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**VIRTUES IN DIALOGUE: A RESPONSE TO  
NANCY E. SNOW AND ANDREW PETERSON  
ON CULTIVATING CIVIC FRIENDSHIP IN  
EDUCATION**

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## **Virtues in Dialogue: a Response to Nancy E. Snow and Andrew Peterson on Cultivating Civic Friendship in Education**

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First of all, I would like to congratulate the two speakers for their clear papers. I will respond to them from my own double professional involvement in these kind of reflections.

First of all, as a professor in fundamental theology, researching the relationship between Christian faith and contemporary context, and more precisely the way in which the contemporary post-Christian and post-secular European context challenges Christian faith and theology to recontextualize themselves, in order to regain theological legitimacy and contextual relevance.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, I will do so as the director-general of Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen, the network organization representing and sustaining more than 2500 catholic schools in Flanders: in that capacity I am engaged in developing and realizing a new catholic pedagogical project, appropriate to schools situated in a highly secularized and pluralized Flemish context: a project which goes under the name of the 'catholic dialogue school'.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to make three observations, each time leading to a question, in a response to the ideas of Nancy Snow and Andrew Peterson. Afterwards I will add a reflection on how the Catholic dialogue school is our own attempt to answer these questions.

(1) A first observation concerns the discussion whether and/or how the virtue of civic friendship can be relevant in today's context. Both speakers in this regard find their inspiration in Aristotle's concept of civic friendship. For Aristotle, civic friendship stands for a robust, thick, shared conception of a set of virtues, a way of life needed to live as individuals in a community. The problem with liberal democracies is that there are many such conceptions, and that living together involves a way to deal with that plurality. Civic friendship then might finally result in a set of thin liberal values (such as equality, mutual respect, toleration), ensuring the neutrality of the liberal democratic state. The issue

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<sup>1</sup> References: L. Boeve (2007), *God Interrupts History. Theology in a Time of Upheaval*. New York/London: Continuum; L. Boeve (2014), *Lyotard and Theology: Beyond the Christian Master Narrative of Love*, London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark; L. Boeve (2016), *Theology on the Crossroads of University, Church and Society: Dialogue, Difference and Catholic Identity*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

<sup>2</sup> References: Cf. L. Boeve (2017), *Belgium: New Thinking on Catholic Education Fifty Years after Vatican II*, in S. Whittle (ed.), *Vatican II and New Thinking about Catholic Education: The Impact and Legacy of Gravissimum Educationis*, Abingdon: Routledge, 55-71; L. Boeve (2019), "Faith in Dialogue. The Christian Voice in the Catholic Dialogue School", *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 11: 37-50; L. Boeve (2019), *Catholic Dialogue Schools under Construction: From Theory to Practice*, in *The Catholic School and the Intercultural and Interreligious Challenges: CEEC Acts of the International Symposium*, Brussels March 14-15, 142-155.

at hand, however, is that individuals, and I quote Nancy Snow “are free to respond differently towards others whose values differ deeply from theirs” (p. 4). That kind of potentially conflictuous plurality in effect often leads to incivility, polarization, exclusion, inequality, violence. The thin liberal-democratic conception of civic friendship, therefore, will not suffice to constitute a social fabric to cope with that kind of difference. We need a more robust conception of civic friendship, Snow argues, nurtured by intellectual and moral virtues, and an environment motivating us to embrace and cultivate such virtues.

However, I would add: at the same time we should not downplay the very plurality of ways of living and thinking, the difference and potential conflict involved in our current societies. Even a discussion about what we supposedly have in common might result in even more difference and plurality, misunderstanding and conflict. It is dangerous to presume a kind of common set of values underneath or beyond the differences of life styles, patterns of meaning, ideologies.

The question therefore runs as follows: *how to arrive at a more robust common set of values which enable to live a common life in difference, not despite that difference (undoing or overcoming it), but in fully respecting it, thus in the midst of difference?* And further: how then to educate our youngsters in it, not as a new way of life, adding to the plurality of ways of life, but as a kind accompanying set of values to be embraced and fostered within the very difference of ways of life: as something we discover as common in dealing, from our very different positions with the plurality and difference of the others.

(2) My second and third observation relate to Andrew Peterson’s distinction in ways to cultivate civic friendship in education (p. 10): a first more conceptual way (from concept to practice, so to say), and, a second, more engaged approach starting from what happens today in schools (thus the other way around: from practice to concept).

As regards the concept of civic friendship, and the virtues which are covered by it, one cannot but notice that both Snow and Peterson, ultimately refer to deeply relational concepts. Snow refers to concepts such as open-mindedness, provisional trust, taking the perspective of the other, charity (p. 5), “intellectual humility, forgiveness, sympathy (feeling sorrow for another), compassion (suffering with another) and the more robust form of perspective-taking of ‘empathy’, which cannot be only cognitive, but also emotional and is ‘feeling as the other feels’ (p. 6). Peterson, for his part, starts from a deep concern for the other: “doing well by someone for his own sake, out of concern for him, and not, or not merely, out of concern for oneself” (p. 2-3). It does not entail the intimacy of intimate friendship but involves a deep partnership looking out “for the interest of others, working on the basis of mutual trust and concern” (p. 4). Remarkably, when reflecting on cultivating civic friendship

in education, he first of all doubts whether the virtues associated with civic friendship by Snow, are sufficient to come to a more substantive sense of civic friendship, i.e. “engendering a commitment to the welfare of other citizens and to the general common good of the community” (p. 6). After which he adds four other virtues: solidarity, forgiveness, sacrifice, and service.

In the end, it would seem that it becomes very difficult to even consider the concept of civic friendship, as put forward by our two speakers, outside a deeply relational anthropology, an anthropology in which the subject is decentered from within the relation to the other, from the encounter with the other. Given my first question, referring to the dealing with difference in a context of plurality, one would wonder whether philosophical approaches such as Levinas’ philosophy of the other might assist in rethinking the very nature of the virtues which have been associated to civic friendship. *Why not immediately invoking a relational anthropology, especially when reflecting a education, which is, by its very constitution, deeply relational? Or in other words: why start with Aristotle, and not, e.g., with Levinas?*

(3) I come to my third observation and question. I was very much struck by Peterson’s opposite movement, from practice to concept. With a focus on the virtue of service, as a virtue connected to civic friendship, he first noted that, in schools, service as a term often is misunderstood as subservience (and thus not used), or is viewed as an ‘activity done by somebody’ rather than a ‘quality fundamentally characterizing a person’, i.e. a quality “shaping positive, helping relationships within communities” (p. 8). And secondly, and in my perspective even more important: Peterson deplores “the lack of a well-developed vocabulary and language of *service to others* in schools” (p. 8). At the same time, he refers to empirical research showing that schools which inhabit an atmosphere of service and share a clear and common language of service, rather than organizing a series of activities of service, do make a difference. In his conclusion he therefore accentuates the need for an “explicit and clear vocabulary and language of civic friendship and its [...] attendant virtues” (p. 10).

The issue of the particular language and, and I would add, a narrative which is practiced in our schools indeed is crucial. At the same time however, it would seem that quite some of our vocabulary seems to be outdated, and even misunderstood. Therefore, a third question: *what kind of language or narrative may create an environment favouring a robust concept of civic friendship, and the virtues accompanying such conception?*

In order to continue my reflection, let me repeat my three questions. First: how to arrive at a more robust common set of values which enable to live a common life in difference, not despite that difference, but in fully respecting difference? Secondly: if we call upon deeply relational values in

order to do so, why not start our reflection from a relational anthropology? And thirdly, what kind of language, what narrative, may support an environment in which such set of values will be fostered, learned, embraced and practiced?

To these three questions, the project of the catholic dialogue school, which attempts to recontextualize the Christian identity of the catholic school network in Flanders, intends to offer an answer. In the remaining few minutes, I will limit myself to some initial insights indicating in what way this project offers opportunities to cultivate civic friendship, using the language of ‘dialogue in difference’. As already mentioned, the project itself also serves another goal, in attempting, at the same time, to recontextualize the rich catholic theological and pedagogical tradition in a timely project, appropriately serving the youngsters of today’s post-Christian and post-secular Flanders, while at the same time realizing anew the best the Christian tradition has on offer.

The project of the catholic dialogue school is inspired by a Christian relational anthropology, of which dialogue is a defining concept: the encounter with the other as a mutual challenge and learning experience for all involved in school life. To this dialogue the plurality of ways present in current society, are welcomed, on condition that each one of them is willing to engage themselves in this dialogue. In line with its own mission, the school is assigned to enter the Christian voice within the dialogue, not as the position everybody should hold or strive at, or as the presupposed consensus, but as a particular voice in its own right challenging everybody present in the dialogue, both Christians and non-Christians alike.

Such dialogue is not constituted by symmetrical relationships but by continually shifting asymmetries between those engaged in dialogue: speaking and being spoken to, being listened to and listening; Shifting asymmetries which involve shifting vulnerabilities having to do with being (not) allowed to speak, (not) being received in listening, etc. Dialogue in this regard is not undoing difference, but lives by it, by its risks and opportunities. In dialogue, the encounter with difference may lead to self-clarification, mutual learning, and, in the end, also a new kind of commonality through difference.

How can we, in fact, in the midst of the process of dialogue, arrive at a common set of values which enable our society to thrive?<sup>3</sup> In considering this issue, I have been intrigued by J.-B. Metz’s oft-mentioned consideration of the Böckenförde paradox.<sup>4</sup> According to the German philosopher of law Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, modern democracy is sustained by assumptions and values which are neither created nor guaranteed by it.<sup>5</sup> By making essentially everything subject to the will of the

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<sup>3</sup> I elaborated on these paragraphs in L. Boeve (2021), *“Which Wolf Will You Feed?” Good Narratives as the Basis for Dialogue and Building a Common Life* [to be published]

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.-B. Metz (1997), *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie* (1967-97), Mainz, p. 180-181, 188.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. E.-W. Böckenförde (1976), *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit*, Suhrkamp, p. 60.

majority, a democratic society can even end up willing its own self-destruction – which is exactly what happened in Germany during the 1930's. Of itself, democracy doesn't simply and naturally lead to more democracy. Instead, in order to sustain its basic values and assumptions, democracy makes an appeal to resources available in the fundamental beliefs and values of the individuals and social groups participating in it. For Metz, the latter opens a space where religious traditions, particularly their dangerous memories and histories of suffering, could be retrieved as necessary sources of meaning for people living in post-traditional democratic societies.

How, then, do we arrive at a social consensus, at common beliefs, values, and attitudes which enable us to live together, despite our mutual differences? What is our common narrative against fake news, incendiary language and rhetoric on social media, and the disappearance of true conversation, nuance, and understanding? Is that narrative shared by a sufficient amount of people so that it can provide the basic beliefs and attitudes needed to ensure democracy's survival? Until recently our society had traditions which were strong and widespread to contribute to a true social consensus. Due to the processes of detraditionalization and pluralization – also within these traditions themselves – this no longer seems to be the case. The only way to offer a solution to this lack of established consensus, is if the various traditions and positions in our society enter into dialogue and, thereby, reach a kind of new consensus, not despite their differences, but through engaging these differences productively. Through such engagement they might experience commonalities in dealing with otherness, in line with the set of values and virtues listed by Nancy Snow and Andrew Peterson, both the more thin and more robust ones. It is through engaging others that potentials of these values and virtues can be mobilized within the very traditions and ways of life of the participants to the dialogue.

In line herewith, I am convinced that the catholic dialogue school can be of use to our society in its search for a new consensus about our live together. Inspired by the relational anthropology it lives from, its goal is to introduce everyone, regardless of their personal convictions, to the traditions and narratives – old and new – which are present in our society. Through dialogue we teach our students to think about, deepen, question, and enrich their own identities, and then be able to communicate this to others. Thereby, we enable the values and attitudes necessary to uphold our democratic society to become anchored in the individual's unique sources of meaning, whatever what they are.