

4-1-1998

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Recommended Citation

Goizueta, Roberto S. (1998) "Responses to Hollenbach: The Common Good and the Marginalized," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 13, Article 6.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol13/iss1/6>



The Common Good and the Marginalized

ROBERTO S. GOIZUETA

At the threshold the third millennium, no single issue is more critical to the future of the Catholic university and the Catholic Church in the United States than that of reconciling our Catholic identities with the demands and responsibilities represented by an increasingly pluralistic social context. More specifically, the challenge before us is that of developing institutions that will affirm the value of diversity as a precondition for rather than an obstacle to authentic community as this is understood in the Catholic tradition. Our ability to confront this challenge is made more difficult by the fact that, in the particular context of the United States, Catholics are tempted to assume—with the society at large—that the problem of pluralism was already solved two hundred years ago with the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, particularly the Bill of Rights. Consequently, contemporary experiences of social conflict and fragmentation have, to some extent at least, caught us unawares and unprepared.

In his stimulating essay, David Hollenbach traces the roots of this conflict and fragmentation to the inade-

quate understanding of pluralism underlying the origins of modern Western societies, especially the United States. He describes how the so-called “postmodern” condition, characterized by a radical diversity, represents a logical evolution of the modern identification of pluralism with tolerance. In turn, this very identification undermines the possibility of an authentic pluralism, that is, a pluralism wherein differences can actually “make a difference” in society. Hollenbach then suggests that the Catholic tradition of the common good offers important resources for promoting such an authentic pluralism.

As a Catholic theologian and a United States Latino, I find Professor Hollenbach’s analysis both insightful and persuasive. If the voices of Hispanics in the United States remain marginalized in our society, Church, and academy, it is not only because those voices have not been heard, but also because, even when heard, they

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have not been allowed to make a difference in the larger conversations. The “appeal to the virtue of tolerance” as sufficient for ensuring inclusiveness and diversity effectively neutralizes the voices of United States Latinos/as and other historically marginalized communities. Whatever the outward appearances, the logic of such an appeal reinforces marginalization for four reasons:

- 1) ethical judgments are relegated to the privacy of the individual conscience, thereby precluding all public discussion about a *common* good;
- 2) the radical relativism resulting from the privatization of ethical judgments precludes the possibility of adjudicating between competing ethical claims (since to do so would require some common criteria against which to evaluate those claims);
- 3) the impossibility of adjudicating between competing claims precludes, in turn, the possibility of making a *preferential* option for the poor; and
- 4) thus, the voice of the marginalized person is “heard” as simply one among many others, unable to make any normative claims, e.g., in the name of justice or the common good.

As Professor Hollenbach notes, the Catholic notion of the common good presupposes a fundamental interdependence among all human beings and, indeed, all creation, an interdependence that calls for an ethic of solidarity. If the “common good” and “solidarity” are not to remain mere abstractions, however, these must themselves be understood in the light of the preferential option for the poor. Those persons and groups excluded from participating in the human community are the ones who *can best judge whether*, in fact, we have achieved a truly inclusive, pluralistic community that reflects the *common good*. In the words of Professor Hollenbach, “the extent of their suffering shows how far we are from being a community of persons.” What gives the marginalized greater insight into the common good is not their moral qualities, but their social location, their vantage point: “The poor merit preferential attention, whatever may be the moral or spiritual situation in which they find themselves. Made in the image and likeness of God to be his children, this image is dimmed and even defiled. That is why God takes on their defense and loves them” (*Puebla Document*, sec. 1142). Those persons whose dignity as children of God continues to be denied are in the *best* position to judge whether, or to what extent, our social, religious, or educational institutions truly promote the common good.

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The *common* good, therefore, cannot be achieved unless and until preference is given to a *particular* good, namely, the good of the marginalized. As Professor Hollenbach suggests, justice is a “prerequisite for a good that is common.” And a prerequisite for justice is a preferential option for the poor, the marginalized. Far from promoting conflict or divisiveness, such a preference is a precondition for an authentic, pluralistic community which affirms the dignity of all peoples. The failure of the “appeal to tolerance,” therefore, is not only that it precludes any discussion about a common good, or that it blinds us to the need for human solidarity, but also that it defines all preference as *ipso facto* intolerable and unjust. Consequently, even when the “common good” and “solidarity” are discussed in the United States context (e.g., among U.S. Catholics), these concepts themselves can too easily be reduced to a mere appeal for tolerance.

Finally, in adumbrating the implications of his analysis for education, Hollenbach argues that universities must be committed to both an intellectual solidarity, which involves a “willingness to take other persons seriously enough to engage them in conversation and debate about what makes life worth living, including what will make for the good of the polis,” and a social solidarity, which “opens the minds of the students and faculty of the university to the reality of human suffering.” These two dimensions of solidarity are mutually implicit.

As Hollenbach notes, among the deleterious consequences of the identification of pluralism with mere tolerance has been the disintegration of reasoned public discourse. Such discourse would presuppose the possibility, at least, of discovering some common values, language, and criteria of rationality—a possibility rejected *a priori* by the modern or Rawlsian appeal to tolerance. I would suggest, further, that the victims of the disintegration of public discourse have been, above all, the marginalized groups in our society.

By denying the possibility of a “positive engagement with the other through both listening and speaking,” the appeal to tolerance effectively denies the marginalized the power to engage *critically* the dominant groups. Since criticism is itself a form of “positive engagement” that presupposes a common discourse, the Rawlsian appeal to tolerance immunizes the dominant social groups from any criticism. A call for justice can be dismissed as one opinion among many others, to be “heard” and tolerated but, at the same time, prohibited *a priori* from making any claim on the others. In short,

where diversity and inclusivity are defined by mere tolerance, marginalization (i.e., intolerance) will be reinforced even as existing inequalities are hidden beneath an appearance of “pluralism.” Thus, the opposite of the Rawlsian appeal to tolerance is not intolerance, but precisely a “positive engagement with the other through both listening and speaking.”

To the extent that United States universities understand their mission as exclusively passive, that is, as merely creating an arena wherein non-interference is the only explicit criterion governing intellectual and social life, the voices of United States Latinos/as, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and women will remain marginalized—even when they are “represented” on campuses. Those voices will be allowed to speak to one another, but they will be unable to engage critically the dominant voices in the academy. Only if normative claims about the *common* good are *possible* are justice and community possible. The possibility of preferring some points of view over others is not a threat to pluralism but its precondition. The preferential option for the poor—in both its social and intellectual dimensions—is a precondition for achieving the common good.