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## Public Ethics as a Canadiana “Theologica Publica”

David Pfrimmer\*

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### Moments For Public Ethics

In June 2012, Canada’s Auditor General released a study outlining problems with some of the expense claims being made by Senators concerning their expenses. The revelations grew to a full blown scandal when Senators Mike Duffy, Pamela Wallin, Mac Harb and Patrick Brazeau were charged by the RCMP with various counts of fraud and breach of trust. A new report by the Auditor General may point to another 5 to 10 Senators with a “...troublesome pattern of expense claims.”<sup>1</sup>

Canada was rocked by the news in October 2014 that Jian Ghomeshi, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s most well-known radio host of the program Q that is heard in Canada and the United States, was fired because of damaging information about his “...predilection for assaulting women and choking women under the guise of sexual encounters.”<sup>2</sup> Ghomeshi now faces five criminal charges. In November 2014 Federal Liberal leader, Justin Trudeau suspended two Liberal Members of Parliament over sexual harassment allegations with two members of the New Democratic Party.

In the wake of Ferguson, Missouri and numerous incidents across the U.S. where Afro-Americans have died at the hands of police, Starbucks launched a “Race Matters” national campaign via social media in the United States to discuss the racial divide there. While a few people applauded this initiative, negative reaction was swift and harsh. Professor Tamara Buckley of the City University of New York noted the importance of the complicated task of creating a context for such discussions to avoid trivializing the issues.<sup>3</sup>

There have been other very public and sensational stories emerging in the media that have raised issues and stimulated a very public conversation about behaviors of leaders, sexual harassment and violence against women, race issues or other important social questions. There is no shortage of issues.

What is important for our consideration here is the observation that unique moments occur when particular issues or questions initiate particularly important conversations or deliberations that change people and the communities in which they live. Such conversations draw combustible interest and considerable energy from a community of people. What is notable is how quickly and how pervasively they come to the top of the public’s attention. Public ethics is a deeper version of the old ‘water cooler’ conversation. The fact that “Everybody is talking about it,” is probably one of the best indicators that this type of incident creates *a public ethical moment* in our society and communities. Public ethics is about recognizing and naming such ethical moments and the issues or questions that they present to us.

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More troubling is the seeming rush to judgment in such moments. Many in the public felt quite comfortable pronouncing their conclusions without a clear articulation of the issues or question(s), to say nothing of “due process.” In some cases it seemed as if those in charge were “making up the process as they went along.” In some cases, such positions were asserted without knowing the nature of the allegations, the parties involved, the circumstances or other significant details. Over time reports were prepared and some elements were revealed more systematically. However, what was troubling was that by then the public had largely made up its mind.

Admittedly such matters, particularly involving sexuality, can be incendiary and awkward. Broadly speaking the task of “public ethics” is to endeavor to help “name the question,” assist leaders to animate the discussion(s), enable participation in collective responsible deliberations, and help identify appropriate resolutions or outcomes. Public ethics is not just about government, public policy, or public institutions. It needs to assist in providing some form, function and public purpose to the wider conversations.

In this paper I will argue that public ethics creates “public(s)” that encourage a community-based process of moral engagement and deliberation to address a compelling personal and social ethical dilemma(s) or paradox(s). Such moments enlist our ultimate convictions and deepest values as global citizens to address or resolve these life question(s) of misery and meaning in our world. A commitment to doing public ethics has important implications for faith communities as they seek to find their new social location and the contribution they can make to enhancing the lives of people and communities in a post-modern and pluralistic society like Canada.

Let me turn to briefly elaborating on the elements of this argument. In this paper, I will make essentially four points to introduce the concept of what I call “Public Ethics.”

1. Public ethics is **public**. The task of public ethics is to create “public(s)” that encourage a community-based process of moral engagement and deliberation to address a compelling personal and social ethical dilemma(s) or paradox(s)
2. Public ethics is **ethics**. Public ethics enlists our ultimate convictions and deepest values as global citizens to address issues or resolve life question(s) of misery and meaning in our world.
3. Public ethics is **theological**. Public ethics for many Canadians, particularly for those who are “spiritual but not religious,” is a means to make ultimate meaning for their lives. It is a means for popularizing or doing theology in a common key where theology is understood as “faith seeking understanding.”<sup>4</sup>
4. Public ethics is about enhancing life’s flourishing and our sense of belonging as Global Citizens.

### Public Ethics is *Public*

We have come to associate the term ‘public’ with that which relates to ‘government(s)’ or government-supported institutions. Universities, schools, hospitals, agencies supported by government are considered “public” as in “public schools” or “public hospitals.” Activities associated with these institutions or other civic processes are considered “public” as in “public service,” for example. However, I have chosen to use this

term “public” in a different way that returns to some of the origins of the concept. Charles Taylor describes the “public sphere” as having “extra-political status,” beyond the political but necessary to its effective functioning.<sup>5</sup> A “public” is much more than governments, institutions or civics. Public(s) serve as the circulatory system of the body politic, the society and the culture.

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the nature of the “public(s).” The “public sphere” owes much to the Eighteenth Century and the Enlightenment. Charles Taylor describes the

...public sphere as a common space in which members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these.<sup>6</sup>

Taylor argues that the emergence of “public opinion” in the 1700’s was crucial to creating this common public space that transcends the more limited “topical spaces.” This “meta-topical” common space is where people, who are not related by family or tribe, can come together “... in a common act of focus for whatever purpose.”<sup>7</sup> I would suggest for our considerations here this dynamic and broader definition of a “public” as a voluntary association of individuals who gather around an idea or purpose or action and who in the process of gathering are changed while at the same time are changing their context.

A “Public” can take many forms. Sports leagues, voluntary organizations, service clubs, faith communities are all in essence “publics.” There can be publics within publics in a manner. Think of organizations or groups that have local, regional, national and international expressions. Publics are not always positive or constructive. There are some publics that support racism, social exclusion, elitism, economic inequality, violence, and exploitation. Such publics reflect a darker reality of publics.

Creating publics and an enabling environment for public participation is essential for any society. Increasingly one cannot presume a monolithic or permanent nature to the public(s) within a society. For example, political parties in Canada today have changed their perception of who their publics are. No longer do they just presume to broadcast their messages to the one generic public, recruit ‘one-commitment-fits-all’ volunteers, or expect the loyalty and support of people whose family has always support the party no matter what. Political parties understand the need to create and nurture various “public(s).” Not all the political party responses are constructive in terms of a ‘body politic.’ Susan Delacourt offers a cautionary example about how some of the current ‘political marketing practices veer “...dangerously close to the view of consumers as morons... It divides the country into ‘niche’ markets and abandons the hard political work of knitting together broad consensus or national vision.”<sup>8</sup> Such approaches may not serve the best interests of the publics being created.

Today’s leaders and organizations will need to better understand the dynamic, ongoing and more complex social process of “making publics.”<sup>9</sup> It is an increasingly necessary quality of leadership in mass societies. Creating, identifying, and sustaining vibrant “publics” are essential skills for leaders in various sectors. The making of publics will be a challenge to just about every institution including faith leaders in the days ahead.

Public ethics can play a role in the creation and sustaining of ‘publics’ that engage

each other. Publics are created, engage, challenge, and collaborate with one another, thereby creating 'communities.' This is often what is meant when references are made to the "business community," the "university community," the "LGBT Community," or other such "communities" in the media that are gathered around a shared interest.

At some point leaders also need to be attentive to the life cycle of publics. Just as publics emerge, they also can and do come to an end. Nowhere is this more evident today than in the changing nature of rural communities in Canada. Many of the former publics in these communities (Church, School, Farm Organizations, etc.) are dramatically changing or disappearing. Accompanying publics at the end of their life is as important as the end-of-life process is with people.

The nature of this public-on-public engagement may at times soar to heights of great inspiration or descend to levels of profound disappointment. It is by nature not always harmonious nor without controversy or serious differences. Diversity and difference that enlist our deepest passions and profound commitments is what make issues compelling and controversial. Conversely, collaborations by publics can be inspiring. One only need think of the global responses to the earthquake in Haiti or in Nepal as an example. Yet it is what makes participatory societies and democratic politics possible.

Likewise, public ethics that leads to engagement is what facilitates personal and social change so essential to social survival. Such a notion of publicity is what is meant by 'politics' in a broader sense than merely elections that form governments. As Professor Chris Ross has said, "Politics is the grammar of human relationships." Public ethics summons our various publics to such political engagement that can lead to moral deliberation and action. People are changed, as are the places where they live. Public ethics is about these human and non-human relationships and is thereby public.

## Public Ethics is *Ethics*

Ethics is often described as deciding how one should live the "good life," about choosing the "good" and avoiding the "evil" or about knowing "right from wrong." We have all heard it said of someone that at a critical moment they "did the right thing!" But the real question is how do you know what the "right thing" is? Public ethics is not simply intuitive although it requires the application of intuition in such challenging moments. Public ethics provides an ethical framework for the work of reflection, deliberation and the doing of ethics in a wide variety of ways.

In general, ethics takes place at the encounter of our ultimate convictions and deepest held values with the world's most difficult and profound issues or questions. Christians take their direction from the Bible and the life of Jesus. People are fundamentally social in nature and are part of communities. As individuals engage others as active participants in a community, we transcend the moment of encounter and appropriate a broader worldview and a sense of ourselves. Such an encounter with others and our context expresses and informs who we are (identity), what we do (purpose) and our ultimate goals (hope).

In our day-to-day lives our "customary morality" as expressed in laws, regulations, traditions, culture is quite sufficient to express and inform how we conduct our lives, the choices we make, and what we consider important.<sup>10</sup> However, there are those other

unique “moments” when our customary morality no longer addresses our “life questions.” There are life questions of misery that focus on love, power and justice. Why is there such suffering? How can such evil exist? How to address injustice? There are also life questions of meaning that focus on identity, purpose and destination. Who am I? What is my purpose? What matters in life?

These more profound existential questions arise in what I would refer to as “ethical” or “theological” moments when we are forced to reconsider our foundational assumptions and worldview. “Life questions are the questions Google can’t answer!”<sup>11</sup> They are religious in that they deal with ultimate commitments, convictions and values. Life questions in such moments are what give vitality to our faith and spirituality. I have often told my students that the most important theological question is, “How have I changed my mind and why have I changed it?” These theological or ethical moments are when such self-interrogation can occur. Public ethics takes seriously these moments, for they set the stage for our public pursuits.

The first task in the interrogative process of public ethics as with ethics in general is to describe and hopefully understand what is really happening in the current situation. The challenge with the Gian Gomeshi, Senate scandals, and the Starbucks as with many examples is the great temptation to rush to draw conclusions or to take action prematurely. Public ethics presses us to get the facts, to probe the context, to be more analytical and deliberative. Buffalo Springfield’s hit song from the 1960s captures the problem, “Something is happening here, what it is ain’t exactly clear!”

The critical task of ethics in general and public ethics in particular is identifying the central question revealed in the ambiguity or paradox of the named moment. Getting clarity about the issue or the question that demands to be addressed is crucial to the effectiveness of the ethical enterprise. This is not a solitary process by individuals but needs to be done in dialogue with others and other publics. “Communities of moral deliberation” are essential to public ethics. Lutheran ethicist Ron Duty has written extensively about how churches and congregations need to be such communities of moral deliberation.<sup>12</sup> Barbershops in African-American communities often served such a role for men during days of the civil rights movement.

In identifying and addressing the question, Public ethics is not merely public opinion. It enlists 1) experience, 2) reason and cross-disciplinary inquiry, 3) tradition/culture and 4) sacred texts, our own and others. Public ethics is both contextual and increasingly in our globalized world *transcontextual*.

Public ethics is open to using the full range of ethical methodologies. There are various methods for doing ethics and each brings a helpful way of clarifying different aspects of the ethical questions. Deontology places an emphasis on respecting the rules. Teleological ethics hopes that a serious consideration of the consequences will motivate ‘good’ action. Virtue or character ethics suggests, “when you can’t be sure, be responsible!”<sup>13</sup> Much like a transmission that has different gears for different conditions, these various ethical approaches all have a contribution to make in the task of public ethics. Public ethics offers a framework for consideration as to how such various ethical methodologies can be utilized in the wider arena of consideration of the “good life.”

Public ethics enlists personal ethics and social ethics. We may be more familiar with personal ethics that involves those moments when we apply our “customary morality” and seemingly make these choices on our own. However, human beings are social and live in

larger communities/societies with many social, economic, political and environmental systems. Personal ethics alone in these circumstances is not sufficient to explain nor even to be effective to the actual doing of ethics. There are structural and systemic questions that impact life's flourishing. During the 1960s, University of Chicago ethicist Gibson Winter began to speak more about the importance of the "social ethics" that "...deals with issues of social order – good, right, ought in the organization of human communities and the shaping of social policies. Hence the subject matter of social ethics is moral rightness and goodness in shaping human society."<sup>14</sup> Personal and social ethics are very much interdependent in our world. Public ethics, I would suggest, incorporates both personal and social ethical questions. Yet in other ways public ethics transcends the personal and social, offering a more dynamic, interactive and wider collective process of deliberation and action. In a sense, it is a framework that moves us toward wider theological considerations.

### Public Ethics is *Public Theology*

Public ethics is *public*. Public ethics is *ethics*. I would further argue that today for many Canadians, particularly for those who consider themselves as "spiritual but not religious," public ethics is *theological*. St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) best summarized the task of 'theology' as "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*).<sup>15</sup> Public ethics is spiritual or religious in that it involves the ultimate values and convictions of a public(s) within and across faith traditions. For many people today with limited engagement or even estranged from their religious institutions and communities, doing public ethics may be a viable alternative theological architecture for making meaning and understanding their world.

In the 1960s Reinhold Niebuhr made a similar observation in terms of the role "ethics" might play. "Ethics," Niebuhr argued,

...is troubled by these questions because religion is concerned with life and existence as a unity and coherence of meaning. In so far as it is impossible to live at all without presupposing a meaningful existence, the life of every person is religious, with the possible exception of the rare skeptic who is more devoted to the observation of life than to living it, and whose interest in detailed facts is more engrossing than his concern for ultimate meaning and coherence. Even such persons have usually constructed a little cosmos in a world which they regard as chaos and derive vitality and direction from their faith in the organizing purpose of this cosmos.<sup>16</sup>

Public ethics has this same theological potential for making meaning in our current context.

In the midst of the huge advancements in science, technology and knowledge, there are many people searching for greater "understanding" and dare I say, wisdom. As sociologist Rodney Stark has noted, "There are some questions only the gods can answer!"<sup>17</sup> Many people are asking important theological questions but they are not looking to the traditional sources and institutions. As Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has pointed out, "Across the country, some 7 in 10 adults and more than 5 in 10 teens explicitly indicate that they have spiritual needs..."<sup>18</sup>

"Spirituality" is replacing religion as the descriptor of such needs. A 2012 Forum

research poll done for the National Post "...shows two-thirds of Canadians are spiritual while just half say they are religious."<sup>19</sup> Forum President Lorne Bozinoff observes,

Organized religion is on the decline, but when we talk about spirituality that is a whole different ball game. These people (spiritual but not religious) don't believe in organized religions' view of God. But they still fear death – big questions around things like that –and I think those kinds of things keep people spiritual, even though they might not be religious.<sup>20</sup>

Bibby's assessment is that while there is revived interest in religion and spirituality, people are not looking to the traditional institutional providers to meet these needs.

The diminished authority of religious leaders and institutions is not unique to faith communities. Peter Newman described a revolution that has taken place among Canadians between 1985-1995,

During the decade under review, Canadians individually and collectively lost common cause with their institutions. Divorced from their sense of God, King and Country – thus separated from their sense of religion, monarchy and land – Canadians carried their own Cross, wore their own Crown, and held their own orb.<sup>21</sup>

This "Revolution" has meant Canadians have become distanced from their institutions. They have replaced their deference for authority with a distrust and defiance of authorities. Nowhere is this more evident than in Canadian's participation in and attitudes toward historic church institutions. Statistics Canada reports "... the General Social Survey (GSS), 21% of Canadians aged 15 and over reported they attended a religious service at least once a week in 2005, down from 30% in 1985."<sup>22</sup> But we see this as well in other institutions such as political parties, service clubs and other voluntary organizations with the possible exception of sports leagues. Robert Putnam has described this trend in the U.S. as "Bowling Alone" whereby people are less inclined to belong to organizations, even the bowling leagues!<sup>23</sup>

Canadians nevertheless remain concerned about social well-being and the health of the planet. In 2012, the Environics Institute in partnership with other organizations conducted a poll asking, "what it means to be a Canadian citizen in Canada?" They found that,

When presented with a list of 17 candidate attributes of a good citizen in Canada, treating men and women equally (95% say this is very important to being a good citizen in Canada) is at the top of the list, followed by obeying Canada's laws (89%), being tolerant or respectful of others who are different (82%), voting in elections (82%) and protecting the environment (80%). Majorities of between six and seven in ten each say a good citizen pays attention to current issues (68%), respects other religions (65%), feels connected to others in society (63%) and knows about Canada's history (62%).

Half of Canadians each say being a good citizen means actively participating in the local community (51%), sharing common values (51%), displaying pride in Canada (e.g. celebrating Canada Day) (51%) or volunteering (49%), while four in ten each



say it includes giving to charity (42%) and learning about Aboriginal peoples (40%). Being bilingual (English and French) (19%) and being an entrepreneur or a small business owner (18%) are found at the bottom of the list.<sup>24</sup>

Canadians remain committed to the vision of the “peaceable kingdom.” Articulating the structures or meaning and the networks of relationships to sustain that vision will be increasingly important.

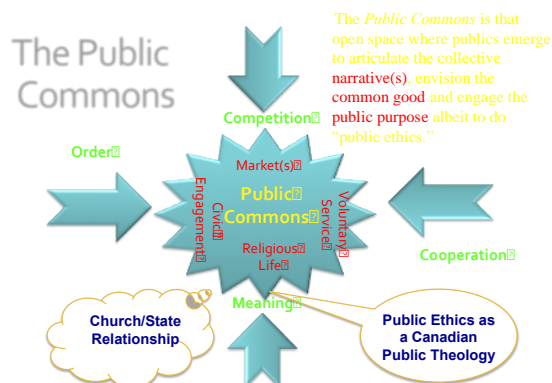
Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has made the important observation that the problem in Canada is not secularization per se but polarization. Bibby writes,

Canada is experiencing a growing level of religious polarization...The more significant question that is potentially of interest to about everyone is the question of consequences – the implications for the quality of personal and collective life, starting with the ability of people who are religious, and those who are not, to co-exist.<sup>25</sup>

Insofar as life questions of misery and meaning that address human flourishing are common to both traditionally faithful and the ‘spiritual-but-not-religious,’ public ethics may provide some common space to bridge this polarized divide. For example, Canadian churches were leaders in the anti-apartheid movement but this initiative also enlisted labour unions, NGOs and other movements. If spiritual needs are important to people, are there less assertive and more engaging alternatives to addressing these ‘spiritual’ needs? I would suggest that “public ethics” might serve as a gateway to a Canadian public theology of meaning making for people without foreclosing access to the traditional resources that come from faith traditions.

### Public Ethics in the *Public Commons*

What should be somewhat evident at this point in our discussion is that faith remains a very public matter with a distinct role to play even if its institutional expressions in Canada seem to be waning in influence and vitality and the historic providers are changing. How will communities of faith respond or identify their role in this context? This is a much larger conversation. However, I have suggested that there is a new ‘public’ architecture, which I have called the “public commons” (See Figure).<sup>26</sup>



The *Public Commons* is that open space where publics emerge to articulate the collective narrative(s), envision the common good and engage the public purpose albeit to do “public ethics.” Government, economic, social and faith-based actors engage each other to address the broader political, economic, social and ethical issues. The Commons is illustrative and not definitive in that individual and community actors occupy multiple social locations in the various sectors that attend the

public commons.

What is important to this discussion is that within this framework, faith-group's participation in public commons is informed by a public theology or theologies. For Christian communities, this conversation began with the question, what it means to be a "public church" with an appropriate "public theology?"<sup>27</sup> The world is globalizing with many currents and dynamics effecting significant changes in our local, regional and global contexts. Faith communities bring strengths and vulnerabilities to this reality. Faith communities will inevitably play a public role.

Having a public theology will be important to shape and inform that public role. What do we mean by a "public theology?" This is a burgeoning field of study and there are many diverse perspectives often conditioned by particular circumstances and contexts. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann offers one definition that may serve our purposes.

...a *theologia publica*, a public theology...gets involved in the public affairs of society. It thinks about what is of general concern in the light of hope in Christ for the Kingdom of God. It becomes political in the name of the poor and marginalized in a given society. Remembrance of the Crucified Christ makes it critical toward political religions and idolatries. It thinks critically about the religious and moral values of societies in which it exists, and presents its reflections as a reasoned position.<sup>28</sup>

It will be our emerging public theology that informs and shapes the participation of faith communities in the public commons. Historically churches and faith communities have had a "political theology" that has served as an imperative for their civic role and contribution. However, given the disestablishment of religious institutions as well as the broader changing social and cultural dynamics, the question arises, "Is there an emerging distinct Canadian public theology to inform and guide faith communities in their contributions in the public commons in the future?"

I would suggest that public ethics might serve to guide and shape just such a "Canadiana theological publica." With humility and deference, creating, nurturing, sustaining, animating and accompanying publics in the process of modeling the doing of public ethics may be a positive contribution by faith communities to the important work of the public commons. Likewise, it may result in a renewed means for overcoming polarization.—So too, it might become the new 'theological lingua franca' for meaning making for people in an emerging and quite different Canadian religious landscape.

## Public Ethics As A Summons to Global Citizenship

Why is public ethics important in this age of seemingly private morality? What difference will public ethics make as the 'lingua franca' of a renewed public theology? I think more thought will need to be given to the concept of public ethics and its implications. However, at this point there are at least four preliminary contributions that might warrant further consideration; (1) public ethics can offer an authoritative narrative(s) or worldview of "belonging;" (2) public ethics can offer a new paradigm for "community leadership;" (3) public ethics can offer a new framework for validating public participation and (4) public ethics can help to foster authenticity, civility and integrity within political systems. Let me briefly turn to offer some initial thought on each of these.

First, an important theological contribution of public ethics is to enlist people in the **broader authoritative narrative** of their respective public or community. One of the significant social diseases of our time may be a profound sense of existential loneliness or not belonging. Engaging in public ethics as a process of creating, nurturing and sustaining publics may give people a better sense of who we are, what we are called to do, and the ultimate goal of our lives. In short, it might provide people with access to a means of belonging to something larger than themselves in a world that wants to relegate them to being merely individuals, consumers and taxpayers.

Such a fuller notion of belonging may be captured by the concept of “Global Citizenship.” Adrian Clarkson in the 2014 Massey Lectures wrote about what she describes as the “paradox of citizenship,” belonging. She writes,

The greatest challenge for us to understand and satisfy both our natural competitive instincts and the deep longing for cooperation...Life at its best exists in cooperative, sharing, and balanced relationships with other lives. This interdependence we call belonging.<sup>29</sup>

In its interdependent origins, public ethics differs from theological ethics. Theological ethics emerges from a particular theology or faith perspective and then is applied. Public ethics becomes a theological narrative that arises from the gathering of a public and summons people to lives as Global Citizens. Public ethics affirms people’s agency as “global citizens” with a commitment to the public purpose and the common good.

Second, public ethics offers a new paradigm for what I would describe as **“community leadership.”** Newman’s Canadian Revolution has led to widespread doubts about all in positions of authority and leadership. People are not willing to merely be deferential to leaders who think they know what is best for people, the organization, the community, or the country. Many polls have indicated a drop in confidence in leaders in various sectors including faith communities.<sup>30</sup> Sociologist David Seljak notes for religious leaders there is a similar skepticism. “Bishops can make whatever pronouncements they want, but even the people in the pews aren’t listening...Even their most loyal followers are deciding for themselves.”<sup>31</sup>

Public’s acceptance of the old leadership paradigm of perceived paternalism is changing to one of ‘accompaniment.’ How can leaders accompany publics in their process of convening, deliberating and acting? Admittedly what this leadership modality is going to look like is somewhat unclear. An accompaniment model of Community Leadership will be different and may require its own public to articulate it. Community Leadership will be important in many settings and particularly for religious leadership and the revitalization of faith communities. In a presentation a few years ago on the future of theological education, I argued that Canadian churches may require pastors to be less like “Shepherds” (the paternalist model) and more like “Adventure Guides” (Community Leadership model) helping people explore beyond their comfort zone to new places, different ideas and sources of meaning.<sup>32</sup> Another example may be that of Ronald Heifetz at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard who speaks of “adaptive leadership.”<sup>33</sup>

Third, public ethics offers a means of **understanding, authenticating and validating public participation** in the political process. Many writers have raised questions about the health of Canadian democracy. Again, Susan Delacourt has highlighted

the problem of narrowcasting and marketing political messages at targeted consumer-citizens, thereby eliminating wider more broadly inclusive conversations.<sup>34</sup> Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan conducted exit interviews with former Members of Parliament and noted some of the “failings” of Canadian democracy. They observed that in his time, John A. MacDonald needed his MPs to communicate with constituents. In our time, in an age of social media, this role for the MP has largely disappeared.<sup>35</sup> Journalist Chris Hedges sums up an essential problem,

What endures is not the fact of democratic liberalism but the myth of it. The myth is used by corporate power elites and their apologists to justify the subjugation and manipulation of other nations in the name of national self-interest and democratic values...the assault of the corporate state on the democratic state claimed the liberal class as one of its victims.<sup>36</sup>

Declining voter participation and other indicators reveal the erosion of democratic institutions.

Public ethics understands that ‘liberal democracy’ is one form that public participation can take. The important dynamic that should be remembered is public participation. Federal Green Party leader Elizabeth May believes (as do many others), “Public Policy is no longer being developed through a process reflecting the public will. Nor is it being developed based on what the country needs in response to issues of concern...” Public ethics can offer a new politics and potentially greater participation by offering an understanding of how people participate, why they will, and what they can contribute.<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, a public ethics that offers an authoritative narrative, community leadership opportunities, and enhanced public participation can provide **a greater sense of belonging for people and communities**. As Chris Ross has said, “politics is the grammar of human relationships.”<sup>38</sup> In enhancing belonging, new kinds of relationships might enable new kinds of politics characterized by authenticity, integrity and civility. Belonging is not without a darker side as Michael Ignatieff has discussed in exploring the sometimes-violent connection between nationalism and belonging.<sup>39</sup> However, in these dynamic publics that allow us to belong, we might rediscover the gift and joy of citizenship and shared hope for Canada and the world. In belonging, we might better understand what is at stake for our common future. Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef points to the difference between knowledge in the midst of separateness and understanding that comes with belonging,

Never in human history has there been such an accumulation of knowledge like in the last 100 years...the point is that knowledge alone is not enough, we lack understanding...When you belong, you understand. When you’re separated, you can accumulate knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

Public ethics needs to contribute to a progressive and constructive sense of belonging where greater numbers of people connected to a multiplicity of publics can serve the common good.

In conclusion, the process of public ethics that enhances life’s flourishing and belonging may be what faith communities can bring to the public commons. Such a public ethics might be a means of addressing the crisis of misery and meaning by affirming the

identity, agency, and visions that make us truly human. Faith communities have a tradition and imperative for reaching out to the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and all who are considered “the other.” Reginald Bibby recalls a column by Toronto Star columnist Carol Goar where she points out that “faith based organizations are the bed rock of Canada’s charitable sector.” They provide all kinds of services from homeless shelters, to sponsoring and resettling refugees, to running facilities for the elderly, providing care for the young, food programs for the poor and a host of other services. Gore concludes with these ‘strong’ words, “It is fine to say – as a majority of Canadians do – that you prefer to explore your own spirituality, practice your religion privately and ponder metaphysical questions in solitude.” But she says, “...look around. There is a world in need out there. Church members are on the front lines, putting their faith to work. They could use some help.”<sup>41</sup> Offering to accompany people in the life adventure may revitalize the public role of religious leaders and faith communities as well.

I have argued in this paper that public ethics is public, taking serious how publics are formed and reformed. I have noted that public ethics is ethics, in that it offers a new architecture for conceptualizing the field of ethics. Given the growing number of “spiritual but not religious” people, public ethics may be an alternative ‘theological’ means for addressing the life questions of misery and meaning. The aim of public ethics is to enhance life’s flourishing and the sense of belonging. “Nothing is anything without everything!” as Larry Rasmussen has said. Finally I have suggested some implications of the practice of public ethics in terms of an authoritative narrative, a paradigm of community leadership, for authenticating and validating new forms of public participation and for developing a new politics.

Such a public ethics does not require its practitioners or advocates to be religious or people of faith. As Reginald Bibby has pointed out “...people can be good without God.”<sup>42</sup> Certainly we could find evidence of the practice of public ethics in other places. However, public ethics is part of the tradition of the churches in particular and faith communities more generally. They have some experience in doing ethics. Developing and bringing a public ethics to the Commons, may help develop a more deliberative and less reactive process to some of the more pressing scandals and incendiary issues. The world today is a wonderfully, dangerous, troubling, but exciting place. Such a contribution of Public ethics might be embodied by Canadian theologian Douglas Hall’s hope for people of faith of a renewed vocation for Canadian churches and religious communities:

In Canada today a church freed from ethnic, economic, class, and other interests and identities could function as a forum for caring in the midst of a society in crisis... Such a church could be a companion in the night to a society which is afraid of the dark.<sup>43</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> "Senators call for new blood on committee dealing with audit fallout," CBC News, May 15, 2015 <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/senators-call-blood-committee-dealing-090000257.html>
- <sup>2</sup> "Top Celebrity Scandals of 2014," Toronto Star, January 4, 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> Starbucks dives into U.S. race relations with "#RaceTogether campaign," The Globe and Mail, May 18t, 2015 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/starbucks-dives-into-us-race-relations-issue-with-racetogether-campaign/article23525794/>
- <sup>4</sup> Williams, Thomas, "Saint Anselm", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/anselm/>
- <sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2007) p.191.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2007) p.185.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, p.187.
- <sup>8</sup> Susan Delacourt, *Shopping for Votes, How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them*, (Douglas and MacIntyre, Maderia Park, B.C., 2013) p.327.
- <sup>9</sup> See Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin, *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe – People, Things, Forms of Knowledge* (Routledge – Taylor and Frances, New York, 2010). This volume speaks to the early development of the "public." What may be useful for our current conversation is to reclaim the dynamic quality of what it takes to create and sustain a public. Many faith leaders today would do well to understand the importance of this concept of making public.
- <sup>10</sup> I believe this concept traces its origins to religious studies scholar Dr. R. Ninian Smart who was a pioneer in secular religious studies.
- <sup>11</sup> In my lectures, I have made this comment many times to distinguish the nature of what I have termed "life questions" from the wide range of important but less ultimate questions that often face people. Space does not permit a lengthy treatment of these important questions. In short, they are questions about that which we value ultimately. Matters of peace and justice form an important constellation of life questions in some contexts. In other contexts, often more affluent situations, the life questions may focus on issues of meaning (e.g. "Why am I here? Who am I? What is my purpose in life? etc.). Some of the best responses to "life questions" are those found in the wisdom literature of the Bible.
- <sup>12</sup> Ron Duty, "Moral deliberation in A Public Lutheran Church" (Dialog, A Journal of Theology, Volume 45, Issue 4, Winter 2006) p.p. 338-355.
- <sup>13</sup> See Lewis Smedes, *Choices, Making Right Decisions in a Complex World* (Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1986)
- <sup>14</sup> Gibson Winter (editor), "Introduction" *Social Ethics, Issues in Ethics and Society* (Harper and Row, New York, 1968) p.6.
- <sup>15</sup> Williams, Thomas, "Saint Anselm", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/anselm/>.
- <sup>16</sup> (Reinhold Niebuhr *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Living Age books, New York, 1960 ) p.15.
- <sup>17</sup> Reginal Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back, Religion's Demise and Rise and Why It Matters* (Project Canada Books, Lethbridge, Alberta, 2011) p 38. Reginald Bibby also points out that "In a recent poll of 84 countries , the Gallup organization confirmed the fact that meaning does not require religion....The gods are not indispensable to finding purpose. But they do not have many equals when it comes to addressing with certainly what happens when we die." See pages 134-5.
- <sup>18</sup> Reginal Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back, Religion's Demise and Rise and Why It Matters* (Project Canada Books, Lethbridge, Alberta, 2011) p. 122.
- <sup>19</sup> "Organized Religion on the Decline? Growing Number of Canadians 'spiritual but not religious?'," The National Post, December 21, 2012.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Peter C. Newman, *The Canadian Revolution* (Viking Press, Toronto, 1995) p.103.
- <sup>22</sup> "Canadians attend weekly religious services less than 20 years ago," Statistics Canada, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-630-x/2008001/article/10650-eng.htm>

- <sup>23</sup> Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community (Simon and Shuster, New York, 2000).
- <sup>24</sup> "Canadians on Citizenship, The First National Survey on What it Means to be a Citizen in Canada, Summary Report" <http://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Canadians-on-Citizenship-Summary-Report.pdf>
- <sup>25</sup> Reginald Bibby, p. 61.
- <sup>26</sup> Karen Bloomquist, editor, Communion, Responsibility, Accountability – Responding as a Lutheran Communion to Neoliberal Globalization, David Pfrimmer, "Stewards of the Public Commons: A Vocation for Government and Church" (Lutheran World Federation Documentation 50/2004, Geneva) p.p.235-250.
- <sup>27</sup> Martin Marty, The Public Church (Crossroads Publishing, 1981) p.3 ff.
- <sup>28</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, God for a Secular Society, (London, SCM Press, 1999) p.1.
- <sup>29</sup> Adrienne Clarkson, Belonging, The Paradox of Citizenship (House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 2014) p. 41.
- <sup>30</sup> The following articles illustrate some of the loss of confidence by Canadians.  
Jancye McGregor, "Canadians Lack Confidence that Governments Can Solve Issues," (CBC News, July 25, 2012) <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadians-lack-confidence-governments-can-solve-issues-1.1200130>.  
Matthew Coutts, "Canadians don't have faith in their leaders, new Yahoo-Leger poll shows -A clear gap is growing between elected officials and their constituents" (Yahoo Canada News – Wed, 13 Nov, 2013) <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/canadians-don-t-have-faith-in-their-leaders--yahoo-leger-poll-shows-185636826.html>.  
Theresa Tedesco, "Canadians' trust in corporate leaders drops to lowest level since 2008, report says," (Financial Post · Feb. 3, 2015), <http://www.nationalpost.com/Canadians+trust+corporate+leaders+drops+lowest+level+since+2008+report+says/10784591/story.html>
- <sup>31</sup> Michael Swan, "Canadians Becoming Ambivalent on Religion" (The Prairie Messenger, April 15, 2015) [http://prairiemessenger.ca/15\\_04\\_15/Register\\_15\\_04\\_15.html](http://prairiemessenger.ca/15_04_15/Register_15_04_15.html)
- <sup>32</sup> David Pfrimmer, "Developing a Public Hermeneutic for the Future of Theological Education," (Dialog A Journal of Theology, Volume 40, Issue 4, December 2011) p.p. 368-372.
- <sup>33</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, Leadership without Easy Answers (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1994).
- <sup>34</sup> See Susan Delacourt, Shopping for Votes, How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them, (Douglas and MacIntyre, Maderia Park, B.C., 2013) that was mentioned previously.
- <sup>35</sup> Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, Tragedy in the Commons (Random House, Toronto, 2014) p.213.
- <sup>36</sup> Chris Hedges, Death of the Liberal Class (nation Books, New York, 2010) p.p.8-9.
- <sup>37</sup> Elizabeth May, Losing Confidence: Power, Politics and the Crisis of Canadian Democracy (McClelland and Steward, Toronto, 2006) p.9.
- <sup>38</sup> Dr. Christopher Ross is a Professor of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier. He shared this view with me at a gathering at WLS.
- <sup>39</sup> Michael Ignatieff, Blood and Belonging. Journeys Into the New Nationalism (Viking Press, Toronto, 1993).
- <sup>40</sup> Manfred Max-Neef, Outside Looking In: Experiences in Barefoot Economics.
- <sup>41</sup> Goar, Carol (2006, May 5) "Loss of faith imperils charities," Toronto Star. From Bibby p.161.
- <sup>42</sup> Reginald Bibby, p. 160.
- <sup>43</sup> Douglas John Hall, The Canada Crisis, A Christian Perspective (The Anglican Book Centre, Toronto, 1980) p.114.