, Bernstein uses a Rousseau-ian type image: this is the kind of thing, he says, that sometimes just 'springs up' in a public gathering. Kuyper would like the example, but he would insist that something much more is going on. The African-American civil rights activists had been 'schooled' in a pedagogy of public spirituality.

We can hope that when this pedagogy is taken seriously by Christians it can succeed in making an impact on the larger human community. But even when it fails in that regard, it bears witness to the kind of profound vision that was described powerfully by the Catholic bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council, in the opening paragraph of *Gaudiam et Spes*, adopted in 1965, in words that Kuyper himself would have surely endorsed:

> The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in [our Christian] hearts.[21]

[20] Richard J. Bernstein, 'The Meaning of Public Life', in Robin W. Lovin (ed.), *Religion and American Public Life: Interpretations and Explorations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 47.

[21] *Gaudiam et Spes*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. This article was originally delivered as the 2015 Kuyper Lecture at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

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