NETWORKED LISTENING AND NODAL LISTENING: A LISTENING CHURCH THROUGH THE LENS OF JOSÉ CASANOVA AND CHARLES TAYLOR

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Abstract

This paper explores the imagery of networked listening and nodal listening as central to envisioning a synodal Church. Based on José Casanova's sociological analyses of secularisation, deprivatisation, and globalisation, the paper highlights how networked listening fosters openness to plural public religions and global denominationalism. Employing Charles Taylor's understanding of secularity as changing conditions of belief, nodal listening is proposed as a way for the Church to engage relationally with diverse worldviews. Together, these complementary listening modes enrich synodality as a dynamic practice of discernment, enabling the Church to journey with both its members and the wider human family in today's complex global and secular contexts.

Keywords: Charles Taylor; Globalisation; José Casanova; Networked Listening; Nodal Listening; Pluralism; Public Religions; Synodality; Secularisation

A synodal Church is a listening Church. A listening Church practices the art of listening and engages in dialogue while crossing

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through easy and difficult landscapes within and with the human family at large. This paper explores the sociological and philosophical perspectives on synodality through the lens of José Casanova and Charles Taylor. Their works encourage a synodal Church to "listen […] to the signs of the times"[1] and engage in what I would call "networked listening" and "nodal listening." In a globally connected world where religions remain present in public spaces, networked listening requires considering the reality of this interconnectedness. On the other hand, nodal listening calls for taking into account the culture of authenticity in which individuals maintain the exclusive freedom to determine their own identity, including religious identity. Individuals act as nodes in this interconnected, globalised world.

The imagery of networked and nodal listening is evocative in synodality because the idea of a synodal church tends towards action. Synodality is not theory but is "primarily a practice, [and] a way of being Church."[2] According to Rafael Luciani, synodality denotes "communicational dynamics," underlining the importance of listening and consultation rather than a drive towards structural reformation.[3]

In this paper, I begin by briefly outlining the idea of a synodal Church as a listening Church. Then I sketch the arguments of Casanova underlining the need for networked listening. It is followed by presenting Taylor's works that set the tone for nodal listening. Finally, based on Casanova and Taylor, I evaluate the nuances of networked and nodal listening for a synodal Church.

Synodal Church as a Listening Church

The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2021–2024) envisions leading the Church to the third millennium centred on "synodality." The preparatory document for the synod (*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*[4]) can be seen as an example of the orientation of the Church towards responding to the prospects and challenges of contemporary times. The synodal document reflects this spirit when it underlines the theme of

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[1] Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission," 51, accessed November 27, 2021, https://www.synod.va/en/documents/versione-desktop-del-documento-preparatorio.html.

[2] Jos Moons, "A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality: Reconfiguring Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Practice," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 69, 2 (February 24, 2022): 85, https://doi.org/10.18290/rt22692.5.

[3] Rafael Luciani, Synodality's Promise for a more Inclusive Church, interview by Hosffman Ospino, National Catholic Reporter, September 3, 2021.

[4] Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*.

"journeying together" and the importance of listening. Synodality in this context goes beyond the traditional idea of formal ecclesial meetings and is envisioned as a "communion when all her members journey together," listening to each other and advancing the evangelising mission.[5] Journeying together focuses on two significant aspects: journeying together within the Church and with the human family at large.[6] The theme of listening points to the importance of "listening to each other" and "listening to the Holy Spirit" to discover "the face and form of a synodal Church."[7]

This journeying together involves conversations to learn from each other, starting from the Bishop of Rome to the ordinary faithful. Pope Francis emphasises that "a synodal Church is a Church which listens," where the conversation partners are not passive listeners but mutual learners.[8] The first step in the synodal process is listening to the people of God, followed by listening to the pastors and the Bishop of Rome. These conversations are not debates to be judged by the weight of rational arguments. Unlike secular debates, a synodal conversation requires openness to transcendence through listening to the Spirit, which would eventually lead to a progressively maturing "synodal conversion."[9] In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasises the need to master the art of listening to make one a respectful and compassionate listener with an open heart that would result in genuine spiritual encounters.[10]

Engaging in this activity of listening with the "human family at large" presupposes the knowledge of the sociological and philosophical background in which a conversation takes place. However, this background is not made explicit in the documents. Through Casanova and Taylor, I highlight two prominent characteristics of the environment in which the process of listening takes place. This could enrich the conversations during the journeying

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[5]Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church*, 7.

[6]Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church*, 17–18.

[7]Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church*, 10.

[8]Pope Francis, "Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops," October 17, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/ content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_ 50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

[9]Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church*, 2.

[10]Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, November 24, 2013, #171, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/pa pa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

together through nuanced listening processes, namely, networked listening and nodal listening.

Casanova and Networked Listening

Casanova's sociological analyses offer one of the most compelling arguments that underlie the call for networked listening. His works have undergone a thematic evolution over time "…from modernisation to secularisation to globalisation."[11] I focus here on secularisation and globalisation. In order to engage in a networked listening process, it is instructive to explore his critique of secularisation theories, and his framework of globalisation.

In the twentieth century, the theories of secularisation reached their peak of unquestioned academic influence and witnessed their descent to the troughs. The common factor among these theories of secularisation was the expectation of a uniform and universal decline of religion with the progress of modernity. However, one of the shortcomings of these analyses was a total disregard for empirical reality.[12]

The empirical reality of the 1980s indicated the reemergence of religion in the public space, such as the ascendancy of the solidarity movement in Poland, the impact of Catholicism in the Sandinista revolution and across Latin America, and the resurgence of Protestant fundamentalism as a political power in American politics.[13]

Casanova explores the fault lines in the secularisation theories taking into account the mismatch between the theoretical assumptions of the progressive decline of religion and the empirical reality of the re-emergence of religion. Casanova discusses three different implications of the concept of "secularisation." The first implication involves differentiation or the separation and independence of secular areas of life from the religious sphere. The second implication indicates the diminishing influence and presence of religion in society over time. The third involves the privatisation and reduced societal importance of religion.[14] According to Casanova, the idea of differentiation as a

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[11] José Casanova, "From Modernization to Secularization to Globalization: An Autobiographical Self-Reflection," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 2 (2011) 25.

[12] José Casanova, "Secularization," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright (Amsterdam: Elsevier, April 9, 2015), 384.

[13] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

[14] Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 19–20.

central part of the theories of secularisation is not disputed. However, the claims that religion is declining and becoming privatised can be questioned. [15] The central thesis of his book *Public Religions in the Modern World* is the deprivatisation of religion. Deprivatisation is the resistance of various religious traditions to accept a marginalised and private role in society as prescribed by theories of modernity and secularisation. This resistance has led to the re-politicization of the private religious and moral spheres and the re-normativisation of the economic and political spheres. In other words, religion has become more visible and influential in public life rather than confined to the private sphere.[16] Notably, Casanova argues that religion has adapted and not declined in response to societal developments.[17]

The case studies undertaken by Casanova from Spain, Poland, Brazil and the USA (Evangelical Protestantism and Catholic Church) illustrate the presence of public religion at the levels of the state, political society, and civil society. Based on his studies, he concluded that "…ultimately only public religions at the level of civil society are consistent with modern universalistic principles and with modern differentiated structures."[18] However, a decade later, he identified this conclusion as one of the shortcomings of his book. From a global comparative perspective, he argues that "…there are many other forms of modern public religion and other forms of deprivatisation."[19] In his latest work, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics,* Casanova proposes a new analytical framework of globalisation to understand the emergence of a global system of religious pluralism.[20]

The two most important consequences of globalisation are de-territorialisation and global denominationalism. De-territorialisation means "…the disembeddedness of cultural phenomena from their 'natural' territories."[21] Globalization is unlikely to lead to the creation of a single world government, society, community, or religion. Instead, it will allow old civilisations and world religions to re-emerge globally. Still, they will have to confront the consequences of being detached

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[15]José Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," *Social Research* 76, 4 (2009) 1050.

[16]Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 5–6.

[17]Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 211–34.

[18]Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 219.

[19]José Casanova, "Public Religions Revisited," in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 108.

[20] José Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics: The Modern System of Classification* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 16ff.

[21]José Casanova, "Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization," *Sociology of Religion* 62, 4 (2001) 428.

from a specific territory.[22] The rise of global denominationalism, or the proliferation of transnational, "global imagined communities" [23] include both traditional world religions and newer hybridised religions such as Baha'is and Hare Krishnas. [24] Casanova also takes into account the impact of the interaction between religion and the secular. In this process, the "…'world-religions' are redefined and transformed, in contraposition to 'the secular,' through an interrelated reciprocal process of particularistic differentiation, universalistic claims, and mutual recognition."[25] This process will affect the public sphere globally.

The presence of public religions makes networked listening relevant for a synodal Church. As Casanova indicated, religions have not restricted themselves to the private space prescribed to them by the theories of secularisation. Instead, there is a deprivatisation of religion or an increasing influence of religions in the public space. This means that a synodal Church has to involve in a networked listening process with other religions. This is not a one-time process but a continuous process of engagement during amicable and hostile times. Networked listening is important in the context of globalisation marked by deterritorialisation and global denominationalism. For a synodal Church to make sense of new conversation partners in society, who might be minorities, a networked listening process could initiate dialogue with the new neighbours and also make attempts to make sense of the unique cultural and religious contexts of their origin.

Taylor and Nodal Listening

The central question that Taylor's book *A Secular Age* addresses is: "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable." [26] Answering this question involves

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[22]Casanova, "Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization," 430.

[23] By using the term "global imagined communities," Casanova indicates the possibilities for world religions in the present global context to be "…detached from the civilizational settings in which they have been traditionally embedded […] [and] through the linking of electronic mass media and mass migration, are being reconstituted as deterritorialized global religions 'at large.'" José Casanova, "Cosmopolitanism, the Clash of Civilizations and Multiple Modernities," *Current Sociology* 59, 2 (March 1, 2011) 252–67.

[24]Casanova, "Public Religions Revisited," 118.

[25]Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics*, 63.

[26] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.

distinguishing three understandings of what it means to be secular. The first two (secularity 1 and secularity 2) point to public spaces being emptied of religion and diminishing religious belief and practice. The unique contribution of Taylor is the third understanding of being secular (secularity 3). He argues that together with the above-mentioned aspects, secularity also means a change in "conditions of belief" where belief in God is one among the many options. Thus, Taylor argues that in these changed conditions in society, "even for the staunchest believer, [religious belief] is one human possibility among others."[27] Examining Taylor's analysis can help us better comprehend the complexities and possibilities of nodal listening.

Taylor argues that the most significant shift in contemporary belief systems began in the 1960s and is known as the Age of Authenticity. This period is characterised by expressive individualism, in which individuals have the freedom to pursue or not pursue various paths towards fulfilment. While expressivism has its origins in the Romantic period, it was previously only experienced by elites. In modern times, it has become a widespread phenomenon. [28] The culture of authenticity, characterised by the desire to be true to one's own self and live life on one's own terms, flourished among the masses during the post-war era of consumerism and the self-understanding that came with it. Expressions such as "do your own thing" and "be yourselves in the world of today" are examples of the widespread adoption of expressivist values.[29] In the Age of Authenticity, the importance of meaning and personal fulfilment in one's spiritual path are emphasised. Other frameworks, such as religious or political ideologies, can be easily discarded. The emphasis here is on individuals and their quest for a spirituality that speaks to their experiences. This spiritual quest is portrayed in contrast to religion because, unlike institutional religion, there are neither authority claims nor normative rules. [30]

According to Taylor, the contemporary public space opens itself to unlimited pluralism. This is because individuals are free to choose their own path and are not required to conform to any external authority. [31] Individuals are free to pursue whatever interests or passions they feel inspired by. In the Age of Authenticity, Taylor

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[27]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.
[28]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.
[29]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.
[30]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 507–8.
[31]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 489.

argues that people exist within what he calls the "immanent frame," where various forms of belief and non-belief coexist. In this frame, individuals are characterised by a "disenchanted buffered self,"[32] as opposed to the "enchanted porous self"[33] of previous times. The immanent frame is based on the belief in a "natural" order, as opposed to a "supernatural" one, and in an "immanent" world, rather than a possible "transcendent" one.[34] For instance, the public institutions will be guided by norms drawn from an immanent "Modern Moral Order"[35] free from religious language. Even though Taylor indicates the withdrawal of religion from public space as a normative authority, based on Casanova, he acknowledges that religious discourse will continue to persist.[36]

Taylor indicates another aspect of contemporary pluralism. It is characterised by tensions between two extremes: closed immanence on one side and its inadequacy on the other.[37] These tensions can be observed throughout culture, as different middle positions exist in relation to these extremes.[38] Taylor also notes that there is a desire for something more or transcendent in our lives, which may or may not take the form of religion. Therefore "[o]ur age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief."[39]

Experiencing the tensions and conflicts between different belief systems and viewpoints can lead to a weakening or vulnerability of the options of belief and disbelief. This process, which he refers to as "fragilization," may have significant consequences for individuals and societies, as it can impact their ability to find meaning, belonging, and identity. Taylor observes that "[t]his mutual fragilization of all the different views in presence, the undermining sense that others think differently, is certainly one of the main features of the world of 2000, in contrast to that of 1500."[40] Taylor notes that the Age of Authenticity brings challenges and opportunities. In response, "Christian faith is in the process of redefining and recomposing itself in various ways, from

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[32]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

[33]By porous self, Taylor means that the self is "…vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces. And along with this go certain fears which can grip it in certain circumstances." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

[34]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.

[35]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 159–71.

[36]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 532.

[37]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 595.

[38]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 595.

[39]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 727.

[40]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303–4.

Vatican II to the charismatic movements."[41] The idea of a synodal Church is one such redefining and recomposing process.

Nodal listening, in the Age of Authenticity, calls for sympathetically engaging in conversation with individuals who seek spiritual wisdom but are not aligned with the Catholic Church. The time of colonial missionary journeys to unknown lands is increasingly becoming a passé. In contrast, nodal listening is an invitation to evangelise the authentic seekers of spiritual wisdom by accepting them as a node in the network of people of God journeying together. Nodal listening also calls for taking into account the possibility of unlimited pluralism in an authentic age. This pluralism is marked by extremes of total rejection of transcendence and complete acceptance of the transcendent reality, together with many middle positions. Nodal listening expects an attitude of generous acceptance of the other, who, based on these diverse orientations, would be inclined to views and acts which would be against the doctrines and traditions of the pilgrim Church.

Evaluating the Nuances of Networked Listening and Nodal Listening

Networked and Nodal listening are two constructive frameworks that could augment discussions and deliberations in the journey towards a Synodal Church. Taking into account the sociological analysis of Casanova, Networked listening indicates a way for a Synodal Church to respond to the reality of the continuing presence of religions in the public space. Instead of staying insulated from this reality, the Church must remain committed to opening a communication network among the religions. This communication network could equip the Church to respond to the prospects and challenges associated with the contemporary public space. For instance, the Church could be a "field hospital" for vulnerable migrants and marginalised minorities, a "protector of common home" for responsible environment stewardship and above all, the "mother in faith, [and] in supernatural life" for humanity.[42]

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[41]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 513.

[42] See: Pope Francis, "General Audience," August 28, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190828_udienza-generale.html; Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2015); Pope Francis, "General Audience," September 11, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/ audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130911_udienza-generale.html.

Taking a cue from Charles Taylor, the framework of Nodal listening highlights the need to focus on individuals. These individuals are characterised by a buffered self, not a porous self, and are integral to the network within and outside the Church. The freedom to pursue their inspirations without conforming to any authority makes them seekers of wisdom. This freedom puts them at odds with a well-defined institutional structure like the Church. Taylor sounds a warning: "Any church which has so many pat and ready-made answers, and so little sense of enigmas of existence is not likely to appear plausible to seekers today."[43] In this situation, Nodal listening calls for exploring the "relations and the communicative dynamics" offered by a synodal Church to engage with seekers. This engagement would create a "new ecclesial culture of taking advice and building consensus" and initiate a process of changing the model of the Church from a "pyramidal and clericalist model" to "one that learns and follows."[44]

Networked and nodal listening processes are dynamic, and the participants cannot remain passive. Their response must be befitting to the Synodal Church, which "is like a standard lifted up among the nations." This standard is ensured when listening is accompanied by personal and communal discernment. This discernment process "creates space for the guidance of the Holy Spirit" and clears the clouds of individual and communal prejudices that confine us to "ready-made answers or pre-formulated judgements."[45] The networked and nodal listening and discernment processes have to work in tandem to respond to the promising prospects and novel challenges for the Church highlighted through the works of Casanova and Taylor. This complementarity is emphasised in *Evangelii Gaudium*, emphasising the faithful and Bishops to work together "in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment" and encouraging the Church to be "bold and creative."[46]

The networked and nodal listening and discernment process reinforces the conventional framework of the Church and the creative framework of synodality. These two frameworks can increase the

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[43] Charles Taylor, "The Church Speaks - to Whom?," in *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, ed. Charles Taylor, José Casanova, and George F. McLean (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 19.

[44] Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), 2–3.

[45] Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church*, 53.

[46] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 33.

resilience of the Church in the twenty-first century when faced with the daunting task of reconciling the extremes, such as the homogeneity of the global and the uniqueness of the local, personal demands of the authentic individual and the collective requirements of the community, the rights of the native and the cry of the illegal immigrants, the recognition of religions in public space and the reservations of the secular movements, and the identity of a practising Catholic faithful and the identity of a seeker of spiritual wisdom.