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Youth as Social Weathervanes in Democratizing Societies: Building the Developmental Foundations for Political Pluralism

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Research Project Description:

The goal of this research project is to shed light on the role of youth development in the process of democratization, with a special focus on its role in building the foundations for political pluralism with a special emphasis on how Catholic thought and institutional development provides a context these processes. The project director will build upon research he has conducted on the links between political pluralism and democracy, on the one hand, and the character of moral reasoning and judgments of youth, on the other (one published analysis-- Garbarino, J. and Bronfenbrenner, U. (1976) The socialization of moral judgment and behavior in cross-cultural perspective. In T. Lickona (Ed.) Moral development and behavior. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston--and four previously unpublished analyses, one of which focused on religious perspectives on pluralism and democracy). In the analysis, the project will employ the concept of youth as "social weathervanes" (i.e. that youth are at a critical phase in their individual identity development during adolescence and early adulthood that makes them especially sensitive to shifting political culture and collective identity).

An historical review reveals that the Catholic Church has shifted from hostility towards democracy towards acceptance over the last several centuries (Curran, C. (Ed.) *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching*. Paulist Press, 2003). Writing in that volume, J. Bryan Hehir summarizes this shift in the following terms: “The idea of freedom, which was at the heart of the democratic movements, appeared in Catholic eyes (at least in Rome) to be devoid of any normative framework that would relate freedom to justice and order. Catholic teaching of the nineteenth century was deeply suspicious of both political freedom and economic freedom. The first threatened intellectual values; the second threatened social justice...The point of conflict between Catholic teaching and democracy was the idea of religious freedom.” (p. 22)

It was not until the mid-Twentieth Century that Catholic doctrine shifted to one of supporting democracy as a primary vehicle for promoting core Christian values, through the persistent analysis of John Courtney Murray and Bernard Haring, and through the impact of Vatican II and the encyclical of Pope John XXII (*pacem in terris*). The essential elements of this new formulation relevant to the current project on “democracy, culture and Catholicism” are these: the acceptance of religious pluralism as the context of the church’s life and ministry, the endorsement of the constitutional state, and the freedom of the church in society (rather than the favoritism of the past). The church has struggled to come fully to terms with the implications of these principles in the multiplicity of cultural and political contexts it has faced, perhaps doing best when it has stood as a source of *de facto* pluralism in secular totalitarian societies or as a base for “liberation theology” in situations of religiously-conservative economic oligarchy, where the concept of “limited government” is the standard bearer for both human rights and spiritual freedom.

John Murray, Bernard Haring, and other “critical” Catholic writers on the interface of religion and politics have sought to work out the political implications of the core Catholic principle of “limited government.” Haring wrote that “The state is not its own end. Man taken in his totality is not made for the state, but the state for man.” and “Man may never be lowered to the

status of mere object or instrument of society or the state, nor may man himself stoop so low....As persons, men have rights given them by God which are inviolable.” And “Obviously we must exclude tyranny (or its most modern form, the totalitarian state) as totally unacceptable because it does not recognize any limits to its arbitrary power.” (Haring B. (1966) *The Law of Christ*). Murray shares Haring’s commitment to the role of God’s primary claim on human beings as predicating a necessary limitation of government authority. He writes “Christianity has always regarded the state as a limited order of action for limited purposes, to be chosen and pursued under the direction and correction of the organized moral conscience of society, whose judgments are formed and mobilized by the Church, an independent and autonomous community, qualified to be the interpreter of mans’ nature and destiny.” (Murry, J. *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, 1960). I draw inspiration from these writers in conceptualizing my own efforts to understand the role of the Church in democratic societies, particularly with respect to the challenges of pluralism, and have done so since I first encountered them more than four decades ago when I prepared an undergraduate honors thesis on “Political and Religious Authority and the Democratic Political System.”

Of special importance and interest today are the Church’s efforts to deal with the moral and social challenges it is now facing with the “democratization” of formerly authoritarian societies where the Church’s role has often shifted from endorsing or at least tolerating repressive regimes to being a firm advocate for human rights. This provides the context for the proposed project on youth as social weathervanes in democratizing societies, because what is largely absent from the conceptual efforts of Murray, Haring, and others is an appreciation for the youth socialization issues that arise for the Church in democratizing societies. Youth do not magically absorb democratic values because of the religious and political philosophizing of elites (even once the “conservative” themes of pre-Vatican II Catholicism are replaced by contemporary “liberalization”). Youth develop these “habits of the mind and heart” from their encounters with social and political realities. The Jesuit educational motto “Give me a boy for his first seven years and he is mine for life” has a sound foundation in child development research, but it is incomplete, for the

next two seven year periods (and particularly the third) are critical for political socialization, perhaps particularly so when political culture is shifting dramatically.

The conceptual and empirical work of sociologist Glen Elder and his colleagues will provide a rich source of data and theoretical perspectives to inform this exploration. They have studied youth development in several dynamic historical/political contexts (e.g. the United States in the 1930s, China in the 1980s and Eastern Europe in the 1990s). In addition, the project will focus on the role of “child and youth participation” in social development as explored in research on the impact of the Search Institute’s “40 Developmental Assets” and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child’s mandate to implement the “right to participation” as contexts for illuminating the processes of political and cultural democratization. The role of Catholic institutions in the development and maintenance of political pluralism will be a special focus of this effort.

The project will rely upon reviews of existing research literature and the project director’s prior data analysis, supplemented by secondary data analysis where feasible. The principal results anticipated are three major papers for publication: one for the Hank Center’s edited volume, a second for publication in an academic journal (e.g. in *The Journal of Youth Development*, *Journal of Applied Developmental Science*, *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, or *Youth and Society*), and a third for a “popular” media outlet such as *Psychology Today*). These papers will in all likelihood become components for a book on youth development written or edited by the project director (who is the author or editor of 23 published volumes).

Compliance Issues: No primary data collection is planned.