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# The Search for Commonality in a Diverse World

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*To be a Christian feminist is to be deluded For a woman to remain in the Catholic Church is akin to a black person being in the Ku-Klux-Klan.*

*Mary Daly*

*Despite all our differences in political and philosophical views, in ideals and values, we must remember one thing: we are all keepers of the flame of life handed down to us by earlier generations.*

*Mikhail Gorbachev*

## Section I

I was in London last year during the elections. At that time, the English government was in the process of denying a petition of the Irish people in England to be classified officially as a minority and thus to be given the same access to the several privileges accorded persons more acknowledgedly different from the British majority as the peoples from Jamaica and India. A few days later, I met with theologians in Belfast who were struggling to rid their understanding of Christianity from any essential connection to the partisan histories and cultures of the warring factions of that troubled land.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, I visited with cousins in the south of Ireland who had never questioned their identification with either a narrow strip of earth in the midlands of Ireland or with just one of the partisan versions of the Christian message fueling the war to their north. Back in the United States, the value of the seemingly provincial outlook of my cousins was echoed by Native American philosopher Vine Deloria, who attacked the quest for universal

meaning and defended tribal meanings ultimately rooted in land and history as the sole source of vitality in religions and philosophies.

The issues underlying the dynamics of Celtic and Native American societies are echoed in many quarters. The concern of the Irish theologians to evolve a more civilizing religion is paralleled in Gorbachev's reconciliatory speech in 1985 to the French parliament, quoted above, in which capitalist and socialist societies were urged "to rise above our differences,"<sup>2</sup> as it is in Jesse Jackson's efforts to build coalitions among hitherto distant subcultures. In the other direction, the separatist or decentralizing resistance to "false universalism" of the Irish in Britain or of Native Americans is echoed in the feminist critique of patriarchal Christianity, the extent of which is sampled in the above quotation from Mary Daly,<sup>3</sup> and in the countless attempts within our institutions, our nations, and our world to gain the space and liberty to articulate the dignity of a new and different version of the human story. The issues were eloquently stated in John McDermott's ground-clearing essay "The Community of Experience and Religious Metaphors."

[W]e come to the most crucial question in the problems of belief and modern [men and women], namely: are we able to believe together as a community without suppressing our differences? And can this belief have truly religious significance for us, that is open us to the endowed and sacred quality of all that is, while not yet offering a hierarchy of meanings, fixed or holy things which divide us from our (brothers and sisters)? Can we actually celebrate this belief? Celebrate it in the way of historical religion, that is liturgically, or in the way of contemporary protest movements, with song and ritual born of adversity? Or is it to remain an abstract goal, a containment keeping us from destroying each other but without building new symbols of human solidarity and affection?<sup>4</sup>

The present essay is a reflection in a Deweyan vein on the search for commonality in an increasingly diverse world. I seek to clarify the nature of that search, to distinguish it from both sentimental and illiberal quests for a less complex and more manageable world, and to reflect within the framework of democratic values on what it makes sense to do and not to do in that search.

## Section II

I begin with three preliminary observations of a general sort. The first observation, the most abstract of the paper, concerns the nature of commonality and diversity, or sameness and difference. Commonality or its opposite is not an objective property of two or more objects or groups or beliefs or belief-systems. Instead, it is a judgment that we make in assimilating two or more things for some particular purpose and in some particular context. Further, sets of belief that appear dissimilar in one context may appear virtually identical in another. Baptists and Catholics could be said to have extremely dissimilar spiritualities but seem in comparison with Judaism to share the most fundamental and animating beliefs. All three religions in comparison with secular humanism seem more similar than different in crucial respects; and yet Marxists and

Christians in Nicaragua find much in common and appear to the established order as part of a single conspiracy.<sup>5</sup>

This sort of contextual analysis, secondly, needs to be extended from the nature of assimilating and differentiating judgments to the value we attribute to commonality and diversity. In those parts of the world where our lives are characterizable as isolated and alienated, and in those global regions where nothing seems as pressing as agreement on nuclear disarmament or environmental endangerment or the senseless starvation of children, it is hard to resist believing that a commitment to community is unqualifiedly valuable and that only the selfish withhold such a commitment. It is easy, further, to believe that what is common is inherently more valuable and even more self-defining than what is diverse and unshared.

We will, in my judgment, make no progress in forging a concept of community appropriate to the contemporary world unless we abandon the notion that what is common is inherently more valuable than what is diverse. It is that assumption that has led many people to characterize the notion of community as essentially illiberal if not totalitarian. The messy truth is this: sometimes what is common is more important for some purposes than what is diverse, and sometimes the opposite is true. Moreover, even when the case seems strongest for the greater importance of what is held in common, it will often seem otherwise to other groups. The comparative noninvolvement of the minority populations of this country in the nuclear disarmament issue is a case in point.

The third observation, an implication of the previous two, might be described as the rationalist assumption about the importance of an articulated set of beliefs or doctrines in the generation and sustaining of community. Philosophers and theologians are understandably preoccupied with this dimension of communal life, but it is indeed only one dimension. In some contexts, e.g., the Husserl Society, a shared set of beliefs is necessary and perhaps nearly a sufficient condition for sustaining a viable community. In other contexts, shared beliefs may be at most a necessary condition for sustaining community. More complicatedly still, communities can be sustained with remarkable diversity of belief, and pressures toward unanimity of belief are not welcomed. Lastly, as an important instance of the two previous observations and of the overall role of ideas in history, one and the same articulation of what unites can be ignored for decades or centuries only to become in another period a revitalization of an ancient community or the generating insight of a new one. The rationalist assumption might be regarded as benign did it not detract attention from those actions that might indeed be helpful in generating perceptions of significant commonality in appropriate times and places.<sup>6</sup>

These observations suggest a clarification of what it is we are seeking — or ought to be seeking — as we pursue the emergence of greater commonality. First, under what conditions do commonalities come to be perceived by hitherto distant or dissimilar groups and judged by them to be more important than (or attractively compatible with) the always present diversities? Secondly, and as importantly, what if anything can or ought to be done in this or that circumstance to hasten the emergence of shared perceptions of significant commonality?<sup>7</sup>

### Section III

How did the Germans and the French come to see themselves as Europeans, or (almost as amazingly) how did Virginians and West Virginians come to see themselves as Americans? Even a rudimentary understanding of the conditions under which commonalities come to be perceived and judged to be more important than differences would require a full-length interdisciplinary study. Here, more for the sake of clarifying the nature of the inquiry than for answering the question, I mention but a few of the often neglected factors that are relevant in the formation and sustenance of the perception of significant commonality.

(1) *A common enemy.* Few things make our differences seem as insignificant as a threat from the outside. The unifying impact of war upon hitherto diverse societies has attracted the sustained attention of sociologists of community.<sup>8</sup> In a more recent example, Jesse Jackson's division of the world into the barracudas and the little fish enabled many white farmers to identify with other exploited people whom they had hitherto scorned.

(2) *The challenge of a cooperative adventure.* Given the opportunity to participate in a gripping adventure that requires our cooperation, our energies focus on the goal and only incidentally upon our differences. This insight underlaid the team-building efforts of Willi Unsoeld's "Outward Bound" program. Eric Hoffer, among others, called our attention to the extraordinary drop-off in energy and cooperation when the task turned from that of building an institution to that of maintaining it.

(3) *The intolerability of continuing the enmity.* All negotiators understand that the perception of differences will change over time as the consequences of rigidity mount. Peacemakers in Belfast elicit their greatest response following incidents that make it obvious that the violence will not end. Gorbachev hopes that capitalist and socialist societies have reached the point of intolerability.

(4) *The passage of time.* What Kuhn said about changes in the thinking of scientists applies to the thought patterns of many groups. If the source of continuing enmity has been removed, the children will feel less strongly about the difference for which their fathers fought.

This incomplete list of conditions under which perceptions of significant commonality emerge might provide a useful framework for a research agenda. More interestingly, perhaps, is the extent to which the list provides any guidance for action. The unifying impact of a common enemy has been used to manipulate whole populations into concerted action. Less destructively, the adventure of artificially created danger has been used to build at least temporary

communities based upon the need under those circumstances to trust one's companions. Two ethical constraints come immediately to mind when we begin to think about employing any of these insights. The first constraint is that we are committed to respecting the value of diversity. Secondly and relatedly, we are operating within the context of democratic values. Together the constraints amount to a prohibition--more or less absolute -- of manipulative techniques or solutions imposed without the consent of the diverse other.

Where does that leave us? In the hands of the gods, some will answer. Although acknowledging in the end some important extent to which the emergence of community, depends on factors other than our efforts, there is yet much that creative intelligence can contribute to the emergence of the perception of significant commonality. I list below three such contributions.

(1) *Intellectual, artistic, and political vision.* Despite the rationalist assumption described above, intellectuals, artists, and politicians frequently contribute to the perception of significant commonality in forging visions that challenge us to see ourselves as more like than unlike other groups. In the context of Northern Ireland, Daniel Martin and Ian Adamson have articulated broader reconciling identities for the warring factions: the former through Celtic spirituality that predates any version of Christianity,<sup>9</sup> the latter through the shared history and geographical uniqueness of the land of Ulster.<sup>10</sup> In the context of sectarian religion, Thomas Berry has bypassed sterile ecumenism in proposing in a Teilhardian vein that we view the universe itself as "the primary religious reality" and the diversity of religious experience not as a hindrance to religious goals but as an enrichment and a resource for sustaining the asymmetry and unbalance characteristic of life and creativity.<sup>11</sup> "The power of these visions, important as they are philosophically, theologically and even politically, are but one dimension, perhaps not even a necessary much less a sufficient dimension for many people, in effecting the emergence of widespread perceptions of significant commonality among hitherto distant or conflicting peoples."

(2) *Shared purposes.* We need not sit upon our hands waiting for some environmental catastrophe to engulf distant or warring parties. We can seek to identify interests that are: shared: not what ought to be shared, but which are de facto shared by the separate parties. In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants have cooperated in caring for the children of victims of the war. In many states of this country, majority and minority populations are cooperating in addressing a problem that threatens the survival of business, the university, and the minority populations: namely, the alarming nonretention rate of our students of color in secondary schools. For these purposes, we are in the same boat. Out of such cooperation may emerge fewer hard-edged conceptions of the separateness of our identities.

(3) *Creating conditions of reciprocity.* The problem of effecting a perception of significant commonality was addressed explicitly by Dewey for one specific context: namely, education. What he said is of course limited by that context, but it is nonetheless instructive. In a passage that I regard as the single most important insight about our quest for commonality, Dewey wrote: "Setting up conditions which stimulate certain visible and tangible ways of acting is the first step. Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step. As soon as he is possessed by the emotional attitude of a group, he will be alert to recognize the special ends at which it aims and the means employed to secure success. His beliefs and ideas, in other words, will take a form similar to those of others in the group."<sup>12</sup>

Two important suggestions of this passage deserve our attention.

(1) Obviously, it has to be adapted to be relevant to nonclassroom situations. In trying to effect a common political agenda regarding nuclear disarmament, those who are already committed to the importance of that issue are not in the relationship of teacher to child with respect to those who regard the unemployment of Catholics in Northern Ireland or apartheid in South Africa as the most important issue. But in this situation and in the educational context, there is a disparate set of evaluations that, according to Dewey, can be made similar (though not necessarily preserving the preexisting valuations of either party) to the extent that conditions are established that effect what Dewey refers to as "reciprocity of interests."<sup>13</sup> The claim, of course, is not that a reciprocity of interests preexists but that if conditions are established that confer the status of partner on the diverse other, then in time they will emerge a framework of shared beliefs and valuations (within which even greater diversity might still flourish). What it means to confer the status of partner will vary greatly from the context of the classroom to international relations to male-female relations in churches and temples. What is important in any of these efforts to secure a perception of significant commonality is a movement away from a monological or hierarchical transmission of information and away as well from mere dialogue toward the actual creation of the material conditions of genuine partnership. This will allow the participants in the associated activity to perceive themselves as having a significant voice and stake in defining a common future.<sup>14</sup>

(2) For this transformation of the watch for a common faith, of the quest for shared perceptions of significant commonality, to be accepted, at least two additional issues of a profound sort would have to be faced. The most obvious would be the willingness of those in positions of power and authority to create with appropriate haste, conditions of genuine partnership for those currently in excluded or subordinate positions. The second, a function of the nature of one's

vision of the future, would be the question of whom to include in the associated activities. The interplay of power and vision is exemplified in Denis Goulet's perhaps generalizable reflections on First World-Third World relations.

"Wisdom for our times can only emerge from creative dialogue-conducted in the mode of reciprocity-between 'old' and 'new' societies. Such reciprocity can only be achieved if all patterns of domination, cultural no less than economic, are abolished."<sup>15</sup>

#### Section IV

In the rephrasing of the search for commonality, we asked above, what if anything can or ought to be done in this or that circumstance to hasten the emergence of shared perceptions of significant commonality? We have addressed the question of what could be done. Were we to ignore the question of what ought to be done, we would be contributing to the perpetuation of the tendency to regard what is common as more important than what is diverse or separate.

Those who have participated in any attempt to define a new identity or a new movement or a new society recognize the need for isolation from at least the dominating other and perhaps from all but those of an extreme like-mindedness. In that isolation, one defines a different agenda and gains support and time and opportunities to create without the distraction of the other's incomprehension, impatience, curiosity, and judgment. The isolation is, at least temporarily, a source of creativity and vitality. Despite the importance in many contexts of what we all share as human beings, or as believers in one or another form of divine presence, there is a more pressing and equally religious imperative, "Women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and eucharistic famine. They can no longer nurture their souls in alienating words that ignore or systematically deny their existence. They are starved for the words of life, for symbolic forms that fully and wholeheartedly affirm their personhood and speak truth about the evils of sexism and the possibilities of a future beyond patriarchy. They desperately need primary communities that nurture their journey into wholeness, rather than constantly negating and thwarting it."<sup>16</sup>

In a democratic society, the search for commonality must celebrate-not just tolerate-separate or newly separating "primary communities." They are to be encouraged, not only as a political right but, more importantly, in the sense that our commonality will eventually be enriched by their exploration. There are excesses to be avoided, as Dewey noted, particularly those that threaten the existence of other communities-in that sense, the recognition of our abstract commonality remains important-and those that might yield a systematic or long-term isolation from other communities.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, no matter how burning the thirst for commonality or reconciliation, no matter how great the need for concerted action, once those who are searching within the context of democratic values for commonality have exhausted creative options such as those listed above,

it ought to be accepted and even celebrated that the time is not yet ripe, And in that limited sense, the matter is not entirely in our hands.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Inter-Church Group on Faith and Politics, *Choose Life: Christian Responses to the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Belfast: Privately published, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> William F. Brazier and Joel S. Hellman, "Gorbachev's New World View," *Social Policy* 18 (no. 1, summer, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Surlis, "Third International Congress on Women," Report on the Third International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Dublin, July 6-10, 1987, *The Ecumenist* (vol. 26, no. 3, March-April, 1988): 39.

<sup>4</sup> John McDermott, "The Community of Experience and Religious Metaphors," *The Culture of Experience* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), pp. 70-71.

<sup>5</sup> This analysis of judgments of commonality and diversity was, of course, generalized by Wittgenstein. The most thorough exploration of its consequences is in a much neglected book, Rupert Crawshay-Williams's *Methods and Criteria of Reasoning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957). In his chapter "Empirical Criteria," he concludes on p. 23, "if two qualities are correctly called the same, this in itself is not sufficient ground for concluding that they cannot be correctly called different (and vice versa)."

<sup>6</sup> An understanding of a more limited role of shared faith seems to be emerging in recent literature on the history of Christianity and on contemporary ecumenism. Though the New Testament characterized Jesus Christ as "the same yesterday and today and forever" (*Epistle to the Hebrews* 13:8), Jaroslav Pelikan's intellectual and cultural history of Christianity concludes that "it is not sameness but kaleidoscopic variety that is its most conspicuous feature" (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries* [New York: Harper and Row, 1985, p. 2). Even within a limited historical period, that diversity of belief is obvious: it was obvious to Abelard in the twelfth century and it is obvious today, even within a single sect of Christianity. That diversity of belief has led some theologians to abandon a belief in anything approaching the essence of Christianity and to reconceive the basis of Christian community in terms of allegedly shared ethical goals (Ronald F. Marshall, "Exploring Christian Unity," *The Ecumenist* [vol. 26, no. 3, March-April, 1988]: 33-34). Others locate the origins of community in a wider socio-historical and psychological web in which faith plays a surprisingly nonmajor role.

Faith bonds with the senses. As philosopher Ernest Gellner says, "Traditional cultures smell." They may smell of incense or garlic, the must of sweeping compound in churches or the coffee pot perking during an overlong sermon before social hour. Faith, no matter what the purists say, comes as a package deal. It is pan of a life fired point-blank at believers. I, for one, admit that a visit to a nearly empty sanctuary where an organist is practicing on a Saturday afternoon does more for building my faith than does reading systematic theology. If so, I am recognizing that faith cows along with connotations and supports. I will not nurture these elements if I am blurred and blended into a nondescript communion.

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(Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church* [New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1981], p. 78.)

<sup>7</sup> This descriptive or historical rephrasing of the question ought not to be interpreted as an elimination of the normative dimension of a philosophy of community. It is merely a first step. The normative dimension, obvious even in Dewey, with whom this rephrasing is most compatible, reenters as we attempt to shape responses in a certain value-direction.

The rephrasing recalls historian David Russo's critique of nondescriptive and noninterdisciplinary approaches to the study of community. With a touch of self-indulgence he wrote:

What makes all these efforts at definition by sociologists like Konig and theologian-philosophers like Buber ultimately unsatisfactory is the failure of these individuals to be good historians as well. Their attempts to grasp the essential nature of community are excessively schematic. Just as the meaning of the term community has changed, over the centuries of western history, so too have the actual shape and substance of the communities themselves changed. Sociologists, in their attempt to understand contemporary society, are not sufficiently aware of the long, varied life of humanity in villages, cities, and nations to make definitions that stand the test of time. Philosophers are too concerned with the ultimate meaning of community to be sufficiently aware of the complicated and variegated shape of their subject when it is examined in the matrix of actual human experience.

This means that historians are-- theoretically at least -- in the best position to comment on the meanings of community through human history. As to definition, one is tempted to urge that students of community allow the people whom they study to say what a community is. The people who live in them have always had their own perception of what communities are. This suggestion is contrary to much of twentieth-century philosophy, as well as social and physical scientific theorizing which has placed a great deal of emphasis on linguistic precision. But it is by no means obvious whether the lack of consensus--and precision-- that frequently follows such efforts leaves us in a better position than we were in when we relied upon the vague, imprecise terms evolved in common parlance.

(David J. Russo, *Families and Communities* [Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1974], pp. 11-12.)

<sup>8</sup> Robert Nisbet, *The Social Philosophers* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1973).

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Martin, "Celtic Spirituality: Towards a United-Separate Ireland" (unpublished manuscript, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Ian Adamson, *The Identity of Ulster: The Land, the Language, and the People* (Belfast: Pretani Press, 1982), p. 108.

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Adamson advanced a concept of community akin to the land-based tribalism of Native Americans. Quoting the nineteenth-century Ulster poet Samuel Ferguson, he urged the writing of a history so that "men may feel that we are not come into the world strangers, but members of a family long planted in the land before them, giving reverence to the place and institutions of their forefathers and by that common sentiment strengthening the social bond among one another."

<sup>11</sup> Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, eds., *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology* (Connecticut: Twenty-third Pub., 1987), pp. 35-37.

<sup>12</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> 13. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> One possible application of Dewey's insight to the political realm is given in Michael Ignatieff's recent book, *The Needs of Strangers*. The author argues forcefully for the importance of our recognizing and basing action upon a common human nature. He judges, however, that modernity has ushered in an insatiability of desires and with it a predisposition to identify ourselves with our differences instead of our commonality. He concludes with a suggestion in the spirit of Rousseau, quoted here solely to illustrate the perceived interaction in a noneducational context between changed conditions and perceptions of commonality.

Millions of people have perished since 1945 in the wars, revolutions and civil strife safely conducted under the umbrella of a nuclear peace.... Most of this dying has been in the name of freedom, in the name of liberation from a colonial, tribal, religious or racial oppressor. It is a waste of breath to press the claims of common human identity on men and women prepared to die in defense of their claims of difference. There will be no end to the dying and no time for the claim of nor common species being. until each people is safe within its borders with a sovereignty which makes them masters of their needs. Only when difference has its home, when the need for belonging in all its murderous intensity has been assuaged, can our common identity begin to find its voice.

(Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* [New York: Viking-Penguin Books, 1985], p. 131.)

<sup>15</sup> 15, Denis Goulet, "A Summary Statement:" *Review of Social Economy* (September, 1968): v- 120

<sup>16</sup> 16. Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Women-Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 38.

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<sup>17</sup> Although Dewey did not specifically address the phenomenon of a separating community, he did indeed address the phenomenon of long-term separateness. He employed two criteria for evaluating communities, both functions of his primary concern with growth. The first criterion was the number and variety of the interests consciously shared by the group. The second, more relevant to the concerns of this paper, was the fullness and freedom of the interplay with other communities. "An undesirable society ... is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience" (Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 99). When full and free interplay with other communities is absent, according to Dewey, an inward orientation develops that turns the prevailing purpose of the community toward "the protection of what it has got instead of reorganizations and progress toward wider relationships" (Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 86).