

Got Community?

Liberalism, Catholicism, and the Search for Community in America

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It is a misperception that living in a relational world is an option. The only option is how one lives relationally.

-Bernard Lee, SM

Liberalism and the Big Bang

Community is one of those words like *family* or *friendship* that is almost always used with positive connotations. It is a warm and inviting word that conjures up images of people working together on common projects and coming together for fellowship and the joy of each other's company. Conservatives and radicals alike tend to embrace the concept of community. Of course, such universal affection for the term itself tells us very little in that we know that the beauty and status of any particular community is in the eye of the beholder.

When a community is fully functional, it is a lived reality rather than a theorized construct. In other words, people spend very little time thinking and talking about 'community' when it is working; it is like the water in the rain. Such pristine communities—whatever their particular attributes or qualities might be—are intelligible but not typically intentional. The notion of *creating* community reverses the existential order by placing essence before existence to the extent possible; it is creative, inventive, theoretical and intentional. It is also a particularly modern, rational and, therefore,

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Western approach. It is a process that has arguably reached its greatest fruition thus far in the United States of America—the “First New Nation.”

If we mark the beginning of the modern political mind with thinkers like Machiavelli and Martin Luther and continued on through the work of Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and, finally, Jean Jacques Rousseau, we could—time permitting—delineate a transformational history that is ultimately characterized by the rise of liberalism and the autonomous liberal state. The results of that liberal transformation become profoundly important for conceptualizing and defining *community*.

Where classical thinkers believed that community was both natural and prior to the individual, the contract theorists like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau argue that community is artificial or conventional and posterior to the individual. Stressing the idea of “self-ownership” as the first principle of natural law, they come to place a huge premium on the notion of voluntary consent. No extra-individual forms of association from families to communities to states can be legitimate unless the individual person agrees to his or her own participation in them. In turn, they retain some ability to withdraw their consent and refuse to continue their participation under certain conditions. The end result of this historical shift will be eventually to render all forms of community contingent and intentional, and to force all would be authorities to justify themselves to those over whom they claim power. The individual is, at least theoretically, protected from tyranny, and the fundamental equality and liberty of the person and his or her conscience is affirmed. Along with this there is also the sense that he or she should have a

role in shaping the social and political world in which they live. These are the essence of liberalism and the hallmarks of a liberal state.

While such a framework is so ingrained in contemporary Western thinkers, and some would say now even in the global community itself, that its victory strikes us as a quaint and practically preordained, it was the political and cultural equivalent of the Big Bang itself. From a relatively monolithic sense of a wholly interconnected world as symbolized by the idea of the Great Chain of Being, the liberal revolutions in England, France, the United States and elsewhere, led by members of the emerging middle class or bourgeoisie, eventually turned the existing social and political orders on their heads. In the explosion of energy unleashed by this movement, empires fell, royals were executed, classes were destroyed, and churches separated again and again. Upon the ruins new forms of government were erected, and new forms of social, political, and economic organization emerged. Just as the Big-Bang itself was simultaneously the single most destructive *and* creative event in the “history” of existence, so too was the advent of the liberal world order compared with what had preceded it.

In this world, anything seemed possible, which is, of course, both wonderful and terrifying at the same time. And this, in its most abstract form, is precisely why I believe we are now approaching our conversations about community so consciously and intentionally. In the modern world, the existence of any community is problematic and tenuous. In order to be legitimate, it must be voluntary. Furthermore, it must compete to some extent in the social and political marketplace with literally thousands of other choices. Because of the voluntary nature and competitive environment, strong and demanding forms of community will be weighed by rational, self-interested actors for

costs and benefits with a high premium on immediate gratification. In turn, all commitments tend toward the provisional, and few choices are actually forbidden to consenting adults.

Community and the American Village on Paradise Drive

Despite the fact that the American Puritans and other early settlers of various religious orientations still had pronounced beliefs in a transcendent order, they were at their core modern men and women insofar as they felt perfectly free to reject most traditional forms of social, political and religious authority and set out on their own to create and remake the world according to their own ideals and sensibilities. While Americans have often focused on the repressive and seemingly stilted nature of Puritan settlements and Puritanism itself, they have often neglected what is the most important aspect of the phenomenon, namely its utopian, creative and voluntary nature. However objectionable many contemporary Americans might find their particular communal choices, they should on closer inspection see in the form, if not the substance, of those decisions a mirror image of themselves. What is Massachusetts Bay circa 1630 if not the first American suburb?

Broadly understood, then, we can say that in its understanding of community as created through the voluntary choices of free individuals to accomplish agreed upon ends, America has been “liberal” in a general sense from its origin. Among the most cherished—though probably least talked about—rights in the American scheme of liberty is the right of circumlocution, the right to move about unimpeded, to go where we want to when we want to go. At the root of American culture is an apparent, though illusory,

paradox of a people who are at one and the same time thoroughly individualistic and voraciously communal. The reason the paradox is an illusion is that while notoriously jealous of their individual prerogatives in general, Americans are particularly jealous of their prerogative to join together with others in community. They are equally jealous, however, of the alternative prerogative, namely to quit or exit any community when it no longer suits their needs or beliefs.

This system, as we know, has not always worked perfectly. Relying on unfettered creative and inventive communal experimentation to foster and maintain stability is, to say the least, a little Pollyannaish. The only alternative, however, is to resort to either authoritative or even coercive forms of control or repression in a more traditional attempt to forge stability through communal uniformity and individual conformity. This, however, is at its simplest an anti-modern, un-American, and illiberal solution to the problem. Those few times in our history that we have actually tried to go that route have typically resulted in huge ruptures in the American social and political landscape.

Hence, in the modern socio-political context, “community” has become simultaneously all-pervasive *and* nebulous at the same time. While the following definition of community adapted from *Habits of the Heart* seems sound enough upon a first hearing:

A community is a group of persons who are socially interdependent, have a shared history and shared interests, participate together in conversations of discernment, decision making and action, and share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it.

It remains precarious for those for whom the idea of community carries a certain amount of normative weight. There are numerous groups who meet this definition of a

community who many would agree are lacking something essential. For example an organized crime “family,” or a devoted gang of drug addicts, or even the old KGB fit the general definition of a community above. Obviously there can be widely varying types of communities, not all of which strike the average observer as equally compelling, legitimate, or desirable. The postmodern dilemma, of course, is what standards, if any, can we agree to that would allow us to talk about “good” forms of community and “bad” forms of community without violating the principle of toleration and respect for individual autonomy that a liberal culture demands?

For many, these extreme and aberrant communities noted above can be dealt with rather easily, and in multiple ways. But, what can we say about other forms of “modern” community that flourish without violating liberal norms and, yet, which themselves undermine the common good through their own self-absorption and indifference? What, if anything, can we say to individuals who through their free choices undermine and diminish— often without any malicious intent— the choices others have made or would like to make?

To break this idea down a little, I would like to point to two recent “texts” that capture in very general ways a dominant trend in the relationship between community and culture in the contemporary United States. The first text is the recent film by the current master of suspense in American movies, M. Night Shymalan, *The Village* (2004). The second is the recent work of non-fiction by the conservative political journalist and regular news commentator, David Brooks, titled *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense* (2004). While both function at the level of

popular anthropology, the former also functions as a cautionary tale, while the latter is mostly celebratory and exultant. I will treat them in reverse order.

Brooks' poignant and witty book takes us on a fast paced tour of the contemporary social, cultural and geographic landscape of today's America. His focal point, as the title suggests, is not theoretical, but practical—*how we live*. Brooks situates his observations in suburban America because that is now where most Americans live. He describes the transformation in American living patterns over the last 50 years as “the great dispersal.” In all spheres of life, including the religious as well as the secular, Americans are shoppers. As Brooks puts it, “Americans go shopping for the neighborhoods, interest groups, and lifestyles that best suit their life missions and dreams.” While this certainly is not the stuff of deep devotion or the sort of ideal most people who talk seriously about “community” have in mind, it is an apt description of how most Americans pursue the American dream today. That dream, as Brooks puts it, revolves around the mastery of “tension, hurry, anxiety, and disorder.” In his words, “The suburban knight tries to create a world and a lifestyle in which he or she can achieve that magic state of harmony and peace.”

Communitarian purists find such pursuits so shallow that they refuse to grant such places the status of communities and instead refer to them as lifestyle enclaves or some other such term of lesser status. To the extent that they are correct in doing so, however, they are also forced by that same logic to acknowledge that more *authentic* or less superficial forms of community are not seen as desirable by many. In something of a response to critics like those, Brooks offers the following:

This common pursuit of the together life leads to the conformity that social critics have always complained about. On the other hand, the pursuit of tranquility is also a moral and spiritual pursuit. It is an effort to live on a plane where things are straightforward and good, where people can march erect and upward, where friends can be relaxed and familiar, where families can be happy and cooperative, where individuals can be self-confident and wholesome, where children can grow up active and healthy, where spouses are sincere and honest where everyone is cooperative, hardworking, devout and happy.

He closes the passage above with the simple question: “That’s not entirely terrible, is it?”

As suburbs turn into exurbs, even the old connection to big cities itself disappears as the new communities sprouting up in the middle of nowhere are increasingly self-contained. People do not even go into town to work anymore. The people who make this move, according to Brooks, “are infused with a sense of what you might call conservative utopianism.” It is a tale as old as the beginning of American time itself. Claiming near the end of the book that Americans “still live under the spell of paradise,” Brooks argues that Americans are constantly pursuing a kind of mythic perfection that leads them to live in the future so to speak. Everything and everyplace could always be better, but rather than the fidelity one might expect to grow from such an orientation, Americans constantly look for the blank canvass. At his most critical, Brooks refers to this phenomenon as “The American Dream devour[ing] its own flesh.” This, in turn, leads to his observation that Americans increasingly live “provisional lives.” Provisional because the vast majority of us are vowed to nothing and no place for longer than it is useful and services our needs and desires as individuals. At its most blatant, this is summed up in Brooks’ observation that there are few if any real rules or limits to such a world view: “What may be true for you may not be true for me. What may be true for me now might not be true for me later.” While those of an older more traditional mindset might be

inclined to see this “provisionality” as a sign of spiritual sloth and moral weakness—the transformation of infidelity to a virtue if you will— Brooks would be quick to remind them that it takes great pains, strenuous effort, and its own kind of discipline to live this way. Americans are risk takers and their pursuit of this sort of communal perfection is not without personal and financial costs. Unfortunately, however, there are enormous social costs and communal losses that are generated which those “conservative utopians” are either not cognizant of, or do not feel inclined to grieve over.

No where has this process been more vividly on display in all its facets than in the recent popular movie *The Village*. Although sold to the American public as a thriller with a surprise ending on par with Shymalan’s first big movie, *The Sixth Sense*, the film is, on my reading, a metaphoric docudrama on contemporary American society disguised as a big-time Hollywood blockbuster. The high level of expectation generated by the film coupled with the generally poor reviews tell us that on some level people did not get what they expected. What they did get, if they were only willing to see it, was a penetrating glimpse into the contemporary American communal mind.

The film is set in the aptly named Covington Woods—a name that conjures up both the traditional notion of covenanted communities ala Puritan New England and suburban developments across the United States simultaneously. The historical setting appears to be a pre-industrial judging from the clothing, mannerisms, language, and general lack of material goods. It is a seemingly pastoral and idyllic place of fraternity, peace, joy and happiness. The village is run consensually by a group of elders led by Edward Walker (played by William Hurt) and others who have fled to the village from the so-called “towns”—“wicked places where wicked people live”—with their families

and friends to form a more perfect community. Over the course of the film, the audience learns of a different character's tragic story of loss and suffering that have led them to the village from the towns. Time and again the upcoming generation of leaders symbolized by Ivy Walker, the blind, red-haired heroine (played by Bryce Howard) and her pensive and stoic love interest, Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix) are told by the elders of the murders, rapes and other crimes that have brought them to the village. This is done in an attempt to deter them and any other "innocents" among them from venturing into the towns. Despite this persistent socialization, the elders are still not sanguine enough to simply let the tales of decadence serve as the sole deterrent against temptation. They have also created a mythology about fierce creatures who live in the woods that will not only kill trespassers, but take revenge on the other members of the village as well should the border between the village and the woods be breached. To add realism to the tale, the elders periodically disguise themselves as the creatures and move about in the woods occasionally leaving stark evidence of their violent nature to be pondered by the members of the village. The creatures are simply known as "those we do not speak of."

The "farce," as Edward Walker will later call it, has obviously worked insofar as an entire generation of children has now come of age without having left the village. The fear of the creatures and the color red—the "bad color" that attracts "those we do not speak of"—has remained palpable throughout the village engendering the conformity and achieving the desired measure of social control intended. Indeed, the only request they have had to leave the village was made by the brave and pure Lucius Hunt who was willing to assume the risk in order to procure from the towns items that might actually strengthen the village itself! (Sadly, it never occurs to anyone that they may have had

some duty to “rescue” or aid those who were left behind in the towns). The joyful, but quite passionless village, of course, is eventually rocked, first by a series of disturbances attributed to the creatures of the woods (but known by the elders to be a member of the community) and subsequently by the attempted murder of Lucius by Noah (the mentally challenged young man played by Adrien Brody) over the love of Ivy Walker. In short order, the film begins its fast paced march to the finish. Ivy is told that there are no monsters and given permission to go through the woods to the “towns” for the medicine needed to save her now fiancé—Lucius. She is told repeatedly not to tell anyone about the village lest they follow her back and destroy it. The movie’s twist, of course, is the discovery of the audience—but not Ivy herself because she is blind—that the actual time period for the story is contemporary as she climbs the wall that surrounds the forest and is met by a friendly and helpful park ranger who is paid to keep others out of the “sanctuary.” While she is gone, the elders weigh heavily their decision to leave and come to Covington Woods and ultimately decide to stay and continue with their plan. Despite some drama, Ivy returns—even more convinced now than when she left that the stories were in fact true—and one is left with the impression that the village will carry on.

Although sold as a thriller and reviewed as a commentary on 9/11 inspired xenophobia, my reading of the movie is a little more pedestrian and little more telling, I hope. On that reading, the village itself becomes *the* metaphorical embodiment of American communitarianism. Its origins, fittingly enough, are in the chance meetings of strangers in a therapeutic self-help group for those in grief. Their *community* is not the by-product of a shared life, but rather an abject creation of individual wills. They literally create a utopian community through the acceptance of a “social contract” and an oath.

The survival of the created community requires that they wall or “gate” themselves off from the dangerous “cities” and literally end all contact. They are homogenous for the most part—there are no African-Americans or other people of color in the village despite the fact that we learn at the end of the film that it is situated just outside of modern-day Philadelphia—and they are very wealthy (though money plays no role in the village itself, it required an enormous outlay of capital to purchase it and sustain it). They are held together by a combination of their own dreams of perfection *and* their shared fear and distrust of others and difference—don’t go to the towns and “do not let them in” are the watchwords. With the exception of the needed medicine, the village is economically self-sufficient. The grass is green and plentiful, pollution is non-existent, the children all more or less happy, content, obedient and even noble, and, until that fateful day, there was no crime. In other words, *The Village* is for all intents and purposes a stylish and slightly austere version of the American exurb taken to its logical conclusion.

While both Brooks and Shymalan can be accused of caricaturing their subjects, it would be a mistake to lose sight of the basic and forceful appeal of what they have offered. Though not everyone’s image of perfection to be sure, these places—and more importantly the process by which they come to be—are inviting and hold out the real potential for happiness, comfort and a certain kind of human flourishing. Though Shymalan is the less celebratory of the two—he acknowledges that whatever you do “sorrow will find you”—most of us, I believe, at least secretly root for the village’s survival by the end of the film. When the elders rise up and vote to continue we rise with them; the question is why? Honesty about motives is rare and often dissonant cognitively speaking. We talk about what is to be gained—peace, safety, better schools, more green

space, and so on. We do not talk about what we are leaving behind and what will happen to it and the others. Americans rarely look back.

Community, Liberalism and Culture

While some Americans might be overtly critical of such communities, it is hard to imagine a significant number who would favor proscribing the rights of citizens to form them even if it was possible. In liberal states, individuals are relatively free to pursue their own independent visions of the good life as long as they do so in private, and the public realm exists primarily to protect individual rights and liberties, maintain order, enforce contracts and rationalize conflict. Broadly speaking, then, it is safe to say that the United States is a liberal state. Furthermore, despite a number of important dissenters and some caveats, it is also safe to say that the American citizenry is itself thoroughly liberal; we are the historical children of John Locke. No writer has made this point more forcefully than Louis Hartz in his still important work on American political culture: *The Liberal Tradition in America*.

Although Hartz's work is rather difficult to read and covers a lot of history in a relatively short book, the basic argument is as simple as it is provocative. What he argued was that despite the outward appearance of social and political conflict, there was a basic ideological consensus on political values, and that consensus was a liberal one. That basic consensus has resulted in an ironic situation where what "everywhere in the West has been a glorious symbol of liberty" has become a "threat to liberty itself" in this country. In pithier language he claims that in America "law has flourished on the corpse of philosophy." Simply put, since we are no longer permitted to call the basic political

foundations into serious question, we are in fact prevented in any meaningful way from challenging the apriori assumptions of the political order without being called un-American. This has meant that radical political groups from both the Left and the Right have been able to mount very little real opposition to the dominant ideology and that most groups who have sought to change the existing political order of a given day have had to conduct their politics in the language of liberalism itself. But, it is not only “political” radicals who would like to challenge the public consensus who find their dreams and goals undermined, ignored, and even repressed.

Building on the insights of Hartz, Philip Abbott, has worried that despite American’s penchant for inventing community, they remain locked into liberalism so deeply that they see any form of community that challenges the notion of individual autonomy as pathological and in need of restriction. As a result of this, he goes so far as to suggest metaphorically that Americans have a difficult time distinguishing “a convent from a concentration camp.” In other words, stronger forms of community that fail to allow for maximum personal autonomy are treated as suspicious and potentially deviant forms of community. Often the members of such groups are stigmatized and even marginalized in a public culture that prides itself on the fully “independent” citizen. Here is the great paradox of community building in an individualist political culture—we often seek stronger forms of community *precisely* because we have rejected autonomy as the central value we would like to maximize in our lives. However, in making an autonomous choice to choose some other value to maximize like “solidarity” perhaps, we are labeled as in-authentically autonomous! It is the proverbial “catch 22” of American

communal life. This fact ultimately makes any “non-liberal”—that is— any traditional or religious conception of community highly problematic.

This line of thought was mapped out earlier in the work of the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. In his most famous work, *Community and Society*, Tönnies differentiated between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) by arguing that the former was produced by man’s natural will (*Wesenwille*) and included things like the family, friendship groups, neighborhoods and religion, and the latter was the product of man’s rational will (*Kurwille*) and included things like universities, businesses and especially the modern state. As prefigured in the work of Marx, Tönnies argues that industrialization, economic growth and expansion along with what we would today call globalization tends to displace earlier forms of community as it increases the need for the expansion of society. It is not that “community” itself ceases, but rather it is increasingly rendered less and less potent in the public sphere. As per the argument above, those more traditional forms of community are increasingly privatized and “individualized.”

As the two spheres—community and society— are increasingly differentiated into more distinctively “public” and “private” fields, public life itself increasingly reflects the values and needs of “society” as it comes to be defined. The communities that individuals subsequently form to meet their private needs—whether more robustly communitarian or more thinly liberal forms of association—are in turn protected from too much external interference, but the price they pay for this is a severely limited or non-existent public role. Communities in this setting will seek equal resources for their respective projects and the maximum liberty consistent with the same liberty for other “communities.” In this way, many entities that appear to be communities are in fact simply collections of

individuals who are hopefully made better and happier by their association with other like-minded individuals. This, for modern men and women who embrace the basic tenets of liberal-individualism, is about as good as it gets: a fair and open social sphere where they can pursue the goods of the world and enjoy the fruits of their labor on an equal and just footing within the boundaries of the market, and a relatively safe and protected private sphere where they can create communities—or not—to their liking without needing to justify or defend their choices beyond the simple assertion that they find them comfortable and desirable. However, that consensus begs a huge question, namely what are we to do with communities whose explicit and even transcendent rationale for existence calls upon them not only to reject the guiding assumptions of liberal theory concerning the human person as argued for, but also the subsequent boundaries between “community” and “society” and the limitations on the political that have been derived from them?

Religion, Community and Liberalism

For those whose conception of community flows out of their religious convictions and traditions—their “natural will”—as compared to their “enlightened” self-interest or “rational will,” such a limited view of community is radically insufficient. I particularly want to make this case regarding a Catholic approach to community, and suggest that properly understood, the grounds and traditions of Catholic theology, social theory and thought must ultimately transcend not only the stark libertine individualism that liberal theory can lead to, but also most of the contemporary communitarian correctives that have emerged over the last four decades.

In a provocative and incisive essay titled: “Liberalism’s Religion Problem,” Stephen Carter argues that much of the time the basic tenets and procedures of liberalism are both consistent with and amenable to Christianity and Christians. But, he goes on to suggest, that, at their cores, there are certain irreconcilable tensions and differences that do not allow us to easily conflate the two without doing very real damage to the integrity of both. In other words, while those operating from certain Christian premises and those operating from liberal ones often end up in relatively similar places socially and politically speaking, those moments are not logically required, but instead represent happy coincidences. As Carter argues so cogently regarding the cleavage between the “liberal” citizen and the Christian “citizen,”: “From the Christian point of view, however, these commitments [to liberal conceptions of justice and procedure], while important, are insufficient. The first and highest duty of the individual Christian believer is to Christ.”

In turn, this means that for the Christian the allegiance to the liberal state (or any state or temporal authority) must always be contingent and conditional. While this is not much of an issue for the average believer most of the time, it is when pushed into the open and considered at a deeper level. As Carter puts it:

The trouble is that the state and the religions are in competition to explain the meaning of the world. When the meanings provided by the one differ from the meanings provided by the other, it is natural that the one on the losing end will do what it can to become a winner.

Thus, no matter how compatible or consistent a given political order might appear to be with the tenets of the faith, there remains an irreparable breach between the two that may be bridged, but never be fully “repaired.” Because the modern mind tends to be a reductive one, it tends to be quite ill-at-ease with this tension. And while that tension may

mean very little in the day to day lives of the average person—believer or not, it matters quite a bit when either first principles are addressed, or when there is a social or political disruption that violates the easy consensus we have struck. It is my argument that the idea of “community” often represents just such a situation.

Whereas the liberal state—in both its theistic and non-theistic forms—begins its theorizing with the solitary individual, Catholic-Christianity begins from a premise of relatedness. We are, the Catholic Church teaches, social creatures. In the language of *Gaudium et Spes*:

But God did not create man as a solitary, for from the beginning “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential.

Hence, it is only through relationships with others that we can enter into full communion with God—the first priority for the faithful. At the most philosophical-theological level the Himes brothers attempt to demonstrate how this idea can be “derived from its [the Church’s] understanding of reality and the human person.”

Beginning from John’s assertion that God is agape or pure self-gift and thinking through the command to “Love one another; just as I have loved you” (John 3:34), the authors develop a view of the Trinity that simultaneously requires that God be seen as the “giver and receiver and gift.” In turn, they then claim that: “‘God’ is the name of the relationship of an endless perfect mutual self-gift: in our traditional imagery, the Father gives himself totally to the Son, the Son gives himself totally to the Father, and the Spirit, proceeding from both, is the bond of that pure agapic love.” As the argument is extended, the authors come to a conclusion that holds that “. . . the doctrine of the Trinity is an

essentially radical political statement: it maintains that not only is human existence social but that the grounds of all being is relationship.” Combining this understanding of the Triune God with the understanding of human beings as created in the image and likeness of God as well as the call for perfection on our part, leads the authors to the assertion that “. . . to maintain that the human being is created in the image of God is to proclaim the human being capable of self-gift.” The logic of that claim allows them then to conclude that: “The human person is the point at which creation is able to respond by giving oneself in return. The fundamental human right is the right to give oneself away to another and ultimately to the Other.”

This is about as distant from the typical American’s image of the “independent” individual as we can imagine, and it, in turn, forces the faithful to think in very different ways about the nature and purpose of society, and the notion of individual rights. Under this scheme of rights, the authors argue: “The most fundamental human right is the right to exercise the power of self-giving, the opportunity for entrance into relationship. . . All other rights are derivative.” While such an argument is not necessarily at odds with the Lockean notion of “self-ownership,” it does render such a claim woefully incomplete. Furthermore, it is at odds with the possessive individualism that often results from Lockean premises. Under the approach outlined here, we “own” ourselves in order that we might “spend” ourselves in the service of others.

This idea, in turn, calls the faithful back to the Gospel of Luke and a reading of that text as requiring the “death” of the self when it says:

Then to all he said, “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross everyday and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it (Luke 9:24-25).

Like salvation itself, “community” is freely offered and may be rejected just as Satan rejected God, but it is not optional for those who would answer God’s call. Regardless of the immediate or temporal consequences that flow from our act of giving the self over to the community as agapic self-gift, the Christian is bound by fidelity and faith to do so—even at the price of suffering. This entire edifice has disconcerting implications for contemporary communitarians and liberal-individualists alike insofar as it requires the Christian to reject the requirements of political “privatization” or “neutrality” that liberal theory seems to require.

The dual nature—both public and private—of Christian community is captured by Bernard Lee, S.M. who argues that Christian community is a “hybrid” with both “primary characteristics” insofar as “members do care for each other—we are together the Body of Christ,” and “secondary characteristics” insofar as “members are strategically related to the coming-to-be of God’s reign in human history.” This leads him to claim that for the Christian “community is permanent mission” and that **“every Christian community is both gathered and sent”** [emphasis his]. Unless believers view it this way he writes:

. . . the group is either a support group or some kind of action group, both of which are socially necessary, but not fully community. . . “Gathered and sent” names both the inner life and the public life of a community. . .

I want to suggest that religious communities in the modern world are allowed more or less to be *gathered* without much fear or many restrictions. What the demand for public “neutrality” does, however, is it prevents those same communities from being *sent*. In other words, as religious communities, they are asked to refrain from participating in the

public realm as *religious* communities. This “privatization,” however, stands in stark contrast to the teachings of the Church and the theological implications of the Trinity.

To summarize the argument so far, Christians are created as social beings and obligated toward community in a manner consistent with the notion of agape or self-giving love. This is the primary means by which they demonstrate their obedience to God’s commandment to love one another as he loved us and come into fuller relationship and communion with God—the Christian’s ultimate goal. Among the ways that this is actualized, is the gathering together into communities of faith. But, because Christians are also called to serve the Other, they cannot simply remain private in their orientation—Christianity is a public faith with social and political obligations that result from its very nature. Contemporary conceptions of individualism and community, on the other hand, not only reject the idea of natural and obligatory community out of hand, but also reject as improper the participation of religious communities as *religious* communities in the public sphere. Since the only manner in which a Christian can truly justify their participation in the world as a Christian is through direct reference to their duty to serve God by giving themselves to others in community, the Christian communalist is forced under the prevailing consensus to either hide their true motivation or refrain from public life—both of which are not permitted by the faith as outlined. If all of this is not enough, there remains one final point to be made regarding the *qualitative* nature of that participation itself which too is problematic from the modern perspective when examined closely.

In the name of peace and order, liberal theory in its modern iteration has prioritized the “right” over the “good” because the diversity and pluralism of the modern

state makes any comprehensive attempt to come to agreement on *the* good problematic and socially risky. Instead, liberal theory, and for the most part practice, has limited itself to establishing a set of rights and processes that rationale self-interested individuals could be expected to agree to. In turn, the results of the process—as long as it was conducted fairly—are themselves deemed to be just. The most visible and familiar of such processes are the act of voting and the principle of majority rule (and minority rights) that we find in Western constitutionalism. While the development of these procedures and the corresponding attachment to the rule of law they are grounded in are highly welcome and praiseworthy developments in the history of political thought and culture, they do unfortunately lend themselves to a potential relativism that the Christian cannot embrace without serious reservations and great tentativeness. As deeply respectful as the Christian must be of procedural justice, longstanding practice and the requirements of peace and stability, they are not ultimate values. For the Christian, the ends matter; which is another way of saying that the Christian, although well cognizant and respectful of the “right,” must never prioritize it over the “good.” This is among the most important reasons why Christian communities, as *Christian* communities cannot fit perfectly into the liberal order as it exists.

In that order, communities that play by the “rules” as outlined tend to be inwardly focused on their private pursuits to the neglect of the larger world or political order. When they do play a political role it is done typically as an “interest” group seeking either protection or benefits for the group and its members. Members of Christian communities as defined herein are not legitimately allowed to neglect the larger world—they are “sent” as well as “gathered,” nor are they allowed to seek their own

advantage as an end in and of itself. Christians—especially in the Catholic tradition—are obligated to seek what is called the “common good.” Although myriad practical and pragmatic questions are involved in such an undertaking, the goal itself is one derived from a transcendent standard which must be intentionally pursued rather than the simple result of the interplay between individuals and interest groups. As noted earlier, it is fortuitous that many outcomes in a liberal order are congruent with what many Christians might have arrived at as the correct outcome or the “good,” but it need not always be the case. When the two diverge, the “good” and the “right,” the Christian and his or her community must do all that it can to side with the “good” so long as doing so will not create an even more pronounced evil.

This assertion mirrors the call of Pope John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* when calls upon the faithful in the following manner:

Once again we exhort our children to take an active part in public life, and to contribute toward the attainment of the common good of the entire human family as well as that of their own country. They should endeavor, therefore, in the light of faith and with the strength of love, to ensure that the various institutions—whether economic, social, cultural, or political in purpose—should be such as not to create obstacles, but rather to facilitate or render less arduous man’s perfecting himself. . .

Coming full circle now, this call to pursue the common good such that the perfection of the self—a self created in the image and likeness of God—is made less arduous should be seen as a call to make it less difficult for the individual to give one’s self to others in agapic relationship. Where liberal- communitarianism is best seen as protecting the right to withdraw into our own circles of family, friends, and others with whom we share certain likes and dislikes while pursuing happiness, Christian- communitarianism sees the protection of such communities as necessary but not

sufficient. The Christian preserves the self so that he or she is better able to give **it** away and help others to do the same. Modern individualism is ill-prepared to deal with such an idea in the intellectual, social and political categories in which it must think about such things. Simply put, community for a contemporary “liberal” is typically a *means* and community for a Catholic (or like-minded person) is an *end*. The watchword of the former could be—“progress,” and for the latter something closer to “sacrifice.”

The Future: A Conclusion

The picture painted in the forgoing pages is one of the good news/bad news variety. On one hand, the idea of community is alive and well in the United States. Americans continue to create, form and reform themselves into numerous groups for widely divergent reasons and purposes. On the other hand, this is attributable, I am afraid, to the increasingly porous and fluid nature of what counts as a community in the modern world. It is difficult to be sanguine about the future prospects for more demanding and less individualistic forms of community given the cultural orientation in which formation takes place.

David Brooks may be right when he claims that Americans are not as shallow as they seem, but they are “shoppers” or “consumers” who tend to view the various pieces of their lives in terms of costs and benefits and with at least one eye on the practical. It is not that we are somehow opposed to the idea of the “common good,” we are just not sure that such a thing could really work in practice. Of course, what we will not attempt collectively, we are all too ready to try individually or in our various enclaves. Unlike the

whole, we believe that as individuals and in our groups we *are* perfectible; we believe that we are just one good autonomous choice, move, or “purchase” away from the best life. It remains fully seductive precisely because of its elusiveness. And, as the work of both David Brooks and M. Night Shyamalan illustrate, such lives are in fact very demanding in their own ways. As a people we are bred to love the pleasures of the chase or the pursuit rather than the catching or the keeping. We are post-modernity enacted.

Living provisionally or “deconstructively,” then, is hard work. While the quest for order and stability through committing oneself to the utopian conservative life of “disciplined tentativeness” is not altogether logical, it does have its charms. One of those charms, however, is not the call to the heroic or selfless perseverance and constancy required to maintain something even in the face of difficulty and tedium. The special joys that are only available through the familiar and the time-honored cannot be purchased in the way that we buy “distressed” furniture or jeans that look well-worn right off the rack. In the greatest paradox of all, what we are often seeking can only be found by relinquishing our right to search any further.

Perhaps Dorothy from the *Wizard of OZ* got it strangely right when she discovered that what she sought was as close as her own backyard. Rather than viewing this as simple nostalgia, we might recognize it as a call to a sacramental view of the world that begins with the demand that we look around and see God where we failed to before. We must elongate and deepen our gaze, if you will, in order to truly see what is in front of us. This form of “morality” is also very demanding. Strangely, I would contend that this very fact can itself be seen as a positive thing. While we are a seemingly fickle people, we are not slothful. Americans work hard and welcome challenges, but we tend

more toward the “pioneer” than to the “settler” because we have failed to appreciate the depth and nobility of the latter while almost always recognizing the excitement and panache of the former. In such a culture, a vow of stability is quite counter-cultural. History, however, is, I would argue, ultimately on the side of the “settler.”

If we do not destroy ourselves, there will come a time when we run out of other places to go. The very smallness of the world itself will leave us little choice but to finally come to the sober realization that we are social creatures who must learn how to share the part of the world we inhabit both physically and spiritually. My hope is that by being in each other’s company that we will have great reason for finally making ourselves fully *present* to the Other. Despite serious misgivings about the present and our immediate future, there are other resources that at least allow us to be hopeful. Aside from the traits already mentioned—we are serious joiners, hard-workers, risk-takers and willing to face up to tough challenges—there is an important fact of American society that cannot be underestimated, namely our shared faith. Over ninety percent of Americans believe in God. Over eighty percent are some brand of Christian. Twenty-five percent of those who are Christians are Catholics. At a minimum, this means that we share significant pieces of what has been called a “second language;” a language that does not take the solitary-rights-bearing individual as its sole point of departure or ultimate metric of success and failure. The mere existence and promotion of the Marianists and their charism is itself testament to the resilience of the communal ideal. Hopefully the cultural theorist, Anne Norton, is both on target and for the good when she claims that “liberals must acknowledge that the success of their constitutional enterprise has created liberals who have recognized the limits of liberalism.” I count myself one of

them. Hopefully, what many believe is true—that human beings are made for and by community—will be made evident and, indeed manifest. Along with our faith, there are other reasons and signs that should lead us to such hope. However, the road is long and The Village beckons.