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THE COMMON GOOD AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Some very preliminary remarks²

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to give a description of the use of the notion of “the common good” in theological discourse. A brief historical analysis of the idea of common good is offered. A distinction is made between so-called thinner and thicker modes of the common good. It is argued that consensus on the thinner and thicker versions of the common good is plausible and possible. Guidelines are offered for dealing with situations where disagreement and incommensurability exist with regard to effectively serving the common good. Suggestions are made for realising the common good, e.g. the formulation and implementation of appropriate policies and practices, as well as the formation of people of virtue and character. In conclusion, three functions of the common good are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of this collection of essays on the theme Religion and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies, this essay briefly reflects on the notion of “the common good”. My intention is not to offer an exhaustive account of either the notion of common good or of all the ways in which this important concept has been used over centuries. Instead, I shall emphasise the way in which I think this notion might be employed.

In a first round I shall offer a very brief historical, and indeed oversimplified, outline of the historical development of the notion of the common good (1). The second round reflects on so-called thinner and thicker versions of the notion of the common good. Human dignity with its constituent features of equality, freedom, justice, and equity, in the context of the integrity of creation, is portrayed as a specific way in which the common good may be described (2). In a third round, the making of decisions and policies based on the common good, the challenge of consensus and dissensus, as well as the embodying of the vision of the common good by people of virtue and character, is discussed (3). The final round focuses on

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² Paper based on a contribution made at the Consultation of the Joint Project on Religions and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies, Stellenbosch University, 10-12 March 2010.

three main functions of the common good, which affirm the importance of the notion of the common good for contemporary public theological discussions (4).

THE COMMON GOOD? A BRIEF SURVEY?

David Hollenbach (2002) offers a brief and very helpful historical outline of the notion of the common good. He links the development of the idea of the common good to three periods and three major figures, namely Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Ignatius Loyola – other figures like Cicero and Augustine also contributed to earlier common good discourses, however, these three are the main thinkers about the common good in pre-modern times.

Aristotle's concept of ethics was built upon the central conviction that a good life is one devoted to the pursuit of good ends and purposes. Moreover, the good that people should seek is the good shared with others, the common good of the larger society of which one is a part. The good life of a single person and the quality of life of broader society are linked. The individual good and the common good are inseparable. The common good, however, enjoys primacy over individual good. It sets the direction for the lives of individuals. In Aristotelian thinking the common good is a higher, nobler, and even more divine good than the particular good for private persons. Hollenbach (2002:3-4) summarises Aristotle's position:

Even if the good is the same for the individual and the city, the good of the city clearly is the greater and more perfect thing to attain and to safeguard. The attainment of the good for one person alone is, to be sure, a source of satisfaction; yet to secure it for a nation and for cities is nobler and more divine ... It is clear ... that Aristotle envisioned the larger good realized in social relationships as superior to the goods that can be achieved in the life of a single person considered apart from the community.

Thomas Aquinas builds on the thinking of Aristotle and also emphasises the divine nature of the common good (cf. Hollenbach 2002:4). He relates the common good directly to God and argues that God, as the supreme good, is the common good, and that the good of all things depends on God. The good of each person and the good shared with others in community find their fullest expression in the communion with God who is Himself the highest good. In my own words: in Trinitarian communion we enjoy the highest good, the good shared with others and the individual good. For Thomas the pursuit of the common God constitutes obedience to the biblical double-love commandment of love for God and neighbour.

In the sixteenth century, at the dawn of modernity, Ignatius Loyola draws on both Aristotle and Thomas to develop his understanding of the common good (Hollenbach 2002:4-6). In the founding document of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuit Order) that he established, he wrote that all the activities of the order should be directed to what seems to be expedient to the glory of God and the common good. The pursuit of the common good included practices such as witnessing, preaching, administration of the sacraments, education of youth and the illiterate, reconciling the estranged, and compassionate assistance to those in prison and hospital. The missional character of the Jesuit Order is attributed to Loyola's conviction that the common good is universal in scope and that it requires fresh definition and application in different contexts.

Hollenbach (2002:7-9) explains that in the centuries following Loyola, the notion of the common good was replaced by concepts such as “general welfare”, “public interest”, and “public goods”. None of these, however, reflect the emphasis on relationship and communion, care and compassion, affection and love – so central to pre-modern and early modern notions of the common good. Aforementioned notions, unlike the common good, focus on goods external to this intimate communion.

In the past few decades, Jean Porter (2005:94) argues, the notion of the common good enjoyed renewed interest. Although Porter focuses on the revival of the common good in Roman Catholic thinking, it is clear that a renewed interest in the concept can be found in various churches, amongst theologians from a variety of backgrounds, and in different parts of the world. In the field of theology, the variety of publications on the common good, in the USA especially, confirms this renewed interest. A few years ago, scholars from various theological disciplines undertook a three year research project on the common good under the auspices of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. The results of this project were published in 2005.³ In Germany, Heinrich Bedford Strohm of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Research Centre for Public Theology at Bamberg University is engaged in interesting work on the *Gemeinwohl*.

A THICKER AND A THINNER VERSION OF THE COMMON GOOD?

a. The so-called pre-modern and early modern versions of the common good are indeed thicker versions of the common good. It does not refrain from a thicker theological substantiation of the idea of the common good. Various objections are formulated against this thicker version of the common good.

Hollenbach (2002:9-17) refers to various objections to the notion of the common good in the contexts of modernity and postmodernity. According to him, some scholars argue that the ideals of a thicker common good can only be achieved in simple homogeneous societies such as the Greek city-state of Aristotle and the medieval society of Thomas. In modern-postmodern complex pluralistic societies where people from a variety of religious and secular world views live together, consensus on the common good, on an agreed vision of the good life, is not possible.

For others such a common vision is also not ideal, since the consensus is normally the expressed will of groups with the most social, political, and economic power in societies. They blame Aristotle for the fact that the common good of the Greek city-state excluded women, slaves, and resident aliens and that it was, therefore, an expression of the interests of the males of that society. This autocratic and exclusivist version of the common good should, according to many, rather be called a “common bad”.

³ P.D. Muller and D.P. McCann (eds), *In search of the common good* (2005). Another helpful publication on the common good is the one of Martin Marty. See M. Marty, *The One and the Many. America's struggle for the common good* (1997). Some other publications relate the notion of the common good to specific issues, e.g. to the economy, see H. Daly and J. Cobb Jr, *For the common good. Redirecting the economy toward community, the environment and a sustainable future* (1994).

With reference to the religious wars in Europe, and the contemporary religious-based conflicts in the world, as well as the growing conflicts in societies that become increasingly multi-religious and pluralistic, for example, in the Netherlands and France, a plea is made for abandoning all attempts at achieving such a common good. The best that we can achieve, it is argued, is to live in tolerance towards different particularistic views of the good life (cf. Hollenbach 2002:24).

b. The path to follow is perhaps not to abandon the idea of the common good. To address the immense social challenges of contemporary societies we need to formulate some form of joint understanding of the type of life that we as citizens from a variety of backgrounds agree upon. The notion of a thinner version of the common good might provide us with a concept of a good life together that is not susceptible to the three points of criticism mentioned above, namely: (1) that it is something that only a homogenous group of people can agree upon; (2) that it is something that is forced upon the less socially, politically, and economically powerful ones in society; and (3) that it is a something that provokes conflict and even bloodshed amongst adherents of a plurality of religious and secular world views, i.e. groups with their own particularistic versions of the thicker ideals for the good life.

Gaudium et spes (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) was promulgated by Vatican II in 1965. For Porter (2005:94-95) the definition of the common good given in this document remains its classic modern description:

Everyday human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. As a result, the common good, that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment, today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race.

This definition, which provides a set of conditions necessary for the flourishing of life, constitutes a thin version of the common good. The advantage of such a thin conception of the common good is that it does not fall prey to the criticisms addressed to thicker versions of the common good. It might indeed be helpful to distinguish between thinner and thicker conceptions of the common good. Objections to the idea of the common good that might be levelled against thicker conceptions of it might not apply to thinner conceptions of the common good.

c. The idea of a thinner version of the common good is, however, not enough. We need to seek ways to build thicker versions of the common good in contemporary pluralistic societies. Porter (2005:95) argues that lessons should be learned from the thicker common good of pre-modern times. According to Hollenbach (2005:15) the so-called tradition of civic republicanism (with representatives like Cicero, Machiavelli, and Rousseau) with its emphasis on civic virtue, is an example of a secular tradition that advances the idea of a thicker version of the common good. Concrete public discourses in South Africa, like the one within the Ethical Leadership Project (ELP), might also assist our thinking about this quest for a thicker public good.

The ELP was launched about seven years ago in the Western Cape. Role players from various religious and secular traditions participated in this civil society initiative that aimed to build ethical leadership in various sectors of South African society. In line with the so-called national Moral Regeneration Movement instituted by president Nelson Mandela in the mid-nineties, the ELP set as its aim the advancement of the vision of the common good spelled out in the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution by way of conferences, workshops, discussions, and publications. One might argue that the South African Bill of Rights constitutes a consensus about a thinner version of the common good, about the minimum conditions of a good life that South Africans agree upon. This vision of the common good entails a life of dignity for all. Constituent elements of this common good of dignity are equality, freedom, justice, and equity. The plurality of participants in the ELP embarked on a journey where inputs were made from a variety of religious and secular orientations on a richer and deeper understanding of these constituent elements of the common good.

A typical Christian input would, for instance, be that equality is not synonymous with uniformity, but it is equality in worth, value, and dignity that has its roots in God's equal love for all his people; freedom is not only freedom from enslavement and limitations, but also freedom for service to God and fellow human beings and the rest of creation; justice is compassionate justice, both the forensic *mishpat* and the sacrificial *tsedakah*; equity means that equilibrium can only be achieved if an ethos of sacrifice that is based on the supreme sacrifice of Christ is adhered to. A Trinitarian description of human dignity would entail that dignity is based in the love of the Triune God who creates us in his image, who sends his Son to die for us for the sake of our reconciliation and salvation, and who sends his Spirit to dwell in us for the sake of our transformation and renewal.

In this ELP initiative, it was so very enriching to see how many points of convergence were discovered among participants from a plurality of world views when they tabled their thicker understandings of these ingredients of a common good of dignity. Participants also realised that this was a more honest approach. They argued that our definitions of concepts such as justice and freedom cannot be separated from the traditions, communities, and stories that shape our lives. Although we think our definitions are impartial, neutral, and objective, they are influenced and determined by these external factors.

The input of various religious and secular traditions does not only influence the contents of the common good of dignity, but it also provides a variety of meaning-giving frameworks within which we act, ends that we strive toward, and motivations that we build upon and that inspire us.

So we might conclude that we need thinner versions of the common good for the sake of a common point of departure for a journey together as fellow-citizens in pluralistic societies. The journey, however, requires that we table our thicker versions and that we discover points of convergence on this level as well. The direction is one of: discovering the thin common good that we agree upon; seeking a thicker version of the common good through inputs from various religious and secular traditions; and discovering the surprisingly high level of convergence and consensus on the level of this thicker common good as well.

ON REALISING THE COMMON GOOD

a. We also need ways to make the notion of the common good more concrete, to translate the vision of the common good into concrete decisions and policies. We need to concretely embody and internalise the vision of the common good.

The consensus on broad vision and principles need to be converted into consensus about concrete decisions, policies and practices. With regard to the common good of dignity, the question is about what human dignity, equality, freedom, justice and equity mean in concrete situations and contexts. It is on this level that it might become more difficult to reach consensus. What does justice mean for land reform initiatives in South Africa? Or, what does it mean for role players in the debates about abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, gender, etc.? What type of reparative and restitutive measures best serve the quest for equity? What level of entrepreneurial freedom will benefit society and what level of state control is required to stimulate growth that will be to the benefit of all? How does one define equality in contexts of vast inequalities? What form of marriage expresses human dignity the best: monogamy, polygamy, or polyandry? In a multilingual society, what policies would best serve the dignity of all? In a context such as this, the quest for consensus becomes a moral quest. The choice to engage in open and frank dialogue, where dialogue partners take each other seriously enough to try to persuade each other, becomes a moral choice in itself.

b. Situations may also exist where consensus does not materialise. This might happen when one deals with so-called “incommensurable positions”. People might reach a point where they say that their world views, their meaning-giving frameworks and basic presuppositions differ to the extent that reaching consensus is simply not possible. This happens, for instance, when sets of human rights come into conflict. The right to cultural expression and the right of control over one’s own body, for instance, come into conflict when we discuss female circumcision/clitoridectomy/female genital mutilation. The definition of what constitutes human dignity becomes contestable in this situation. Is dignity served by the recognition of the right to cultural expression, or through the recognition of the right to autonomously decide on what happens to one’s body?

c. When only dissensus remains on the concrete and specific application of the common good, the challenge is to practise an ethos of tolerance and embrace. This ethos opens the doors to continued dialogue and collaboration amidst deep differences. From the continuous dialogue and exposure to the other, new, creative and surprising possibilities might come to the fore.

North American theologian, David Cunningham (1998), identifies so-called “Trinitarian virtues” and “Trinitarian practices” that enable us to oppose our craving for violence, our neglect of children, and our misguided quest for homogeneity. The three Trinitarian virtues are polyphony, participation, and particularity. The three Trinitarian practices are peacemaking, pluralising, and persuading. These Trinitarian virtues and practices can help us towards peaceable living in pluralistic societies, especially when we are faced with incommensurable positions and dissensus.

Drawing amongst others on the work of Bakhtin, Cunningham (1998:156, 164) describes polyphony as a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combined but not merged. This polyphonic unity is informed and underwritten – and I would add, called into being – by the Trinitarian union within the Triune God and between God and his people and creation.

Cunningham (1998:180-183) bases our participation in God on the incarnation of Christ. He argues that the Chalcedonian formulation has cosmic significance, namely the formulation that the divine and humane indwells each other without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. Christ is the focal point for this co-inherence, mutual indwelling, mutual and reciprocal participation, *perichoreis*, of God and humans, of this intimacy, *koinonia*, between God and his world. Cunningham especially employs the notion of *koinonia* to describe the intimacy and participation in each other's lives amongst humans.

The *koinonia* within God, and between God and his creation is, according to Cunningham (1998:183-186), the communion that human beings are called to live in amongst each other. The sharing of common meals shows that we participate in significant ways in each other's lives. It entails that we take account of dietary restrictions and the aesthetic and gustatory preferences that each person brings to the table. Common meals reflect a participation in each other's lives that require patient listening practices, careful discernment of the needs of others, and the observance of culturally-encoded rituals like table manners.

The Trinitarian virtue of particularity makes room for difference and individuality, without paving the way towards isolation, separateness, individualism and autonomy. Particularity creates a space for difference that is equally constituted by mutual participation and a rich polyphony. Particularity recognises and validates subjectivity, contextuality, and difference, and cannot accept the reduction of human life to a homogeneous economy of the same (1998:197-230).

These three virtues (polyphony, participation, and particularity) enable us to practise peacemaking since they oppose the root of violence, namely the drive toward homogeneity, that is expressed in the subjugation and elimination of the other, and the destruction of the otherness of the other. These virtues pave the way for practices of pluralising, since they make room for and are defined by multiple modes of discourse and practice. These virtues foster the practice of persuading, i.e. foster a definition of authority and power that is not informed by coercive power, but which is modelled on and formed by the persuasive power of the Triune God (Cunningham 1998:234-335).

These Trinitarian virtues and practices can be helpful indeed in our quest to effectuate the common good amidst dissensus and incommensurability.

d. The vision of the common good also needs to be embodied by so-called good people, i.e. people of character and virtue. According to American theologians, Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen (1989:124), an etymological study of the word "character" indicates that character has to do with the engraving of particular principles into a person. They refer to the Greek roots of the word which means "engraving tool", and by extension the marks made

by an engraving tool. And hence, character contains the notion of values which are engraved into a person, over time, so that they become assimilated, incarnated, and embodied in the person. Character, like virtues, therefore, develop over time in communion with God and other human beings.

The North American ethicist J. Philip Wogaman (1989:29) offers a valuable description of virtue. He describes virtue as

... a disposition of the will towards a good end, as a tendency to think or behave in accordance with goodness, as a habit of the will to overcome a threat to our ultimate good.

A virtue is a predisposition, a tendency, an intuition to be and to act in a specific way without prior reflection. It almost happens instinctively. To some extent it has an element of unavoidability. The Greek word for virtue, *arête*, refers to the divine power that we do have to be and to act in accordance with goodness. Virtue also has a dimension of *habitus*. This implies that virtue is acquired in a process of consistent and collective habitual behaviour. For David Cunningham (1998:123), virtues are dispositions that God has by nature, and in which we participate by grace. Virtues are characteristics of the Triune God that are freely bestowed upon us.

Greek philosopher Aristotle identified four so-called “cardinal virtues”. “Cardinal” is derived from the Latin word *cardo*, which refers to the hinge of a door. The four cardinal virtues are, therefore, the hinge on which all virtues turn. These virtues are justice, moderation/self-control, discernment/wisdom, and courage/fortitude. Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas added three theological virtues to these four, namely faith, hope, and love.

Social and political scientists in various parts of the world argue that democracies with human rights cultures that serve the common good cannot become a reality without leaders and citizens of civic virtue and character. Societies hunger for people of public and civic virtue: public wisdom in contexts of complexity, ambiguity, tragedy and *aporia* (dead-end streets); public justice in the context of inequalities and injustices on local and global levels; public temperance in the context of greed and consumerism amidst poverty and alienation; public fortitude amidst situations of powerlessness and inertia; public faith amidst feelings of disorientation and rootlessness in contemporary societies; public hope amidst situations of despair and melancholy; and public love in societies where public solidarity and compassion are lacking.

e. All institutions of society have a role to play in actualising the common good. Churches in various forms (as institution and organism) at local, regional and global levels and in partnership with institutions in various spheres of public life (politics, economy, civil society, the formation of public opinion), participate in the quest to realise the common good.

CONCLUSION: THE NOTION OF THE COMMON GOOD IS HELPFUL

After the above analysis I conclude by citing three sets of reasons why common good discourse might be very helpful.

First, the notion of common good has a descriptive function. In complex contemporary societies it is offered as one of many central categories when discussions take place about the types of societies that we want. Various sectors of complex modern societies strive to embody the common good.

Second, the notion of the common good has a rhetorical and inspiring function. It triggers the imaginative and visionary dimensions of our lives. It encourages us to dream, and not to make peace with the status quo of injustice, inequality, oppression and the manifold ways of the violation of dignity. Common good language enables us to imagine a different world. Things need not be as they currently are. Dehumanisation and injustice do not need to have the final word. Common good discourse, therefore, encourages us to offer courageous criticism of the wrongs of our societies. It inspires us also to look for what is common to us all, for communion in the midst of societies where too many people, through their attitude and practices, betray that now is not a time for unity, for social solidarity, for social cohesion, for building social capital, for reciprocal responsibility.

Finally, the notion of the common good has a normative function. It does provide moral insights and material with which to envisage a new society, for the formation of people of character and virtue, as well as for the making of decisions and policies that will enhance a life of dignity for all, for both human and non-human forms of life.

And, this threefold role fulfils the common good in local societies (national common good), in international contexts (global common good), as well as in the context of the hospitality of humans to show to the rest of creation, i.e. in the context of the integrity of creation (cosmic common good).

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KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE

Common Good / Algemene belang
Human Dignity / Menswaardigheid
Pluralism / Pluralisme
Virtues / Deugde

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