

## The American Context of Ministry: An Exploration with Daniel W. Hardy

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One of Anglican theologian Daniel W. Hardy's continual occupations was with God's ways with the world, and particularly with the human creature in God. In order to do justice to this topic, he adopted a very distinct style of writing and speaking. He would at times develop neologisms, such as "sociopoiesis"; other times he would shape the meaning of a term through innovative (some might say idiosyncratic) use, such as "extensity" or "sociality." His motivation for this, in part, was wanting to sidestep more common technical terms in order to avoid narrowing the realities of God and world to one or another ready-made reduction, whether theological or philosophical: tidy playing fields that he found many content to play within, but much too small, he thought, to be confused with the real.

He also worked to conceive of God and God's ways with the world visually as well as conceptually. Near the end of his life, inspired by analogous efforts by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he worked to diagram what he termed "the energetics of attraction."<sup>1</sup> This is an attempt to draw together God's ways with the world in a large-scale, comprehensive manner.

The "energetics of attraction" was his way of describing what he saw as God's working within creation to create sociality, a dynamism he termed "sociopoiesis." Hardy observed that the process of being made into social groupings of various sorts is intrinsic to creation when functioning as it ought. This happens spontaneously and healthfully: it is the flourishing of human creation. This sociopoiesis is itself the ongoing act of God in and for the creation, and more specifically, within civilization (including family, government, and other overlapping social groupings).

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel W. Hardy, with Deborah Hardy Ford, Peter Ochs, and David Ford, *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 48.

But sociopoiesis, the creation and flourishing of sociality, is not simply for the sake of creation but rather is the means by which creation is attracted to God. Being attracted to God, humans fulfil their God-given capacity for relation with God and with others.<sup>2</sup> This capacity is a part of being creatures; it is the “godwardness” of all creatures. Drawing on Coleridge’s use of the term, Hardy called this process of attraction “abduction,” a process of being drawn to the divine light and thus “closer to all things.”<sup>3</sup>

And yet there was a manifest and darker possibility, too. Creatures are created to move toward God, yet at least human creatures have also the capacity to resist this “towardness.” This comes in several different manners, which have a converging form: Hardy talked about it in terms of pathology—obsessiveness—and also self-reference or self-absorption: the “inertia of self-attraction.”<sup>4</sup> Not to be attracted to God is to resist God’s acting and the directionality of the creation.<sup>5</sup> He summarized it in the Augustinian phrase, of humanity being “curved in on itself.”

He further explained that being created is a matter of being “dispersed”; he often also talked about the “extensity” of creation in relation to the “infinitely intense identity of the Lord.” Although at points he referred to extensity as a neutral or simply given condition of creation, there are points where dispersion and extensity seem to be conditions to be overcome in the abductive attraction of creatures to God. Dispersion and extensity constitute a “counter attraction” to God, being distracted by the multiplicity of things and failing to engage their depths.<sup>6</sup>

And yet there is within the creation not merely its directionality, but its life, both the dynamism of sociopoiesis and abductive attraction to God, which I would suggest might be appropriated as the work of the Holy Spirit. This work can be resisted and, at points, even thwarted, but this does not close down the possibility of the Spirit continuing to work.

A superficial reading of Hardy’s work here might prompt one to worry about a loss of self. If being turned toward oneself is a violation

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<sup>2</sup> Hardy, *Wording a Radiance*, 48–49.

<sup>3</sup> Hardy, *Wording a Radiance*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Hardy, *Wording a Radiance*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Hardy, *Wording a Radiance*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Hardy, *Wording a Radiance*, 68.

of the elemental directedness of creatures, and if the route to healing is through the attraction of God, an attraction which turns creatures away from “self-engagement” and toward God and the created other, then it might sound as if the self disappears. But this is an unsatisfactory reading: throughout his work, Hardy is careful to show that the redeemed, rightly directed self is still a self. That self is not a self-constituted Cartesian monad, but intended for and flourishing in sociality with God and others.

To transpose the point into my own terms: the redeemed self is one that is able both to receive *and* to give to the other; she is able to take her place in a sociality in which she always receives first—indeed, primordially—and yet what she receives is herself. She is one who can receive and give, and is called to take her place in a community of which she is an intrinsic part. There is in this sense a conversational character to the sociality which is brought about through sociopoiesis. One comes to flourish as a differentiated self in community with others.

What I have set out thus far attempts to capture some of Hardy’s most basic logic in his theology. And yet it cries out for engagement with particular historical, material, embodied contexts. The church is called to discern God’s ways with the world in whatever place the church finds itself, to discern that place’s participation in (at least some form of) the dynamism of civilizational abduction, even as it also wrestles with its own afflictions, obsessions, traumas, and joys.

### *The Context of Ministry in America*

In order to show how this might done, I shall turn to an analysis of the context of ministry in much of America, to reflect on the specific material conditions of extensity and self-reference in this nation today. There are two conditions in particular I would like to highlight. I will then suggest that the Anglican tradition might possess resources to begin to address this situation—not to “jump start” the process of abduction so much as to improve the conditions of its possibility.

One condition of self-absorption found in America is an increasing polarization, particularly around matters of politics, economics, and religion. A recent Pew Research Center poll has shown that the amount of ideological overlap between Democrats and Republicans has shrunk substantially over the last twenty years; moreover, the share of each party’s membership with a highly negative view of

the opposing party has likewise grown. Specifically, among those considered most politically active, 27 percent of Democrats see the Republican party as a threat to the nation's well-being; fully 36 percent of Republicans would say the same of the Democrats.<sup>7</sup>

Americans are increasingly dwelling in ideological silos in which the idea of being in conversation with someone who is not a reflection of oneself is either inconceivable or undesirable. This is abetted by the “echo-chambering” effect of self-sorting groupings on the internet and other forms of media, in which one may find others with whom one agrees to socialize. This is further aided by the phenomenon of demographic sorting, in which patterns of mobility and internal migration contribute to the increasing homogeneity of communities.<sup>8</sup> Put plainly, while America is an incredibly diverse nation coast to coast, it is a diverse nation made up of increasingly homogeneous places. Those places that are politically liberal are becoming more liberal; those places that are politically conservative are likewise becoming more so. It is becoming increasingly attractive to live among people who are like-minded; to put it the other way around, it is becoming positively repellent to settle among those who might differ from you. This means that Americans are reifying their own being curved in on themselves, as they affirm that they are better off residing among those who reflect themselves, rather than being in relationship with those who are genuinely other.

The second factor that I would like to discuss is the built environment in America. The built environment is, literally, the reification—the concretization—of notions of who the human is and what she is for. Of course, even as these notions are themselves contingently formed, so also are the built environments in which they are manifested: yet the durability of the built environment inscribes such contingent judgments well beyond their horizon of persuasion.

By way of illustration, I shall mention four pervasive designs which serve to hinder sociopoiesis while encouraging dispersion and self-attraction. These are not intended to be exhaustive.

In the decades following World War II, the American built environment has undergone a massive transformation. In a broad sense,

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<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” June 12, 2014; [www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/](http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/).

<sup>8</sup> Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

there has been a waning of what might be termed a complexly private and public realm in favor of a strict binary of public and private, with greater care being shown for the private. This can be seen in the midcentury move away from public transit and toward private automobiles. It can be seen in the move away from Main Street shopping districts (as a part of a town or city) and toward private shopping developments (whether enclosed behemoths or smaller strip malls). It can be seen in the move away from public parks and other amenities: even when these are included in new private developments they tend to be for show and little used. The primary users of public parks today are usually organized sports teams for young people—and so parks become tools to be used by private organizations rather than places in which the public congregates.

Secondly, Americans have created a built environment which is automobile-centered, rather than human-centered. This has resulted in sprawl, or the dispersion of the built environment from higher into lower densities. People now routinely live, work, shop, learn, and worship in places which are separated by farther, drivable distances. The effects of this have been profound: one now needs a car to live in most places in the United States, and being unable or unwilling to drive leaves one dependent and marginalized. Moreover, the construction of the nation's interstate highways have decimated the cities they have gone through and the smaller towns they have gone around. This destruction has not only been in the initial construction of the highways but in their continued use: at least one estimate notes that 70 percent of downtown Columbus, Ohio, has been devoted to surface parking.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, these environments are unsustainable, not only environmentally but economically: ironic, because they have typically been justified economically.<sup>10</sup> Most saliently for church leaders, this has been corrosive for communities considered as places, as they become a collection of unrelated destinations, arrived at by means of private automobile. This contributes to isolation and dispersion.

Isolation and dispersion are further exacerbated through, thirdly, decisions made in housing design. Over the last seventy years, new housing has been located in lower-density developments, created by

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<sup>9</sup> James Howard Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 163.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Marohn, "The Value of Value Capture," May 21, 2012; [www.strongtowns.org/journal/2012/5/21/the-value-of-value-capture.html](http://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2012/5/21/the-value-of-value-capture.html).

subdividing larger tracts of land owned by private developers. While American housing has typically been built privately, it was constructed as an integral part of a larger town or city, connected to the municipality's larger grid system of streets and other aspects of the transport network, and located a short distance from the necessities of daily life, such as shops, churches, and schools. This contrasts sharply with typical building practices today, in which housing subdivisions—often known as “pods” or “clusters”—are linked to the larger community only by means of one or two access roads connecting to a main arterial.<sup>11</sup> Daily needs such as recreation, education, worship, and groceries are located outside the development, sometimes some distance away. Increasingly, the houses in such developments are gauged to appeal to a single socioeconomic class as well, priced within the reach of some and not others, with only one form of dwelling available. Housing is then situated around a parking lot or on a cul-de-sac, rather than being set on traditional shorter blocks within walking distance of other forms of housing and daily necessities.

Finally, Americans have lost a sense of orientation. I will show my students slides of typical contemporary American subdivisions and ask them what, if anything, is wrong with them. Inevitably they will reply that all the houses look alike. But then I show them slides of Haussmannian boulevards in Paris, Edwardian terrace homes in London, Victorian row houses in San Francisco, and Brownstones in Manhattan. All of this housing is popular and expensive, and each unit looks very much like another. In each of these places the housing, although it might all look alike, is situated as an integral part of a much larger whole, a whole with order and meaning. The Eiffel Tower and the Houses of Parliament, for example, are not located outside the city in the midst of parking: they are meaningful centerpieces of their cities. The fact that the houses all look like their neighbors in such areas does not detract from the sense of place. It is when houses look identical, whether in Peoria or Petaluma, *and* are located in and around nothing of greater meaning or significance that it becomes a problem. Rather than being oriented toward a larger meaning in a well-designed place, denizens are simply left on their own. The bulk of care and energy are expended on the private realm while the public, shared realm

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<sup>11</sup> Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, tenth anniversary edition (New York: North Point Press, 2010), 5.

flags. These factors are the reification of the inertia of self-attraction at its most advanced. It becomes clear how the material conditions of communities can contribute to both dispersal and self-absorption and can form one of the precursors of the “silos” in which Americans increasingly dwell.

Contrast this with a more traditionally designed home, which is close to a recognizable center of a city. This housing design allows for a complexly private and public realm, with public, semi-public, semi-private, and private spaces provided in the progression from sidewalk to porch to living room to bedroom. These spaces are all proximate to each other and are not so much absolute separations, but thresholds. Together, they work as various organically-connected yet distinct aspects of the one place all brought into relation with the public realm and with neighbors. This is a material form of the conditions of possibility of a differentiated self, flourishing in relation to others. In other words, this is one form of the built environment which is more adequate to the dynamics of civilizational abduction, being attracted to God in a manner which also draws the human to her neighbor in ways that go beyond elective affinity. (I should add that this “more adequate” built environment is contingent and particular to North American cultures; other cultures may find that they have different maladies and different remedies.)

### *A Possible Remedy*

These are some of the hurdles the church faces in much of America today. Given that, in Hardy’s terms, these two disparate conditions can be seen as functions of the sin of self-absorption and dispersal, perhaps they might both be addressed in the same way. Anglicans might be well placed to consider not only explicitly spiritual concerns in the local community but broader issues of the material context and its contribution to human flourishing. Hardy in particular took pains to trace God’s act not only in salvation or the work of the church, but as broadly as possible in bringing order, life, and health to all of creation.

One possible means of addressing the condition of dispersal in the built environment as well as the problem with self-absorption in Americans’ glad embrace of ideological silos is in returning to the notion of a parish (as distinct from the church which is found in that parish). An Anglican approach to this lies in what Bishop David Hamid

says of Anglican polity: because of the church's decentralized structure, the Anglican Communion Office is not a head office with thirty-eight provincial branch offices, but rather a collection of thirty-eight head offices all trying to share the same London-based branch!<sup>12</sup> The reality, though, is that if one were to inquire at any of these provincial offices, they would suggest that they are essentially a branch office of each of the dioceses contained in the province. And indeed, one would hear the same at any diocesan office of the constitutive parishes. There is in this a basic Anglican pattern of subsidiarity, of referral to basic levels as much as possible—not least because there is so little outside of Anglicans' imagination and good will that comprises any levels higher than the parish.

Naturally, a return to considering the parish is more straightforward in places such as England: parishes have had virtually no legal or ecclesiastical standing in America since the middle of the twentieth century, and little enough before then. The reality of church life in twenty-first-century America, for good and ill, is that the church is a purely voluntary body, with the result that it can easily tend to become an echo chamber. But recognizing the possibility of homogeneity within congregations, and the potential problems with that, the church might nevertheless make specific and intentional decisions as this particular body—the congregation—to engage with the wider population of the neighborhood or community in which they find themselves—the parish.

Thinking of congregation and parish in this way raises the possibility that the church might start to be clear about who it is and who are those around it. The promise of imagining the parish as the mapping of the church's mission field lies in considering the area in which this church has been planted as the primary—not the exclusive, but the primary—form of question put to the congregation. Such questions might take the form of: How can we be the church, not just for ourselves, but for these people we find ourselves among? What does that demand of us, apart from being dissatisfied with our own self-obsession? How can we serve these people well, given the range and diversity of who they are? What do they need to hear or see demonstrated of the good news of Jesus Christ? How can we as the church

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<sup>12</sup> David Hamid, "The Nature and Shape of the Contemporary Anglican Communion," in *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism: The Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ian T. Douglas and Kwok Pui-lan (New York: Church Publishing, 2001), 73.



be a visible and recognized presence in the community, contributing to its good, its identity, while also not pretending to comprise the whole of that identity? This mutual self-knowing through the church's serving the parish is itself a kind of service, healing the dispersion and self-absorption of both church and parish, and in that way helping to restore the process of sociopoiesis that is the work of God in creation.

Of course, given the reality of ideological silos, neighborhoods (and parishes) are also becoming increasingly homogenous. In light of this, the church's call to its parish might be expanded: it is not only that the church is called *to* its surrounding community (and not just those in the congregation), but it is called *for* its surrounding community. In the midst of increasing homogeneity in church and parish, the church can intentionally engage with other, different parishes: not as reaching for diversity for its own sake, but as the site of redeemed sociality, through the reconciliation that Jesus Christ brings. Thus the church can represent not only the parish to itself, but can represent its own parish, with all its afflictions, obsessions, traumas, and joys, to other parishes as well. For example, a church situated in a wealthy area can be clear about that, but work specifically to overcome the false sense of self-sufficiency and the self-absorption that results from it. Or a church in an impoverished area can be clear about that, but work specifically with its parish to realize the gifts that are already present there—in line with asset-based community development—and work to build healthful, interdependent partnerships with other parishes.

In this way, to focus on the particular concrete context in which the church finds itself would be a way of engaging the depths, not of a random multiplicity but of a particular place and time, its suffering, upheavals, and joys, and its relations with other places. It is one way in which God may draw humanity from self-absorption and dispersion into healthful sociopoiesis. Or as Hardy wrote in an earlier essay, it would be a means by which the church could work “to *deepen awareness of how* God's life and work are evident in the world today, and how we may *follow* that.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, this would ultimately serve to facilitate attending to, being attracted to, and following (in Hardy's phrase) the infinitely intense identity of the Lord.

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel W. Hardy, “The Future of the Church: An Exploration,” in *God's Ways with the World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 221.

