Chapter 9
Civilian Empowerment: A Theological Inquiry

9.1   Introduction

The power to change the direction of unsustainable trends resides, at least in democratic nations, resides in the realm of the civic—a space created by persons recognizing their shared humanity as a basis for dealing with their social estrangements. That's not the case, of course, in nations governed by dictators or kings. Even in democratic governments, however, citizens must choose between military force and civic power. Military force can protect the civic, but not empower it. That takes civic power, and civic power arises through the collaboration of those who have access to resources and those who need them, or between citizens and civilians. In fact, civilians must be empowered in order for citizens to collaborate with them.

By definitions, civilians have the right to protection from undue harm, but not the means to protect themselves. This is certainly true of civilians in refugee camps who have fled war zones with nothing more than they can carry. Today, there are around 80 million refugees in the world, or about 1% of the global population. We also use the term to refer to people dependent on the protection of police and other government agencies that serve them. Civilians are vulnerable, and rely on the rule of law, when there are laws to protect them. This does not mean, however, that they are powerless. Their power is not the power of the gun or of the terrorist. It is a different kind of power, and the purpose of this Chapter is to engage in a theological inquiry into its character.

Theology is about god or the gods, and this theological inquiry is about the gods as sources of power. Because civilians are vulnerable—not fighters or warriors—they may be tempted to find or to create gods to protect them. After all, who has more power than the gods? In a sense, isn't that the very essence of a god—to have powers that humans do not? If that is true, theology can be seen as a study of power. Since civilians are certainly interested in the power to change things, or to prevent things from changing, a theology for civilians would search for those gods in the different

parts of our interpretive framework—the Earth, our humanity, the social and the civic—that might empower such change.

9.2   A Theology of Civilian Empowerment

During my Ph.D. studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley (in theology and rhetoric), I learned from the New Testament scholar and theologian, Edward Hobbs, that the word "God" for the early Hebrews was not some guy in the sky, but rather an exclamation of the experience of freedom from Egyptian slavery. "God" was not some entity that lead them out of Egypt, in other words, but rather the experience of getting out of Egypt. It was like: "O God, we escaped and now are free." I know this may seem a bit unusual, partly because Western religions have been strongly influenced by the Greek thought of a metaphysical force separate from human affairs, or what Aristotle called the "unmoved mover."

One might think of the difference between seeing "god" as a reference to particular human experiences and seeing "god" as some existing entity as the difference between a window and a mirror. The window approach sees theology as opening a window so one can see god, then worship and obey, and so on. The mirror approach sees theology as studying the gods to see our own human possibilities. There are multiple ways of approaching theology, of course, but a theology that focuses on those human experiences that theologians interpret as mirroring our human capacity seems especially appropriate for civilians.

My Ph.D. dissertation, *The Interpreter's Audience*, was aligned more with the mirror approach. It explored the role of an interpreter's audience or community in the process of interpreting the ancient Bible to them. I proposed that the fears and hopes of one's audience could help an interpreter know what the Bible might mean for them. I assumed that they were looking for meaning in their world, not the world of ancient Palestine. As I continued my studies and reflections on these topics, the enduring challenge has been to create the conditions that empower those who understand the contemporary possibilities for human fulfillment and maturity.

For the most part, the Christian theology I studied was composed within the triadic framework of Indo-European languages. This triadic formula leaves out of its vision, for the most part, the life of the Earth or our common ground: the ground that turns into mud when it rains, and dust when it doesn't. When I look back at my theological education, and even my own research, it's clear that European/American Christianity mostly ignored the American indigenous tradition of seeing the Earth as sacred. A 4-part interpretive framework of the Earth, our humanity, the social and the civic allows us to remedy this omission. Before we turn to the different elements of this framework to explore how they invite us to talk about the gods (about power). let's look at the roots of the relationship between Western religions and nature.

9.3   Western Religion and Nature

In the West, the three great religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—spring from the victory of the patriarchal, nomadic Hebrew tribes over the agricultural, matriarchal cultures of the settled communities of Canaan. The contrasts between the Canaanites and the Hebrews were stark. The Canaanites practiced agriculture and worshipped multiple gods and goddesses through fertility festivals and rituals. The Hebrew tribes were nomadic shepherds who worshiped Jehovah, or Yahweh, a single male god. Whereas the Canaanites found vitality in the natural world, the Hebrews found vitality in the story of their relationship with their god. The Earth for them, was something to subdue and conquer. Well, the West has succeeded beyond its wildest hopes. It has not only subdued the Earth. It is now smothering it.

Western culture still lives with this dominance of the male principle of control (or protection) over the female principle of fertility (or providing). Although there have been many variations and oppositions to it throughout Western history, the patriarchal tradition continues to foster the view of nature and "land" as something at our disposal, for our use. It just seems "natural" to treat the Earth as property. If we examine how most communities have treated the Earth, however, this view is quite unnatural. For many peoples, the Earth was seen as sacred and their gods were gods of the earth.

9.3.1   The Gods of the Earth

Many indigenous people view the Earth as sacred. Mother Earth provides for them, accepts their dead, and receives their gratitude. Viewing the Earth as sacred provides a sharp alternative to seeing it as something to be dominated and controlled or as an asset for commercial use. Indigenous people's message about the Earth's sacred character could call us to look again at our view of the significance of the Earth's life, and perhaps to develop a more reciprocal relationship between us.

So, where does the vitality of life on this Earth come from? Today, we know that all energy ultimately comes from the sun. If the sun burned out, the Earth would no longer sustain life. If we are looking for power, the "forces of nature" are hard to underestimate. The Earth's fecundity—its power to provide—deserves our respect and stewardship. Access to this energy happens not only through the extraction of its energy deposits, but also through participation and alignment with the patterns of its ecosystems.

One might suggest that we should all become nature worshipers. That would assume that what Max Weber called the "disenchantment of the world," can be reversed (1922) While that seems impossible, it is possible to recognize our experiences of the beauty, the power and the grandeur of the natural world. We can also recall Western beliefs about nature as God's creation. Such traditions certainly bring

us closer to the kind of attitude we need toward nature if we are to align ourselves with its survival rather than act as its enemy.

Our Earth belongs to a large galaxy, circles around the sun, and through various forms of homeostatic processes, such as photosynthesis, maintains its balance. The Earth's "story" not only includes its evolution, but also the evolution of plants and animals, including humans. The terminology we select to talk about the Earth—dirt, the planet, or "Mother Earth"—does make a difference. A piece of the planet could be a farm, a territory, a park or property. One way of evaluating our view of nature as impersonal or personal is to think about the difference between good luck and God's blessings.

9.3.2 Good Luck or God's Blessings

Say a tornado rips through your town and destroys your neighbor's house, but not yours. Do you "thank God" for saving your house, or do you say, "I am a lucky person"? If god gets credit for saving your house, then does he also get credit for destroying your neighbor's house? Maybe we feel grateful or thankful and we thank "god" because that's simply what people do. We may also want to express our feeling of humility that our house is still standing, and our neighbor's is not. If I win at bingo, I should feel lucky, Should I feel grateful? There is no "god" that gave us the winning bingo numbers. They were picked at random. If I win at bingo, I may certainly feel lucky, but to feel thankful to someone for something that was merely a matter of chance seems like a category mistake.

The idea of a climate of justice does assume a just relationship between people and the planet—justice as balanced relationships. The planet is certainly not a machine or simply a piece of property. It is a living vibrant system. It is beautiful, bountiful, and a home for all living things. Its storms and viruses are also destructive, even deadly, to human communities as we all know. We may use rich metaphors to make our experiences meaningful for us, but we should also be able to tell the difference between our social constructions and natural dynamics. This issue of finding the most appropriate language becomes ever more acute when we turn our attention to the second strand of our interpretive framework: our humanity.

9.4 Gods and our Humanity

Like other primates, our humanity lives with the Earth. We live by the Earth's air—the biosphere—breathing in and out of us. To properly understand this, we need to see the Earth as having its own value. The Earth, in other words, is itself a living, beautiful planet. It does not belong to us. We belong to it. Humans are one species among others, and yet, also distinct from others because of our special capacities. Many of those capacities arise from our participation in a language that allows us to

tell stories, develop concepts, reflect on things, and even to do things differently than they have been done in the past.

The neurobiologist, Antonio Damasio, provides evidence that we witness our own body's purposeful vitality (2010, p. 22). This seems to entail a basic human dignity. We experience this vitality sometime after birth, after we are breathed into and begin to participate in the life of the biosphere. We then enter and develop as persons in a series of on-going conversations that provide the social patterns and stories that give our life meaning. For most peoples, these stories and patterns have included gods. Some of the stories or myths follow patterns such as the pattern of fall and redemption, a journey from innocence to wisdom, or a pattern of leaving and returning home. These patterns belong to different social worlds. Any newborn has the capacity to participate in any one of them. There are certainly vastly different social worlds with different assumptions about human nature.

Neurobiology, of course, also exists in a social world created in part by scientific inquiry about body/brain/mind dynamics. Still, it describes our humanity as essentially alive and well. Some theologians may wonder if neurobiology is overlooking something. What about a person's insecurity and incompleteness without a god? Don't we need something beyond human vulnerabilities, without our flaws and limits, to protect and guide us, whether we call it god or superman? Isn't our humanity incomplete without some spiritual element? What about the millions of civilians who have suffered the horrors of war and neglect? Has neurobiology missed the presence of evil or wickedness?

One way to check out our view of evil is to examine our treatment of young children.. We not only have different theories, but also different cultures in which adults have different ways of raising children. An old guideline for Western cultures has been: "Spare the rod and spoil the child." If you see the child as "willful," then it may seem quite logical to "break" their will. One might also conclude that since my parents spanked me, and I turned out OK, I should also hit my children. Recent studies have provided evidence that indeed spanking is harmful to children (Caren 2018). Still, whether one takes these studies seriously, of course, depends on one's view of human nature.

Children are certainly "bundles of energy" and as they go through the different stages of life, their energies change. The changes, however, largely depend on our primary attachment relationships and the stories that create our social worlds. Some people have not experienced secure attachments in their early life and must live with various degrees of insecurity and anxiety, which may incline them toward evil actions. Still, our shared humanity is not something to be despised or feared but rather something to be relied on. Our social worlds are multilayered and complicated. There are instances of "crimes against humanity," but our humanity is not the origin of such crimes. They belong to the social trends that have been created and maintained by communication and behavior patterns.

Since we almost always experience our shared humanity in some social clothing, our understanding of the relationship between the gods and our social life brings us closer to how the power of gods figure in our everyday lives.

9.5   Gods and the Social

In our interpretive framework, religious language—the language of the gods—would belong to the social as all languages do. If you belong to a social world that gives credence to a sacred language or sacred words, then this probably makes sense to you. If you live in a different social world, it may seem like word magic. All languages, even the language of theology, are social creations. This means that all the gods, even "universal" gods, are social gods. They belong to some social world, including those social worlds that treat them as universal.

One could argue, of course, that since one can translate the meaning of a saying from one language to another, there are universal meanings that are only imperfectly expressed in any social language. Could be. There are certainly experiences that seem universal. Giving birth, raising children, fearing harm, grieving, hoping, and so on. These seem like basic human experiences that involve deep emotions and feelings. These experiences, however, belong to the emotions and feelings of the body. It's like laughing and crying—that's what human bodies do. What stimulates laughing and crying, as you know, can be quite different in different social cultures. So, whether there are universal experiences of god or not seems like an open question, because these experiences are always expressed in some particular language, and all languages are social.

Missionaries, of course, tend to overlook the social limits of religious language. They claim that their gods are superior to other gods, and it usually follows that they believe that their social worlds are superior to other social worlds. A missionary's social world will deeply affect their message. The social world of individualism, private ownership, wealth accumulation, and philanthropy, for example, provide the conditions for the missionary activities of protestant churches in America, where success is measured by increases in membership and budget. This is not to say that the missionaries' intent is merely to "grow their business," but only that the capitalistic social world conditions the ways in which the church maintains its existence. There seems no better expression of this than the advice of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley: "Make all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can." What he did not say, of course, is to "Spend all you can" and yet, in a social world dependent on an economics of consumption, it makes sense to add this command to the other three.

So, what about the relationship between these religious social worlds and civilians? International Humanitarian Law today recognizes civilians without any reference to the gods. At the same time, civilians belong to some social world with its specific language, customs, and religions. Still, while one's social world may recognize human dignity or perhaps deny or violate it, it does not create it. Human dignity resides in our experience of ourselves as purposeful living beings—as worthwhile. We are humans with dignity. How we move from this non-verbal awareness of ourselves to a reflective enjoyment of our human dignity does depend on the social relationships in which we live, and the power relationships they entail. So, the religious views of the gods should not be discarded, because their stories and

beliefs are about the powers that control the world. If we want to protect and even empower civilians, we need to know something about these powers and our access to them. It all depends on how we construe the relationships between the gods, religious institutions, and civilians. Let's look at two options, using the Christian idea of church as the religious institution.

9.6   Two Views of the Flow of GOD'S Power

How do civilians gain access to the powers they need to protect and provide for themselves? One answer is that the power of God is channeled through the church (or any other religious institution) and then the church fulfills its mission to share what it has received from God. It's a flow from God to the church to the world:

God → Church → Social Worlds

The key point is that the only way to know God's power—what God is doing—is through the church, or through the church's interpretation of its sacred text.

The other answer is that God is always, already in our social worlds, and the church has the task of exposing and celebrating God's work. In this case, the church, or any other religious institution, actually has a circular connection with social worlds. It is a witness of what God in doing in the world, which it expresses and interprets with its own perspective and language, and then it's interpretation makes God's action more accessible. This answer changes the direction of the arrows.

God → Social Worlds ↔ Church

In this answer, God does not belong to the church, or any religious institution, but rather belongs with those events and movements that reflect God's power in the world. If we accept this second answer to the question of the relationship between God, the church and our social worlds; the church, with its historical and conceptual resources, would have the task of helping us understand what God is doing in the world. This means that the church, or any religious organization, is not the place to know God; the place to know God is in the world. Or we could say that what the word "God" refers to is what "god" is doing in the world—what is happening in the world that appears as god-like. This changes the basic location of God's activity—from the church to the world. It also raises a serious question: how do we know what activities are God's activities? We could always be mistaken. Couldn't we? To examine this more carefully, I will draw on the work of two eminent theologians I studied with: Paul Lehmann and Edward Hobbs.

9.6.1   Paul Lehmann's Christian Ethics

In his book, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, Paul Lehmann writes that the question to answer is: "What is God doing to make and keep human life human?" (1963). This question fits with the second formula of the relationship between God, social worlds, and church, and it fits more with the mirror than the window type of theology. What did Lehmann mean with the phrase "make and keep human life human?" Human life, for Lehmann, is not limited to what one can observe from the perspective of neurobiology. Nor is it merely the social self. What Lehmann wants to "keep human" is what we could call, given the vocabulary of our interpretive framework, the social human or we could say, the person. The social human depicts the fact that our human existence always comes embedded in sets of social relations, language, and culture. Why do we need something to "make and keep" our human life human? Our humanity itself is already human. Still, we recognize our humanity and the humanity of others only in the realm of the social. So, what "makes and keeps" human life human is the social recognition of one's innate dignity, which is finally located in our purposeful living in secure attachment with others. To understand what Lehmann has in mind here, we need to follow his thinking.

Central to Lehmann's approach is the idea of the "Christian Context." For him it's the Christian context that sets forth the conditions for "making and keeping human life human." He defines this context as a "fellowship-creating reality of Christ's presence in the world" (p.49). To further define this reality of Christ's presence in the world, Lehman uses the Greek term for community or church: *koinonia*. In contrast to the institutional church, *koinonia* represents a living community in the world. In terms of the distinction between the church and social world, *koinonia* exists in the social world. This "church" for Lehmann is not the building or the believers attending a Sunday morning service. No, it is people participating in a "fellowship-creating reality" in the world. In conversations I had with Prof. Lehmann, he explained that even though the creation of a mature human community had always been possible, the Christian message now made this evident. Lehmann writes:

> A Christian ethic seeks to show that the human in us all can be rightly discerned and adhered to only in and through the reality of a climate of trust established by the divine humanity of Jesus Christ and the new humanity, however, incipient, of all men in Christ (p. 130).

His "climate of trust" seems close to a climate of justice. but could this climate only be established, as Lehmann seems to suggest, "by the divine humanity of Jesus Christ"? Was the Christian message necessary for the creation of this type of fellowship? Could ordinary civilians, who might belong to other religious traditions, also participate in such a creative occasion? In our conversations we discussed this question at length, and he was reluctant to agree that one could realize this type of community with a different vocabulary than that of the Christian tradition. Still, he did not reject the possibility. As he writes in his book:

> There is, of course, one marginal possibility, which must always be kept in mind. Indeed, it emerges precisely in the context and course of God's action in Christ in the fellowship of believers in the world.... God's action and God's freedom are never more plainly misunderstood than by those who suppose that God has acted and does act in a certain way and cannot, therefore, always also act in other ways (p. 72–73).

Let's put it this way: Does the Christian faith know something about being human that non-Christians cannot know, or does the Christian faith express something about being human that is possible for everyone? This is a serious question, especially when we want to repair relationships among different groups—including groups that have been harmed by institutional religion and racist church policies.

We can gain some knowledge of Lehmann's use of his theological ethics when he writes about desegregation: "Desegregation is a concrete human action which is a sign of God's action" (p. 152). Desegregation, in other words, was not merely a change in policy, but also a carrier of meaning—of making and keeping human life human—carried out by citizens, not necessarily by Christians. For Lehmann, desegregation signaled—through the legal changes in social relations among blacks and whites—the possibility of a fellowship creating activity. Lehmann suggests this is always a possibility:

> What is the living word? It is the verbal expression of the full complexity and totality of the existing, concrete situation. And what is ethical about the existing, concrete situation is that which holds it together. And what, it may be asked, holds the concrete situation together? The answer is: that which makes it possible for human beings to be open for each other and to one another (p. 130).

Is it "possible for human beings to be open for each other and to one another" in and between different social worlds? Does this power to do so reside in human relational capability? Can we meet one another as civilians, without our gods?

The Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, appears to have written about a similar type of community as Lehmann where participants can "be open for each other and to one another" in his discussion of genuine dialogue.

> There is genuine dialogue no matter whether spoken or silent—where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them (1993, p. 22).

Buber's most recognized phrase for such relationships is that of "I and Thou" a relationship in which persons recognized as living beings, rather than merely things (an "I and It" relationship).

The point here is that we have the capacity to call each other into a community of inclusion and fundamental equality.

In our conversations about the empowerment of civilians, what concepts we use does make a difference. Sometimes, however, the words that provide the opportunity for recognizing such possibilities come from unexpected sources. James Cone's book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, for example, encourages us to see the lynching tree as a contemporary Cross (2011). Could the meaning of lynching bring people together today as the meaning of the Cross had for others? Does lynching in America help us understand the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion? I think Paul Lehmann would have found this an intriguing question and would have invited us to look at different sources for developing an answer. The same is true for another theologian I had the privilege of studying with, Edward Hobbs, who used the Christian trinity to explore what it means to be human.

9.6.2 Edward Hobbs' Trinitarian Analysis

Prof. Hobbs not only had provocative ideas about the Hebrew use of the word "God," which I referred to earlier, but he has also interpreted the Christian trinity in such a way that it exposes some basic aspects of human relationships (1970, p. 32). For Hobbs, the Christian Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—refers to three basic human experiences. He relates the Father to our experience of limits. Hobbs believes that when one experiences one's limitation, the response, and this sounds a bit odd, is gratitude. How can the experience of limits result in gratitude? In contrast to Ernst Becker's view that the experience of limits elicits what he calls the "cosmic hero," who overcomes limits, Hobbs believes that the experience of limits elicits gratitude (1997). The idea here is that with the acknowledgement of one's limitations—vulnerabilities—comes an openness to entering into relationships with others, and to experience being recognized and accepted as one among others in the community. Gratitude comes from the experience of recognition and acceptance.

Remember the story of Adam and Eve. When Adam ate the fruit, he wanted to be like god. So, they were expelled from the Garden. A strange story about human relations, but a clear story about limitations. Adam is not a god, and if you like the story, neither are we. The story of the first person of the trinity—God the Father—refers to such experiences when we blow ourselves up bigger than life and then someone pokes our "bubble," and we acknowledge ourselves and are acknowledged by others, as one among others. Vulnerable civilians, of course, do not have the luxury of pretending they are gods. It's a disease that affects people of privilege who have split themselves off from the misery of others as well as their own vulnerability and pretend to live a life of unlimited possibilities.

The second person of the Trinity—the Son—refers to a somewhat different experience: the experience of exposure. Here something about us is revealed we wanted to conceal. The exposure occurs, for example, when a harm we have covered up is uncovered. Exposing the harm will reveal the wrong, but once this wrong is recognized, the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation arises. If we were to apply this approach to the violation of the humanity of Native Americans, the answer would be clear: expose the violation and repair it. The point is that we do have the power to do this.

The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit relates to the experience of encountering the needs of others, which results in meeting their needs. One does not have to believe in the Christian trinity to have these human experiences. In fact, the experience of overreaching and falling back on our heels, of encountering our failures and needing forgiveness, and of feeling a need to respond to the needs of others are fairly universal human experiences, at least for those of us living in modern Western cultures. Even if they are not universal human experiences, Hobbs' exploration of human experiences through the lens of the Christian Trinity demonstrates how religious texts and traditions can be interpreted in such a way that they help us locate the power to "make and keep human life human," to use

Lehmann's phrase. Although there are not any gods in the civic realm, the gods of different social worlds —different religious traditions—can help us understand the powers available to civilians.

9.7 Civilian Power

Years ago, when doing research for my book, *Working Ethics*, I discovered that two social economists had come up with very similar typologies of power (1990). One was Kenneth Boulding. He developed a triad: threat, exchange, and integration. Power based on threat said. "You do what I say, or I will harm you." Exchange power said. "If you do something for me, I will do something for you." And the power of integration said simply, "Let's do this together." (1990). The third type of power—the power of integration—seems similar to the power of community building that we saw earlier in Paul Lehmann's notion of what is keeping human like human.

The second political economist was Kenneth Galbraith, who had a more institutional and historical approach to his three types of power (1983). He wrote about the power of Kings or personality, the power of money or capitalists, and the power of organization. In a sense, Galbraith's power of personality paralleled Boulding's power of threat; the power of money paralleled the power of exchange; and the power of organization paralleled the power of integration. We could also see parallels among these three and the powers of the military, the market, and the power of the civic. Civilians do not have access to the powers of threat. Nor do they have much to exchange. So, the powers available to them are the powers of organization and integration.

As was said at the beginning of this Chapter, civilians are vulnerable, cannot protect themselves, and rely on the rule of law. Still, they are not powerless. They can organize, stand up and speak out, and hold government officials accountable. Jeffery Stout in his book, *Blessed are the Organized*, puts it this way:

> Democratic action aims to create a society in which even bosses, generals, and presidents are held accountable to the rest. Holders of high office will always have power at their disposal, but in a healthy democracy that power can be held in check. What holds it in check is itself a kind of power. Ordinary citizens, by relating wisely to each other and to elites, are able to influence and contest decisions made on high (2010, p. 92).

There are many different kinds of organized groups, of course, from the Tea Party, Patriot Boys, to Black Lives Matter. It's not just about making demands but making demands that respect human dignity and promote a climate of justice. One does not have to be a believer to learn from Edward Hobbs' analysis of the Christian trinity to recognize the importance of a group culture that is circumspect, open, and caring. The power of civilians is not the power to erase their vulnerability, but rather the power to persuade those with resources to honor their rights to protection and provisions, and in many cases, to persuade them to simply obey the law.

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