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PERSONS, COMMUNITY
AND HUMAN DIVERSITY

It is with a deep sense of honor, respect and affection that I accept the invitation to contribute to this *Festschrift* for Jude Dougherty, distinguished philosopher, educator, editor and long time Dean of the School of Philosophy at the Catholic University of America. As a valued friend and discussion partner, he has provided me with many stimuli and opportunities that otherwise may not have come my way. Since meeting for the first time en route to a conference in Brazil in 1972, we have been friends in spite of our differences in philosophical and theological traditions. A person of moral and intellectual integrity, Jude Dougherty is a strong and articulate representative of what I would call the traditional Catholic or Thomist philosophical tradition, and he has done much as a philosopher and administrator to insure that this tradition has its voice in the world of contemporary philosophy. I share some of Dougherty's concerns with what in *Western Creed, Western Identity* he calls our socially turbulent times, and his call for a kind of moral foundation or criterion that comes before all particular rules and laws and upon which our human associations depend and are judged. While he will probably find much with which to disagree in the following brief discussion of persons, community and diversity, I hope that in some ways it may complement his more extended discussion and call for an approach to Western identity anchored in the classical tradition before the advent of modernity.

I

We use the term "community" in a variety of ways and underlying each form of community is a conception of the human person.[1] The Western understanding of the self or person as free individual has its roots in the Greek world and was given a particular twist in Christianity. Neither the Greek nor the Christian idea of freedom meant following one's subjective desires of the moment. For both the Greek and Christian traditions, individual freedom meant freedom of self from dependence upon any motive or force, external or internal, that would detract from the wholeness of human being and freedom for the fullness of selfhood. Freedom of self in the Christian tradition, however, is focused less on persons in the Greek sense of mind and more on persons as historical beings creating themselves in encounter with whatever they confront at a given time. Persons are understood primarily as agents or centers of activity. Further, for Christianity, more emphasis is placed upon freedom as a gift of divine grace than freedom in relation to the law of reason. Both the Greek and Christian conceptions of freedom contribute to the Western understanding of persons, sometimes in close alliance and at other times in tension.[2]

Perhaps the concept of person first came into clear focus for me in the work of the personal idealists where emphasis is placed upon persons understood as centers of activity as opposed to theoretical beings with fixed essences. In their judgment the concept of person is the highest value in our experience and the concept of person provides the fundamental clue to reality. Following World War I personalism became more independent of the idealist tradition, and its emphasis upon freedom and action often brought it into close proximity to the existentialists in which human beings or persons are understood not as spectators but as agents. In contrast to some existentialists, however, personalists believe mutuality or the relation of self to others is fundamental. The word "person" as I use it in this essay refers at least in part to self or ego that is the conscious, unifying and purposeful characteristic of what it means to be human. Persons are theoretical beings, but they are more than that. They are also agents who act in ways that distinguish them from so-called natural events. To use the language of Heidegger, temporality, not substance, is the basic structure of self. Think-

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[1] For further discussion of the concept of person, see my "Quest for Transcendence," *The Review of Metaphysics* 52 (September, 1998): 3–19.

[2] See Rudolph Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1955), 305–325.

ing or reflection is taken up into self as a moment within the activity of self. Persons intend or project, they transcend forward in time so that we can say that a person has the capacity to be more or less than his or her most authentic self.

Yet, as John Dunne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself . . ."[3] Persons find themselves already thrown into a world in relation to persons and things. In their freedom persons transcend towards others and in the fullness of their being they are at one and the same time individual and social, fully themselves only in transcending towards others, whether in struggle or agreement, and ultimately towards a wider range of being. Persons might be said to be striving towards a fuller humanity in which self and other give recognition to each other, enable each other to be fully human. This is not to say that this striving towards our most authentic self in relation to others is always a reality. For example, we may choose to negate others as persons, to relate to them as objects for what might be called more objective or scientific purposes, and in some cases we are subject to loss of our fullest humanity when others fail to acknowledge us as persons. Our most full or authentic personhood depends upon our conscious striving towards the goal of human relations in which persons and others enable each other to achieve their fullest humanity. We are in process of becoming our most authentic existence as we choose to live in mutuality with other persons in our more immediate relations and in the wider history of humankind.

Because self is in process of becoming in relation to others, authentic selfhood is not something accomplished with finality, not a possession in the sense of an acquired skill or knowledge. It is not an essence. Persons become their most authentic selves only in striving forward into the future, in openness to the future, and this depends on a kind of commitment, faith or trust beyond what he or she brings to the moment. History and tradition on this account have less to do with authority and dependence and more to do with awareness of the possibilities of existence. This seeking to live in relation to others in ways that enable self and other to realize their fullest humanity is a moral striving and may be said to provide an ontological ground for human behavior that is presupposed in our particular or historical ethical traditions. To put this in another way, it provides a norm for

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[3] John Dunne, "Meditation XVII," in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959).

measuring our particular historical ethical codes, a norm that may be shared by different religious and non-religious persons alike.[4]

II

Persons as described above are individual and social. The reality of persons we might say is a mutual reality and this becomes clear when we focus on the notion of persons and community. There are many forms of community including, for example, the community of family and friends, the community of persons sharing common histories and traditions, and communities founded upon religious faith and belief. Perhaps the first kind of community that comes to mind when discussing persons and communities is what might be called our more intimate communities. Such communities depend upon immediate relationships of openness and trust, the kind of communities typically founded on love and respect among members of a family or friends. We might call this kind of community an intimate community and such communities in the best sense of the word depend upon persons treating others as persons. Persons might be described as centers of freedom or to put this in another way, the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes persons from mere animal life is freedom. As mentioned above, however, freedom as understood here is not what might be called subjective freedom, but freedom to create, to give shape to the self or person. In what I have called intimate communities the fundamental notion is that we free others to be persons, to give shape and form to their humanity as they free us to be persons. Free surrender for the sake of the other is at the heart of what it means to be a person in a family or among friends. Martin Buber gave a classic expression of this person to person relation in speaking of the I–thou in contrast to the I–it relation, thus putting his own stamp on the words of the nineteenth century philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, who wrote, "Where there is no *thou* there is no I."[5]

We are both individual and social and when the individual pole is separated or withdrawn from the social pole, the individual may be understood as a negative movement, a withdrawal from the social. The ego we might say negates the other as a person. We may witness this among

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[4] See John Macquarrie's proposal for a revised theory of natural law based on a contemporary understanding of changing human nature and an inner drive towards a fuller, more personal human existence in *Three Issues in Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1970), chapter four.

[5] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 92.

friends or members of a family when the sense of the other, the love and mutuality for which we hope, is distorted. In more extreme cases one might think of ideological attitudes and actions that set one person, one nation or one religion against another, the Nazis in Germany, or some of the slave owners in the United States where love and marriage among the slaves, who worked in the fields and cared for the children and the sick, were considered on a par with the breeding of horses and cattle. In less extreme cases we may find ourselves welcoming persons who are different from us only to the extent that they conform to us, to the extent that they share our views or speak, act and dress as we do. It is no accident that persons who fail to be recognized as persons often "act up," refuse to be made an object in the image of the other.

To the extent that we are able to realize what Martin Buber called the I–thou among persons in our family or immediate circle of friends we might be said to be most free. To the extent that is, that the individual is taken up into the positive intentions of the personal, to the extent that we live for the sake of the other, we may be said to be free of that kind of self centeredness and defensiveness that comes about when we believe ourselves threatened by or in competition with others. This kind of community can be found only when we transcend our egoism, when we are open to and reveal ourselves to each other without fear. Perhaps it was something like this that Robert Frost was trying to get at in his poem, *The Death of A Hired Hand*, when he said, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they take you in. I should have called it something you somehow don't have to deserve."[6]

III

It might be argued that we should reserve the word "community" to refer to what I have called the intimate community in which relations between persons are more direct or immediate as in the case of families and friends. We recognize, however, that there are other forms of community in which our personal relations are more indirect than direct. We often find ourselves speaking of the community of our town, our city, our state, our nation or even the global community. The basis of such communities is found in common experiences, tasks, histories and traditions. These larger

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[6] Robert Frost, "Death of a Hired Hand," in *North Boston* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914).

communities might be called societies to distinguish them from the forms
of community where human relations are more immediate or direct. In
larger communities or societies we often find ourselves relating indirectly
to persons whom we do not know, even persons whom we have never met
and are likely never to meet. Communities or societies of this kind are
based more on common histories and experiences, shared ideals and tasks,
and less on intimate relations and personal devotion to others. Presumably
we still seek the freedom and unity that we may find in the more immedi-
ate circle of family and friends and that promotes human flourishing, but
this is much more difficult in the case of societies where our human rela-
tions are more indirect than direct. In such cases my freedom may clash or
appear to clash with the freedom of others who are different from me. And
in such cases it is justice rather than love that dominates our relations with
others. It is the impersonal character of law that protects persons from each
other in the context of society where, unlike intimate communities, rela-
tions are more indirect. However, law is not or should not be an end in
itself. Law is unable to provide the kind of freedom that we seek in our
immediate communities that depend on free persons united in their inten-
tions to encourage or enable the freedom of self and others. And where law
is contrary to the flourishing of persons we have a moral obligation to re-
fuse to conform to it. This does not or should not mean that we can or
should rely on individual conscience in society where our relations are
indirect and we are incapable of considering all the consequences for just
and fair relations between persons. Should we be directed by conscience to
refuse to conform to the laws of society we should do so in such a way as
to preserve the place of law and justice for all as a means for adjusting our
relations with others in a fair and just manner. It is something like this that
is expressed in the so-called classical theory of civil disobedience.

The larger historical communities or societies seeking the unity and
freedom of persons depend upon organization and structure. And speaking
historically there have been two primary tendencies or theories of organi-
zation, one emphasizing the individual pole of persons and the other the
social pole of persons. Thomas Hobbes, for example, argued that our socie-
ties are composed of individuals with diverse interests that are threatened
by the competing interests of others. These individuals are understood to
use whatever resources they have to further their own freedom, interests
and satisfactions. Nevertheless, it is argued, we can learn to understand
each other and live together in order to accomplish our long-range goals.
This requires some agreement limiting individual aggressiveness for the

sake of long-range interests. Law backed by the power of state, nation or world of nations is understood as a device for protecting each person from the self-interest of others.

This theory and some of its variations is widespread. For example, it was supported by many moderates in the early stages of efforts to bring about a more racially integrated society in the United States. And as a device of practical politics it may have been effective, at least in the short run. Nevertheless, relations between persons from this point of view are essentially negative. The individual and social poles of persons in relation are split asunder. Persons are assumed to be ego-centered, or even aggressively related to each other. In the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, many of the persons who welcomed the laws that required the integration of races recognized that without a change of heart, a change of intentions toward others in which one seeks to free the other to be himself or herself, there would never be free and open relations among persons of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Some of these persons looked to the religious communities to change the intentions of persons but many despaired for the religious communities were often among the most segregated communities. Religious communities as well as religious individuals were in need of change.

Theories of society that emphasize the individual pole of persons seem in the final analysis to work against the intention of persons to live together in communities where persons are united in freedom, where persons seek to enable the freedom or flourishing of others and to live in openness and responsibility towards others. In contrast to more libertarian theories, idealist theories such as provided in the work of Rousseau emphasize the social pole of persons. The goal may be freedom of individuals, but this is approached by way of the general or social will of the community. Persons, it may be argued, are essentially well intentioned and in time conditions for all will improve. In the meantime it is essential that we identify with the general will and perform our duty in accordance with our position in the community. In this way, each of us will have maximum freedom possible and will avoid the pain associated with conflicts between individuals. From this point of view organizations and laws are prerequisite to living with others, but they are a function of consent and their authority is limited by the general will of the persons in the community. On this account the state and its laws are not ends in themselves but functions of the general will. They exist for the purpose of judging between claims of individuals, for adjusting individual wills to the general will. On the sur-

face such theories seem to have much to contribute to diverse individuals living together in social contexts. In practice, however, there appears to be an inherent conflict between the individual and social poles of persons in such theories, a conflict between the freedom of the persons and the general will of the people. And often the result is that the individual is submerged into the collective person and robbed of his or her selfhood or freedom. When carried to its extreme we have the totalitarian state.[7]

Persons are in need of social, political and legal structures in order to live peacefully in a world in which persons are required to relate to others in more indirect ways. Yet this seems to be something of a catch twenty-two. The very striving to live in free and creative relations with others, to enable self and others to realize their fullest human possibilities often gets caught up in organizations, structures and ideologies that work counter to persons achieving their fullest humanity. The very social and political organizations that we require to insure justice, to enable persons to live freely, may lead away from the kinds of human relations where persons free each other to realize their fullest humanity. This may appear to be less of a problem in cases where persons want to emphasize either the individual or social pole of what it means to be fully human. But it does raise a problem for those who strive for a moral ideal where persons live in such a way that individuals are not limited by their historical experiences and traditions, where persons transcend their more limited histories and traditions in order to enable others to realize their fullest humanity. To put this in another way, law and justice that are essential to cooperative relations between persons should not have their final purpose merely in maintaining law and order, in keeping the peace, but in enabling human flourishing, in helping to make possible free and creative relations among persons so that they may achieve their fullest humanity. In society, community may be understood as a potential way of being and law and justice should be understood in such a way as to enable or make possible community among persons if and when they confront each other in more direct or intimate relations.

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[7] In this section I am indebted to John Macmurray's Gifford Lectures, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1961). I have discussed his analysis in *Philosophy and Civil Law: Proceedings of the Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. XLIX (1975), 125–137.

IV

Religious communities differ from societies and intimate communities as we have discussed them above in being what we might call communities in the transcendent. Traditionally religion has often been understood in terms of an authoritative tradition and in some cases authoritative tradition as expressed in sacred scriptures. Religious communities looked to tradition and/or scriptures for their origins, justification and authority. Religion in this sense was widely challenged in the Enlightenment and continues to be challenged today where religion and religious communities no longer have an unchallenged authority or place in human life. This challenge did not always and need not today mean a denial or rejection of history and tradition. Indeed, I would argue that this challenge is itself an important part of the Western tradition and allows for a critical appreciation and appropriation of history and tradition in the context of persons as creative and future oriented beings seeking the flourishing of self and others.[8] Tradition is important to our self-understanding, but this need not result in our becoming enslaved by it. I agree with Hans-Georg Gadamer, who finds an analogy for the hermeneutical experience of tradition in our experience of the other person as thou, in which we stand open, letting the other really say something to us. On Gadamer's account in *Truth and Method*, understanding tradition is conceived as part of the event in which the meaning and truth of historical tradition is formed, actualized and handed down. Interpretation culminates in the openness for experience that distinguishes the experienced person, the person of wisdom from the person of a dogmatic frame of mind. However, as David Brown has argued, even those traditions that are held most dear should not be free of critical examination challenging their prejudices and perspectives.[9]

I would argue that religion is viable today only in the sense that it is understood to be part of the human transcending towards the world and others and ultimately towards transcendent reality, understood both as challenging the human tendency to believe that persons can fulfill themselves through their own resources, and as opening up new possibilities of self, world and others, freed from the limitations of self dependence. On

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[8] See the insightful analysis of what he calls the boosters and knockers of modernity in Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1991).

[9] I have discussed Gadamer in *Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 425–429. See also David Brown, *Tradition and Interpretation: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9–59.

this account the fundamental difference between the religious and non-religious and between one religious believer and another may have less to do with whether or not one believes the proposition that a transcendent entity called God exists and more to do with whether or not one believes that reality is such as to enable or free persons to fully realize their self-hood.

Religious communities have many purposes, including the moral purpose of calling themselves and others beyond the limitations of their human organizations and structures, including religious organizations, and opening up new possibilities of being, calling and encouraging persons to frame social structures that help bring about conditions in which persons may realize their most authentic personal being. An ideal of religious communities is a universal community of friendship, of persons freely relating to each other in such a way as to make possible the full realization of persons as free for self and others. In the Christian tradition this is expressed in terms of the grace of God and the love of Christ in which the authentic self is understood to be free from his or her past and open to a new future in the event of grace in the word of Christ. Since persons are always in process of transcending or becoming, always on the way towards selfhood, this is not a goal achieved once and for all through knowledge or effort. Individuals may become themselves only in constant openness to others, in being enslaved to nothing that he or she already is or has. This is a way of being that can be won or lost and a goal that may be shared in part by religious and non-religious persons as well.[10]

Persons of many religious traditions might learn much from Karl Jaspers' proposal for philosophical faith, his understanding of *Existenz* and *Transcendence*, the historicity of religious beliefs, boundless communication and what he calls the axial period of history common to the whole of humankind. For some more liberal protestant Christian thinkers philosophical faith might even be seen as an alternative to more traditional Christian faith and belief.[11] Most religious persons, however, will come to understand transcendent reality within their particular traditions and in most cases traditions they have inherited as a result of accidents of birth. Reli-

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[10] See my essay, "An Approach to Religious Pluralism," in *Being and Truth: Essays in Honour of John Macquarrie*, ed. Alistair Kee and Eugene T. Long (London: SCM Press, 1986).

[11] For further discussion of philosophical faith, see my *Jaspers and Bultmann: A dialogue between philosophy and theology in the existentialist tradition* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1968).

gious histories and traditions might be said to both make possible and set limits to human efforts to give expression to a more universal account of existence and ultimate reality. Without institutions, moral codes and beliefs, religious communities have little significant content. Yet, religious communities are constantly at risk for degenerating into institutions that forget their historicity and their role in calling persons to their fullest selfhood in relation to others, at risk for replacing religious faith with institutional belief that emphasizes orthodoxy more than the call of religious faith to ultimate reality and human flourishing. In the case of Christianity, for example, traditional belief may become an idol or ideology separated from the encounter with persons who are other by way of tradition, religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. In such cases religious faith has more to do with authoritarian belief and less to do with faith as trust in and the transformation of self in relation to divine reality and others. In the Christian tradition the liberation of self for others is understood in terms of divine grace and the love of Christ, but the goal of persons living together in agreement or struggle in such a way as to be free for self and others is a goal that may be shared with persons of other religious and non-religious traditions.

Although religious communities may share much in common with societies, as discussed in the second part of this essay, they should not be confused with societies. Human transcending and flourishing, as we have described them, depend upon a kind of faith or trust in the future, a kind of confidence or hope that reality makes sense. In religious communities, however, this basic confidence or trust is rooted in reality that transcends the particular histories and traditions of societies and even the particular religious histories and traditions in which ultimate reality is experienced and comes to expression. In other words, religious communities are distinct in being grounded in transcendent reality that calls the self beyond the limits of historical societies understood in terms of law and justice and towards a universal community of friendship, a community of persons radically transformed in such a way as to be free for self in relation with others. In this sense the intentions of religious communities share something in common with what we have called more intimate communities. However, the goal of human flourishing in religious communities in which persons in relation to transcendent reality are called to relate freely and openly with others cannot without contradiction be authoritatively imposed upon societies. Societies have the important role of adjudicating and balancing the claims of the diversity of persons who may or may not share the

moral or religious beliefs of particular religious communities. Here, I agree with Keith Ward, that religious communities that have the goal of a universal community of friendship will have to encourage this while recognizing or being open to the diversity of persons in society, both religious and non-religious.[12]

Although religious communities often seem to be part of the problem rather than the solution, the function and duty of religious communities rooted in transcendent reality should be that of opposing injustice and oppression and encouraging the positive intentions of the personal beyond the minimal level of fairness and justice found in societies, pointing ultimately to a universal community of persons in relation. As suggested above, however, religious communities cannot authoritatively impose such a universal community of friendship upon others without contradicting the idea of community. Nor can they realistically engage in sheer optimism or utopianism, a blind faith that all works out for the best which ignores the painful checks to hope. Religious communities may, however, find in their hope for and encouragement of a fuller humanity and a flourishing of persons common ground with other religious and humanistic communities.[13]

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SUMMARY

This article explores the topic of persons, community and human diversity. Tracing the roots of the western conception of persons to the Greek and Christian traditions, the author develops a conception of persons as agents and as free and flourishing in mutuality with other persons. Arguing that persons are both individual and social, the author considers persons in intimate communities, societies and religious communities. He argues that seeking to live in relation to others in ways that enable self and other to flourish provides an ontological ground for human behavior that is presupposed in our particular ethical traditions and provides a moral basis for human behavior that may be shared by diverse religious and non-religious persons.

KEYWORDS: person, freedom, community, diversity, ethics, law, justice, tradition.

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[12] Keith Ward, *Religion and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 237ff.
[13] I much appreciate comments made on an early draft of this essay by Jeremiah Hackett, James Mclachlan, William Power and Jerald Wallulis.