

NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES

- Topic: Radical Individualism and Ecclesial Responses
Convener: Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Graduate Theological Union
Presenter: John Markey, Barry University
Respondent: Mary Johnson, Emmanuel College

In "The Need for the Recovery of the Communal Dimension of Individual Spirituality," John Markey argued that "individualism interpreted therapeutically or 'hyperindividualism'" and its attendant, ubiquitous forms of therapeutic spirituality are "fundamentally irreconcilable with either the gospel or the tradition." In short, Markey began with a description of the contemporary American ideology of radical individualism (or hyperindividualism), and of the way in which this gives rise to a therapeutic, cultural milieu and spirituality. Next, he examined the intellectual roots of this American phenomenon, exemplified in the work of William James. Then, Markey used the work of Josiah Royce, a contemporary of James, not only to critique James but more importantly to suggest the means by which we may recover the communal dimension of individual spirituality.

Markey introduced his paper by drawing a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, the widely influential but, in Markey's judgement, deeply flawed conception of religious experience put forward by James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and, on the other hand, the too-long ignored yet more fruitful account of religious experience developed by Royce in his *The Sources of Religious Insight* (1912).

As the cultural and intellectual frame of reference for his critique, Markey observed that America was not "modern" in the same way that Europe was modern and thus is not "postmodern" in the same sense as Europe. "American culture should not be described as postmodern, but rather, as hypermodern," because the American structures of modernity have not collapsed but have "succeeded all too well." This has led to an "ongoing dialectic between individual and community [which] has defined the cultural development of American society." Americans, while fascinated with the idea of community and with being socially connected, nevertheless remain beholden to the "reification of the individual." As a consequence, the individual, while seeking personal self-fulfillment, experiences a deep sense of isolation and alienation, and when the individual does seek out community, she/he does so exclusively for the purpose of serving her/his self-interest. Thus, community is conceived of as existing solely for the purpose of serving the individual's self-interest. Markey identified this phenomenon as hyperindividualism.

Markey stated that the critical task in a hyperindividualistic world "is for each individual to be fully aware of their desires, feelings and needs." This concentrated focus on the self is what Markey, following the work of Robert

Bellah, referred to as the "therapeutic attitude." This attitude not only defines one's interpersonal, familial, social and institutional relationships but it also in the end extends to one's relationship to God. Again based on the work of Bellah, Markey claimed that "James' language has become the primary language for describing and interpreting any religious experience or spiritual reality in the dominant culture in North America." For James, religious experience is "intuitive, immediate, individual and temperamental." Indeed, religious experience is about feelings. As a consequence, "community plays a secondary and even detrimental role within individual religious experience" because as religious experience becomes institutionalized by communities, its vital impact on the individual is diminished and dispelled.

By contrast, for Royce religious experience is "inferred, communal, contrasted and holistic." Royce claims that "the most basic human [religious] experience does not exemplify an inarticulate sense of salvation welling up from the unconscious," as James would have us believe "but a clear and urgent insight that one needs to be saved." And, "[b]ecause the need for salvation is common to all, the divine process itself must be a *social* process." (emphasis added) Thus the experience of love and community is a "foundational experience and necessary complement to merely individual religious experience." Royce holds that another serious flaw in the Jamesian conception of religious experience is that it separates intuition and reason, and thereby creates a split between theory and praxis. Royce instead uses the term "religious insight," a more integrated term. If religious insight is true it "would be empirical for it would face facts; intuitive, for it would survey them and grasp them, and be intimate with them; rational for it would view them in their unity."

Markey concluded his presentation by suggesting that we abandon spirituality cast in therapeutic terms and reclaim the classical spiritual traditions of the major Mendicant religious communities of the High Middle Ages. He offered a number of concrete suggestions for "recovering the communal dimension of individual spirituality" for teaching and pastoral work.

Sociologist Mary Johnson offered a thoughtful response in which she agreed with Markey's critique of James and his use of Royce, and commended his concluding suggestions. She questioned, however, whether the work of Bellah reflects a wide enough spectrum of American culture today. Bellah's conclusions were based on his observation of white, dominant, upper-middle-class people. From her experience of working with and researching the behavior of Catholic young adults between the ages of twenty and thirty-nine, she is doubtful about the aptness of the terms "hyperindividualism" and "therapeutic spirituality." Today, many among this young adult generation suffer. When they were children, most parishes offered them neither quality religious formation programs nor opportunities to use their gifts.

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