

Believing and Acting in a Pluralistic World: "Faith and Values at Work in Service of God and Society"

At least three approaches are available for seeking truth, doing theology and developing a civil society in pluralistic world:

AN AGONISTIC APPROACH:

In the agonistic approach to a civil society, the dominant practices revolve around a competitive struggle among rival religious and moral truth claims. These rival truth claims are presented as pure, self-sufficient and cohesive systems.

In this model of discourse, the ideas and leaders of a system vie for preeminence over those who hold other truth claims by presenting themselves as publicly and persuasively as possible. The leaders of the system strive to gain power through the support of those who begin as onlookers, become active imitators and eventually emerge as an elite minority.

These agonistic practices lead to the dominance of a single religious or moral view of reality along with the diminution, assimilation, or outright elimination of rival truth claims, systems or traditions.

AN ATOMISTIC APPROACH:

In the atomistic model public conversation is subject to the constraint of neutrality whenever a single or moral truth claim asserts that its conception of reality is superior to others.

The constraint of neutrality prohibits "trumping" of conflicting points of view. It relegates religious and moral truth claims to allegedly neutral frameworks by setting aside disagreements through circumstance and personal experience.

In matters of religious and morals, participants must agree not to disagree in public and instead confine their religious and moral conversations to private spheres. Religious truth claims are to be removed from public discourse.

A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH:

Communicative approaches to truth and action share certain features with the agonistic and atomistic models. Like the agonistic approach of assertion but unlike the atomistic model of neutrality, the communicative approach welcomes assertions and questions of faith and truth that have implications for belief, religion, ethics, philosophy, science, culture, politics, and economics.

Unlike the agonistic approach with its practices of display and trumping, the hallmark of the communicative approach offers truth critically through participatory and reflective practices. Participatory practices empower traditions and systems that are affected by truth claims to have a say in the formulation and adoption of such beliefs, ideas and systems.

This communicative approach emerges whenever all affected by religious, moral, social and political ways of thinking and acting engage in discussion and evaluation of their validity.

Unlike the atomistic approach with its relegation of faith and morals to private discourse often among the like-minded, the communicative model removes the rigid boundaries between public and private conversation encouraging reflection on the important relationship and mutual influence between private and public beliefs and values

By emphasizing participatory practices the communicative model enhances the possibilities of faith and truth embodied within the practices themselves while focusing on the systemic distortions that accompany the self-interested monologue of any single system.

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Drawn from the work of Gary Simpson on the moral possibilities of civil society. See: "Civil Society and Congregations as Public Moral Companions," Gary Simpson, *Word and World*,

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