

**Community and Culture:  
Reflections from Contemporary Resources\***

**By**

**Christopher M. Duncan  
Department of Political Science  
University of Dayton  
[Christopher.Duncan@notes.udayton.edu](mailto:Christopher.Duncan@notes.udayton.edu)**

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*Culture preserves the map and the records of past journeys so that no generation will permanently destroy the route.*

- From *Damage*  
by Wendell Berry

*The grace that is the health of creatures can only be held in common.*

*In healing the scattered members come together.*

*In health the flesh is graced, the holy enters the world.*

- From *Healing*  
by Wendell Berry

*To posit and then theorize the individual as an abstract solitary may be helpful on the way to loosening feudal bonds and demarcating a clear space for rebels attempting to individuate themselves from a hierarchical and oppressive order. But it may appear as an obstructive exercise in nostalgia in an era when the binds that hold together free communities are growing slack.*

-From *The Conquest of Politics*  
by Benjamin Barber

**Introduction**

In this paper, I was asked to review contemporary scholarship on community and culture and to develop a practical framework or set of ideas to guide conversations by members of Marianist universities in their respective quests to build community on their campuses with an eye toward the even larger challenge of building an academic community that can sustain a dialogue between faith and culture. Such a task would be daunting to even the most exceptional scholar and intellect. Since I am neither of those

things, it is all but terrifying to me. Thus, in good academic fashion, I will attempt to answer a question more consistent with my own limited skills and knowledge.

Since the aim of this work is the development of a *praxis*—the combination of ideas and action, I will attempt to “unpack” the terms in ways that are relevant to educated discourse, and to provide a particular historical-theoretical view of their interplay that can help deepen our reflective capacity to inhabit in justifiable and meaningful ways the social space such discourse helps foster. In more colloquial terms, I want to explore how we “talk” it (community) and how we “walk” it. Culture, in keeping with the metaphor, represents the context where our “talks” and our “walks” have taken place in the past, will take place presently, and in the future.

This paper will proceed in roughly four parts. In part one, I will try to provide a sense of why we are embarking on this conversation and a picture of the historical terrain we have traversed. In the second part, I want to offer some definitions of the terms we are using to converse with and a sense of where we find ourselves today. In part three, I will explore some of the resources we have to aid us in our journey, and survey the dangers, difficulties and barriers we will encounter that will potentially hinder and impede the successful arrival at our destination. In the last substantive section, I will put forward a more robust and challenging vision of community and explore the fit between faith and community in our culture. Finally, in the most tentative part of the paper, I will try to help frame the practical considerations that flow out of the preceding analysis to begin joining together ideas and action.

## 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. The former tends to worry about preserving the community from corruption and decline, and the latter about how to rescue it after a perceived fall or to create it anew where, on their account, it has yet to exist. The American radicals of 1776 are good examples of the first type, and the French radicals of 1789 the second (see Arendt 1965). Every society has its conservatives. Of course, such universal affection for the term itself tells us very little in that we know that the beauty and status—existing, fallen, or potential—of any particular community is in the eye of the beholder. Hence, while healthy communities are usually marked by minimal violence and rationalized forms of conflict, defining and delineating the nature, structure and ethos of a community itself is often contested and can readily lead to both rhetorical and real violence.

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. A lived community is both the condition and the essence of its member's lives. It is *where* they live, *how* they live and in essence *why* they live the way they do. Such pristine communities—whatever their particular attributes or qualities might be—are intelligible but not typically intentional. They can be observed, understood and explained, but such an endeavor is existential in its orientation i.e. the essence of such a community can only be understood

through the reality and history of its existence. The notion of *creating* community represents an attempt to reverse that 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, Western approach. It is a change that began nominally with the birth of political philosophy itself in the Greece of Socrates and Plato, and arguably reached its greatest fruition thus far in the United States of America. Said philosophy, however, was in all likelihood a response to a critical historical shift rather than the cause of that shift. Let me elaborate, briefly.

Crisis breeds reaction, reflection, intentionality and reification.<sup>1</sup> Only when a community is threatened or experiences some sort of rupture, perceived loss or effectually ceases to exist do its members begin to take what has been lived and make it an object of study, theorization and explicit naming. Plato writes his *Republic* (still arguably the most intentional piece of communitarian literature in the tradition) in the aftermath of Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian Wars and the Spartan occupation of his city-state. Augustine writes his most famous work, *The City of God*, in the wake of Rome's great fall. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke can each be viewed as responding to the Puritan Revolution in England circa 1642-49, and its aftermath. And Father Chaminade himself is situated in the great swirl following the French Revolution. There is, however, an important difference between the work of the latter three thinkers and the work of the previous two exemplars that involves a crucial paradigm shift in the way in which the nature and fabric of the psycho-social world was understood, and, in turn, an

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<sup>1</sup> *reify* tr.v. To regard or treat an abstraction as if it had a concrete material existence. ( *The American Heritage Dictionary*). With the exception perhaps of a simple geographic definition of community that explains legally or socially understood boundary lines, there is really no such thing as a community until some collection of people is named such and the process of differentiation and qualification is undertaken. In this manner we could say that all self-conscious or intentional communities are in fact cultural artifacts.

important transformation in the manner in which questions about community were subsequently approached.

One can safely imagine that early communities formed out of necessity and through a relatively organic process of the expansion of familial units to clans and tribes (de Coulanges 1980). In such units, we can assume that actions and behaviors that began as instrumental or practical responses to the world early men and women were given gradually became habits which over time became customs which, still later, were transformed into traditions— all quite unintentionally and without much in the way of self-conscious theorizing. In such a world, there was no meaningful distinction made between what was “law” what was “custom” and what was “religious,” “moral” or “just.” The *Pentateuch* (the first five books of the Bible or the Books of Law) strike me as a good example through which to conceptualize such a community (if we assume that the general practices and proscriptions outlined there codified to a large extent preexisting communal practices among the Hebrew people, which I do). Political philosophy is born when two or more such communities come into contact with each other and realize their radical differences about fundamental questions of belief and social organization. Knowing that they cannot both be right i.e. assuming they worship different gods or some such thing, the attempt to resolve the difference in one or the other’s favor begins. Often this meant war and domination in the name of unity. Philosophy, originally understood as the quest for truth, was yet another way to choose between competing claims. The philosophic enterprise sought unity through reason rather than through violence, revelation or tradition. Toleration, we must remember, is neither a traditional religious virtue nor a classically philosophic one.

Hence, diversity or pluralism on important questions like how one ought to live, what or how one should worship and so on was not an option for thinkers like Plato Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas—theology itself is an enterprise that is rooted in the embrace of reason even if it is seemingly ironic to think about reasoning about revelation. However unattainable, the perfect (and therefore uniform) community was possible at least to envision and expose in speech and theory. For Plato, the ideal community was found in his Theory of the Forms; for Aristotle, in Nature itself; for Augustine, in the Heavenly City; and for Aquinas, whose project was to join reason and revelation together, in a Christian state. Although obviously very different from each other, what each of these thinkers had in common was the belief that the standard against which to measure truth or perfection was both real and transcendent. Human beings and their communities were expected and encouraged to conform to limits, laws and strictures that were external to their own conventions and desires if they were to be lasting and/or righteous. No where in American history is this idea expressed so plainly as by John Winthrop on the Flagship *Arabella* in 1630 as the Puritans arrived in what was to become Massachusetts:

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the Counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God, for this end we must be knit together in this work as one man, we must entertain each other in brotherly affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities. . . we must delight in each other, make each others conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our Commission and Community in the work. . . (Levy 1988, 12).

Those same faithful Puritans, however, were themselves located at a revolutionary crossroads of social, political, theological, religious, and philosophic history and thought.

At one and the same time they were emblematic of the old philosophic order and the forerunners of the order to come. They were historically situated at a turning point that began full bore with the thought and actions of people like Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Martin Luther (1483-1546) and continued on in the work of Rene` Descartes (1595-1650), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704), finally culminating in its purest form in the teachings of the theoretical architect of the French Revolution, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Though there were numerous other voices, these figures are quite representative of the historical transformation and should be familiar names to many. Although each thinker and their respective times are complicated and highly nuanced in their own right, I only want to use them suggestively here. At its simplest, this transformation is characterized by the rise of liberalism and the autonomous liberal state along with the corresponding ideological constructs of individualism and individual rights, consent, liberty, equality, democracy, limited government and private property.

While the social and political encasement and conformity often ascribed to the medieval period (roughly 500-1450 A. D.) is often overstated, there can be little doubt that the socio-political degrees of freedom increased dramatically starting at or near the end of Fourteenth Century. The power and control exercised by the Catholic Church simultaneously confronted the Protestant Reformation begotten by Luther and the rise of the idea of the autonomous state best depicted in the work of Machiavelli. In his infamous work, *The Prince*, Machiavelli turns away from the brand of political philosophy that had dominated Western thought for almost two-thousand years which was concerned primarily with how to achieve the just political order, and instead focused his attention on what we now call *real politick*. In that work, Machiavelli attempts to



make the case for the pursuit of power as an end in itself. In doing so, he ultimately rejects in practice, if not in theory, the idea of transcendent standards against which state action could be measured and judged, and, in turn, contends that each state is its own autonomous source of values and morality. Although vehemently denounced in theory, there is a good historical case to be made that Machiavelli's ideas were all too accurate a description of much of European practice, even among so-called ecclesiastical states.

Whatever larger arguments might be brought to bear upon such questions, the upshot of this line of thought is that unity, authority and power were in the process of being radically divided and multiplied. Although he himself remained committed to a transcendent standard, Martin Luther contributed greatly to this process through the theological revolution his notions of salvation by faith, the priesthood of the believer, the preeminence of scripture, and the corresponding depiction of church as a voluntary association or community of believers begat. While certainly not a political liberal, Luther's theology contributed to the fragmentation of social and political authority by sanctioning the idea of national churches, and to the rise of individualism through the fostering of freedom of conscience logically entailed in his defense of a right to interpret scripture for one's self, and the corresponding idea of an unmediated relationship with God. Those changes (along with those described by Machiavelli), though ostensibly religious in nature, have implications for the eventual understandings of community which were soon to emerge as we will see.

Regardless of his Jesuit education, Rene` Descartes stands at the forefront of the philosophic and scientific revolutions that mirrored the rise of the autonomous nation state and the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, I would argue that his *Meditations on First*

*Philosophy* could be viewed as the extreme, but logical, outcome of Luther's theological insights. Contained in his most famous dictum, "*cognito ergo sum*" ("I think therefore I am"), are the original seeds of the entire modern project. After "rejecting" all authority, tradition and even experience itself as potentially false, Descartes sets out to discern the truth about God's existence as well as his own by looking psychologically inward for that rational knowledge that preceded all such things. In his own words:

And as I converse only with myself and look more deeply into myself, I will attempt to render myself gradually better known and familiar to myself (1979, 23).

After discovering that he is "a thing that thinks," Descartes eventually comes to believe in the existence of God because the thought of God could not have come from nothing, not from himself. In simplified form, God exists because the idea of God exists in Descartes' mind.

Without commenting on the merits of such an argument (one that eventually claimed vast numbers of adherents throughout the educated world), I would like to draw attention to the larger implications of the Cartesian method for our conversations about community. From Aristotle through Aquinas and up until that historical moment, the guiding understanding of human beings saw them as primarily social creatures who reached their full potential as beings through their relationships with others—communal relationships. In effect, all self-knowledge was in fact knowledge gleaned through our relationships and conversations with others and through the process of mutual recognition described by Hegel (1977, 111-19). In contemporary philosophy, Charles Taylor (1991) has referred to this as "dialogical individualism" and a little earlier Richard Weaver

(1987, ch. 5) called it “social-bond individualism,” which both compared and contrasted dramatically with what might be thought of as either the “monological individualism” of Descartes or the “possessive individualism” of Hobbes and Locke (discussed below).

Whatever else the method entails, its clear metaphoric value is to displace strong notions of community as the forerunner to personal identity and replace it with the picture of the solitary individual discovering his or her true self by looking within his or her own mind and thoughts. While this clearly carves out very important space for individual conscience, the question is begged as to what this means for the relative strength and viability of any conception of community which is not grounded in an individual will or free choice. This is precisely the point of departure for the social contract theorists, and ultimately will come to be the single most important development in democratic theory and the rise of the liberal state. In turn, it will become profoundly important for the way in which the idea of community itself is conceptualized and argued.

Thomas Hobbes, the author of the first comprehensive work of political theory in the English language, *Leviathan* (1651), was a contemporary of Descartes, friend to Galileo, and supporter of Charles I, and tutor to Charles II. After the beheading of Charles I in 1649 by the Puritans, the rise of Cromwell to power and the creation of a commonwealth, he fled to exile in France with Charles the II. In his most famous work, Hobbes takes direct aim at Aristotle and all the other “old philosophers” whom he rejects on the basis of their lack of empirical grounding and scientific method. Rather than looking for some transcendent standard by which to measure human behavior and conduct against, Hobbes begins with what can be measured. Rejecting any talk of metaphysics or transcendence as nonsensical (because there can be no such thing as an

immaterial material), he looks to the human being as a sensory creature who is defined by his or her capacity to experience pleasure and avoid pain. Human nature, on his view, defines human beings not as social creatures, but rather as pleasure seeking and pain avoiding animals. In his account, all reason is instrumental in nature and designed to gain more of what gives one satisfaction and less of what causes one discomfort. In place of any conception of natural law, Hobbes substitutes the idea of the law of nature. Under the latter, the strong attempt to dominate the weak, the weak band together to defend themselves against the strong, and everyone has a right to everything they can lay claim to and hold through their own ingenuity and power. He calls this world of every man for himself the “state of nature.”

The implication here is rather straightforward, namely that the natural state of human beings is not social, but asocial, atomistic or individualistic. Hobbes writes of this natural state that it is best described as a constant war of all against all, in which everyone lives in constant fear of violent death, and where, in his most famous phrase, “life is nasty, brutish and short.” Because we are pleasure seeking and pain avoiding creatures, life in such a precarious state gives those individuals all the incentive they need to form compacts with each other for their mutual benefit and protection. This process he refers to as the formation of a social contract. It is through mutual consent and agreement whereby the political community is formed. Hence, rather than human beings being the product of a community, the community is created by them to serve and protect their interests as they understand them. Although this basic approach will be significantly refined by social contract thinkers like John Locke (1690) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762), over the next hundred years, the basic die is cast.

Where classical thinkers believed that community was both natural and prior to the individual, the contract theorists argue that community is artificial or conventional and posterior to the individual. The subsequent work of Locke and, to an even greater extent, Rousseau will come to enhance the model's normative aspects in ways ignored by Hobbes' rather matter-of-fact description of the process. Stressing the idea of "self-ownership" as the first principle of natural law, both thinkers 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 a certain 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 [Fukuyama 1992]) that its victory now 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, and noted for its such implications as the Divine Right of Kings and the existence of a vastly

unequal feudal world of rigid hierarchies, 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, new forms of social organization emerged, economies collapsed and were born again with ferocity and so on I could go without even coming close to overstating the case. Just as the Big-Bang itself was simultaneously the single most destructive *and* creative event in the “history” of existence—a process that continues unabated to this day, so too was the advent of the liberal world order compared with what had preceded it. No one has captured this more profoundly than Karl Marx himself when he writes of it in 1848:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned. . . (1948 , 12).

Because he saw this age as historically necessary to usher in the next stage of history, Marx was on the whole pleased with this development. In shattering the structure of the classical world, liberalism unleashed the required energy to give birth eventually to the new order and new man he envisioned in the final stage of human history. Without embracing either Marx’s dialectical materialism or his communism, his sense of the sheer magnitude of change is useful and telling. Anything seemed possible, which is, of course,

both wonderous 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, and with individualism itself. Finally, 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 that are often looked at on only a short-term basis with a high premium on immediate gratification to the neglect of long-term considerations and any real regard for the common good itself. In turn, all commitments tend toward the provisional, and few choices are actually forbidden to consenting adults. Perhaps T.S. Eliot said it best in his essay *Christianity and Culture*:

That Liberalism may be a tendency towards something very different from itself, is a possibility in its nature. For it is something which tends to release energy rather than accumulate it, to relax rather than fortify. It is a movement not so much defined by its end, as by its starting point; away from, rather than toward something definite. . . Liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation (1948, 12)

### **Community and the American Village on Paradise Drive**

Despite the fact that 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 (Duncan 1995, ch.1). In this regard, however objectionable many contemporary Americans might find their particular communal choices—as well as those of the Quakers in Pennsylvania and the Anglicans in Virginia, 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. While perfectly comfortable with the notion of a divine Creator who is the author of natural laws, Americans are probably the first people who believe that their personal happiness is among God’s highest priorities. In place of an older faith that demanded obedience and often suffering from the faithful, God in America is the defender of individual rights and liberties and, increasingly, is viewed as the facilitator of personal growth and worldly success (Bloom 1992; Prothero 2003). 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 (Hirschman 1970).

Oddly, this is not only part of the American cultural fabric, it is built directly and purposefully into our constitutional system itself, according to none other than James Madison. Where from virtually the beginning of political time nations had seen the multiplication of distinct groups within the whole as a threat to unity and a sign of communal weakness, the American founders actually sought the exponential multiplication of such groups in the name of stability itself (Madison, Hamilton & Jay [1789] 1988). Hence, the maxim *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many one). Unity *in* diversity. Till this day no one has captured this unique aspect of American culture better than one of its earliest observers, Alexis de Tocqueville. In his famous work, *Democracy in America* ([1835] 1988), Tocqueville worried openly about the pervasive individualism in America, which he differentiated initially from an older term like egoism, writing:

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. Egoism springs from a blind instinct; individualism is based on misguided judgment rather than depraved feeling. It is due more to inadequate understanding than to perversity of the heart. Egoism sterilizes the seeds of every virtue; individualism at first only dams the spring of public virtues, but in the long run it attacks and destroys the others too and finally merge into egoism (506-07).

The end result of this process for the person him or her self was that they would become increasingly isolated from both their ancestors, their own children and even their friends and become “shut up in the solitude of [their] own heart[s]” (508). However, Americans, according to Tocqueville, thwarted this process by their robust penchant for forming and joining various groups and associations. In other words, by using their individual choice to choose various forms of community, Americans were able to sustain and reproduce the social capital necessary to remain the functional *community of communities* the constitutional scheme depended upon and prevent the slide into egoism and narcissism that would result in their own personal alienation. In this way, what was once thought to require virtue, discipline and obedience could seemingly be produced by self-interested individualism, the pursuit of happiness and the willingness to respect the rules (read rights of others) of the larger political game.

This system, as we know, has not always worked perfectly. By relying in large measure on something as fluid and self-referential or solipsistic as the virtually unfettered creative and inventive communal experimentation found in American culture to foster and maintain stability is, to say the least, a little Pollyannaish. The only alternative, however, was to resort to coercion and various forms of 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. While perhaps necessary on occasion, the witch trials in Salem, the carnage of the Civil War, the lawlessness of Prohibition, and the general unrest of the 1960's have made us

cautious and reserved in our demands for national unity. By the time John F. Kennedy uttered those memorable words: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your country,” we know that the national communal game was more or less already lost. The fact that no president since has really tried to make “sacrifice” a prominent theme of his campaign or administration with any success is also quite telling. Much like “God” in America, presidents have made the personal happiness and material success of their constituents their first priority.

At this historical point and in this socio-political context, “community” has become simultaneously all-pervasive *and* nebulous at the same time. The following definition of community adapted from *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1984) 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 (see glossary).

However rich this definition potentially is, it remains precarious for those for whom the idea of community carries a certain amount of normative or even moral weight. There are numerous groups who meet this definition of a community who many would agree are lacking something essential. For example and 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 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?

While the sorts of extreme examples of aberrant communities above can be dealt with rather easily, and in multiple ways i.e. their devotion to illegal practices, their own rejection of the rights of similar groups to form and act on them the way they act on others, the fact that their form of community cannot sustain itself without treating others within society as means and so on, what can we say about other forms of community that flourish without violating liberal norms and yet which themselves undermine through their own self-absorption and indifference the common good? 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—we are the most religiously diverse nation on earth with over 1600 different faiths, denominations and sects—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” (10). 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.” “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” (42).

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 (see Bellah et al. 1984). 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 (44).

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 (90% of the office space built in American during the 1990’s—a period of great economic growth—was built in the suburbs) (2). The people who make this move, according to Brooks, “are infused with a sense of what you might call conservative utopianism” (48). 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” (270), 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” (273). 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”(277). 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—in what appears to be a pre-industrial time period judging from the clothing, mannerisms, language and general lack of material trappings (the newly made grave marker of a young boy’s reads 1890-1897). 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 in 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 and occasionally leave 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 and engendered the conformity and achieved 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! 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 towns-cum-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 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—what they do not have they have learned to not want or need. 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 (the absence of any jail beyond the “quiet room” attests to this). 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 (on my reading of him at least) 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? Perhaps the line delivered by Ivy Walker is true

in this context as well as the one in which she uttered it: “Sometimes we will not do things we want to do so that others will not know we want to do them.” 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. As modern men and women our first duty is to the self; we owe it to ourselves to be happy we will often claim without much thought as to exactly where such a duty might have come from in the first place. It has what contemporary men and women love contained in its idiom—the sound of authority and tradition without the weight or moral force thereof. In the next section, I will explore the philosophical and cultural foundations that help foster and sustain this transformation in the ways we think about community.

### **Community, Liberalism and Culture**

The most important work in political philosophy in the second half of the twentieth-century is usually acknowledged—by fellow-travelers and critics alike—to be *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls (1971). The best known portion of that long and complex work deals with what Rawls calls the “original position” and its counterpart the “veil of ignorance.” To find an objective point of departure for conversations about justice, especially distributive justice, Rawls asks his readers to imagine themselves as disembodied individuals with no knowledge of who they are or what the world they will inhabit will look like, or how it will be structured. This means a person will not know if they will be born male or female, rich or poor, healthy or sickly, strong or weak, gay or straight, highly intelligent or mentally challenged; they will not know their race or

nationality, or even their likes or dislikes, and so on. All a given individual does know is that they will enter a world in which there will be scarce resources—meaning that everyone will not be able to have everything they might desire or need—and that each person will want as many of the goods of the world as possible in order to maximize their own ability to pursue happiness and a meaningful life, however such a life is defined eventually. These individuals are then asked to construct the broad distributive and political principles (a social contract) that will govern this soon to be inhabited world based purely on their now thoroughly objective “self-interest(s).” (Since we could literally be anyone, the way to think about this is along the lines of what any “self” would minimally want/need to pursue their life’s project).

The implications for a theory of justice can be made evident quickly: First, the argument goes, we would all want equal shares of the primary goods of the world unless an unequal distribution would generate more goods overall for each of us i.e. through economic growth. Second, we would all want to share in decision making; third, we would all want the maximum liberty consistent and compatible with the same liberty for others to pursue our own life projects. In academic philosophy, this view is one that prioritizes the “right” over the “good;” it is fundamentally concerned with process rather than ends and goes by the term “justice as fairness.” In such a world, the “good” is plural and assumed to be whatever results from the free actions and exchanges of individual citizens pursuing their individual ideas of happiness. In turn, any comprehensive or transcendent conception of what used to be called “the good life” (like one that might be derived from religious belief and devotion) is relegated to the private realm of individual conscience. As one writer in a similar vein argued, the language of public/political

discourse must be “neutral” with regard to such ideas since they ultimately end up involving “a privileged insight into the moral universe which is denied the rest of us” (Ackerman 1980, 10).

In Rawls’ own subsequent work, *Political Liberalism* (1993), he extends both Ackerman’s argument and his own formulation of justice in a direction designed to reflect the structural and essential diversity and pluralism of liberal-democracies by turning to his attention away from the more abstract notions of *A Theory of Justice* to the idea of “over-lapping consensus.” Simply put, this approach takes the “reasonable” and shared (“over-lapping”) points of agreement between various “comprehensive” doctrines and contends that they represent the basis for social unity and sound constitutionalism. The central concept that emerges from this is the idea of “public reason,” which is on par with Ackerman’s notion of “neutral” dialogue except to the extent that certain longstanding beliefs that may have once involved “privileged insights” might now be admissible because they are sufficiently wide-spread and agreed upon that no one tradition or group “owns” them. In this manner, the less “consensus” the less legitimacy.

Now, of course, there is something both inherently appealing in this idea for those who are in favor of limiting the amount coercion and potential oppression and violence in a given society as a practical matter, as well as for those who take the principle of toleration as a serious ethical idea. When one begins to think through the actual content of the current “consensus” there is also a large comfort factor i.e. it does not ask for much in the way of positive duties or changes in the way the majority of people in advanced liberal-democracies live, and it severely limits the amount of intrusion permitted into our personal choices and affairs by other individuals and groups. However, a number of

questions are in fact begged by both the original version of the argument as well as the “political” version, including whether the “original position” can have any real currency if the construction of the human person is so remote from reality and, perhaps, even the truth that its ultimate usefulness or analogic import is rendered superfluous, or what if the actual ability to sustain a particular “consensus” itself somehow depended on a given comprehensive doctrine whose initial entrance into the public realm or discourse did in fact violate the principle of neutrality? Holding off on those questions for now, there is a less philosophic question that is of particular importance for a nation like ours, namely what do we do with people who hold “comprehensive” ideals that carry within them an injunction against “privatization” i.e. ideals that explicitly reject neutrality?

Both Rawls and Ackerman spend a good bit of time on that latter question in their own ways, and numerous other critics have addressed the more philosophic aspects of their work. The reason I have spent so much time with them here is despite the numerous critics of their approaches, I would argue, their positions or ones that more or less mimic them are both ascendant and dominate in American public life.<sup>2</sup> Their arguments provide the intellectual infrastructure that helps sustain a strongly liberal (Lockean) conception of the state. In such 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

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<sup>2</sup> While the economic implications of his system have certainly not been adopted, the implied objectivity inherent in the original position and the veil of ignorance have clearly informed the way we think about the distribution of certain social rewards like school admission and employment.

historical children of 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* (1983).

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. Where so much political writing had focused on conflict—what divided us ideologically, Hartz looked at what we had in common. What he discovered 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. However nasty some of our political debates were, they remained debates about means rather than ends. While we might argue vehemently over how to protect individual rights, we almost never have real debates about whether individual rights are among the most important values to worry about. While we argue over the best means for ensuring democracy, we never argue over whether democracy is itself the right political system. While we argue over how to best define and extend equality, the vast majority of Americans would never think to argue that all of us were **not** created equal. In other countries, indeed other Western democratic countries, these arguments still take place and have for centuries between political parties who compete against each other in free elections. Symbolic or not, England still has a Royal Family! As a result of this sort of logic, it is pretty safe to say that were most American Democrats and Republicans transported to another nation they would actually be members of the same party rather than in opposition to each other.<sup>3</sup> Although some writers have celebrated that basic consensus (Boorstin 1953; Diggins 1983), Hartz saw in

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<sup>3</sup> In Appendix A, I have put together a kind of structural definition of the liberal mind based on the work of C.B. Macpherson to help get at this point with a little more specificity—if there is general agreement with the thrusts of those basic propositions among the American populace Hartz's argument is mostly accurate.

it something much more insidious and socially ominous, namely the “danger of unanimity” (11).

Hartz contends that the basic liberal consensus in American political culture 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 (11). In pithier language he claims that in America “law has flourished on the corpse of philosophy” (10). Simply put, since we are no longer permitted to call the basic liberal foundations into serious question we are in fact prevented in any politically meaningful way from challenging the apriori or foundational assumptions of the political order without risking claims of un-American behavior and thought. 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. In other words, most political movements, like say the Civil Rights Movement, have not argued that the American way was wrong, but rather that the nation was not in fact living up to its own claims. Those who have made patently illiberal arguments in American history, like the defenders of slavery or Communists, strike us for the most part as ridiculous and so deeply flawed as to not even be worthy of consideration politically speaking. Hartz himself was actually a frustrated social-Democrat and so he knew firsthand how difficult this intellectual “iron cage” could be for serious political thinkers. 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 in the land of liberalism’s most pervasive realization.



One theorist of American political culture whose work has built on the insights of Hartz, Philip Abbott (1976; 1987; 1991), 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 (1987, 173). 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" (1987, 175). 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 and quite often the members of such groups are stigmatized and even marginalized in a public culture that prides itself on the fully "independent" citizen. Here, of course, 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 (Abbott 1987, 174); instead, "other goals are sought: solidarity, other-worldly-contemplation, cooperation," and so on (Abbott 1987, 174). However, in making an autonomous choice to choose some other value to maximize, we are labeled as in-authentically autonomous! It is the proverbial "catch 22" of American communal life.

Along with Rawls and Ackerman, Hartz had his own critics who argued that his depiction of the American cultural story was incomplete or overstated (Smith 1993), however, the more pronounced response came from those who agreed with his basic analysis and sought ways to both confront and overcome what they believed was a deeply flawed social and political culture. Communitarians of all political stripes and with widely varying agendas from the left (Walzer 1983; Unger 1975; 1987), the middle

(Barber 1984; Sandel 1982; 1984; 1996; Taylor 1989; 1992; Wolin 1960; 1989), and the right (Elshtain 1995; Genovese 1994; Will 1983), to the religiously inspired thinkers (Bellah et al. 1985; Lasch 1991; MacIntyre, 1981; Taylor 1999; Tinder 1980) to multiculturalists like Kymlicka (1989), and on and on the list could go, set out to strike back at the liberal-individualist monolith dominating the American mind. Doing a great injustice to the fine works listed here and the many others not accounted for in this brief list, I want to suggest that despite their valiant attempts to break free from liberalism's pull, many of these works share at their deepest level its core commitment to individualism and choice. At the point of oversimplification, I would argue that many contemporary communitarian tracts are in essence simply competing for the allegiance of the sovereign individual's loyalty. It is as if, they are saying that in choosing "community" you will be healthier and happier than you will be if you choose a less demanding life. The metric has not changed i.e. personal fulfillment, only the means. If I am correct, then I would argue that this insight is one that eventually allows us to make an important distinction between an Aristotle and an Aquinas, between "liberal" communities and "religious" communities that will make communal enterprises of the latter variety even more problematic—even, if not especially for, religious citizens as we will see in the next section.

Much contemporary work on the question of "community" does not begin with the emergence of liberalism as I do, but instead takes its bearings from the work of the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. In his most famous work, *Community and Society* ([1887] 1963), 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." A quick example might help clarify this point. Ask yourself why it used to not only be perfectly acceptable to hire members or one's family, friendship group, or even religious denomination before hiring equally or even more competent strangers or outsiders and today there are rules in most liberal societies that prohibit nepotism, "old-boys networks," and religious discrimination? The answers would have to do with merit, efficiency, competition, equality of opportunity and individual rights—in other words liberal ideals. Indeed, in a country like the United States, affirmative-action programs and institutional commitments to diversity actually ask us to favor the "stranger" and the "other" in the name of justice and fairness.

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 are simply collective manifestations of Rawlsian individuals in the original position who will seek equal resources for their collective 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. In the next section, I will turn to the significantly more difficult questions that have so far only been raised implicitly, 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**

As Robert Putnam (2000) and others have pointed out in their own ways, there might be very good “liberal” reasons for worrying about the privatization of community or the loss of traditional modes of community, insofar as those events equate to a reduction or loss of the social capital necessary to sustain society altogether. But as

important as those reasons are, they remain mired in the utilitarian logic of possessive individualism in that the root question is still ultimately concerned with something on par with the “greatest good for the greatest number,” and where the “good” is defined as the collective preferences of the individuals involved. Although I do not want to overly disparage this approach—there are many alternatives that have far less going for them than this one, I do want to suggest that this approach is radically insufficient for those whose conception of community flows out of their religious convictions and traditions (natural will) as compared to their “enlightened” self-interest (rational will). In particular, I 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 the contemporary communitarian correctives that have emerged over the last four decades.

In a provocative and incisive essay titled: “Liberalism’s Religion Problem,” the well known social critic Stephen Carter (2002; see also 1993) argues that much of the time the basic tenets and procedures of liberalism are both consistent with and amenable to Christianity and Christians in general. 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 (22).

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 (see Tinder 1989). This conditionality is not typically much of an issue for the average believer because of a combination of the coincidental parity mentioned above, and the cognitive dissonance daily life often demands that we live with in order to function in our given society. However, when pushed into the open and considered at a deeper level, believers and liberals alike are confronted with the following sort of issue put forward by Carter:

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 (23).

Thus, no matter how compatible or consistent a given secular 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 “repaired” such that they were made into a whole. To make the world “whole,” so to speak, would ultimately mean that one was engulfed and consumed by the other thereby leaving a monolith or leviathan in place of the pluralism and dynamic tension that marks a healthy social order. Simplistically put

in the case before us, the result of religion engulfing the liberal state would be to try to make the “secular” “sacred,” which could only result in a brand of idolatry, or, in the case of the state engulfing the faith, rendering the “sacred” “secular” thereby resulting in blasphemy. Because the modern mind tends to be a reductive one i.e. we are led by the demands of intellectual consistency to seek out the so-called logical conclusion of an argument, it tends to be quite ill-at-ease with the idea of mystery and paradox.

The religious mind (especially the Christian mind), however, is not only at ease with such things, it is based on them i.e. the virgin birth, the incarnation, the resurrection and so on. While such differences may mean very little in the day to day lives of the average person—believer or not (see Coles 1999)—they ultimately do matter quite a bit in the larger scheme of things where either first principles are addressed, or when there is a social or political disruption or disputation that violates the easy consensus we have struck—Christians and “liberals”—and forces upon us a true and typically dichotomous choice between alternatives. It is my argument that the idea(l) of “community” represents just such a situation, especially in the Catholic tradition as it has developed in the last hundred years. In other words, as Catholic social and political teaching has gradually made its peace with the liberal state and come to recognize the number of things it has in common with it, the fact that they get to certain shared positions in fundamentally different ways has been conveniently overlooked, unrealized or ignored in unsustainable ways once strict attention is paid and “community” becomes an object of inquiry and debate itself.

Whereas the liberal state—in both its religious (Locke) and non-religious forms (Hobbes)—begins its theorizing with the solitary individual, 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. (1994, 13).

Just a few pages later this same point is amplified still further:

Since this social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny (1994, 24).

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” (1993, 55).

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, you must love one another” (John 3:34), and the injunction to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” the authors develop a view of the Trinity that simultaneously requires that God be seen as the “giver and receiver and gift” such that they can 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” (57). As the



argument is extended, the authors come to a conclusion that holds: “Thus 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” (59). Combining this understanding of the Triune God with the understanding of human beings as created in the image and likeness of God (*imageo Dei*) and 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” (59). 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” (59).

This, of course, is about a distant from the American liberal’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” (61). 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 give ourselves away.

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 at least two major and disconcerting implications for contemporary communitarians and liberal-individualists alike that can be made evident with a quick set of logical calculations. The first problem has to do with the priority of the right of over the good that Rawlsian individualism leads to, and the second is the rejection of the requirements of “privatization,” “neutrality” or “public reason” that liberal theory seems to require. I will take them in reverse order.

Bernard Lee, S.M. argues in his paper, “Community in Catholic Culture,” that Christian community is a “hybrid” in that it has both “primary characteristics” insofar as “members do care for each other—we are together the Body of Christ,” and “secondary characteristics” “because members are strategically related to the coming-to-be of God’s reign in human history” (4). This leads him to claim that for the Christian “community is permanent mission” and that “every **Christian community is both gathered and sent**” (4 [emphasis his]). In further clarification he writes:

Christian community as hybrid: both gathered and sent. Otherwise, the group is either a support group or some kind of action group, both of which are socially necessary, but not fully community (but often seed-beds for community). “Gathered and sent” names both the inner life and

the public of a community (the public life sometimes is political in nature, as with the prophets and certainly with Jesus) (4-5).

Although my use of this concept may not mirror Lee's as faithfully as he might like, I want to suggest in the context of this paper that religious communities in the modern or liberal world are (thankfully) allowed to be *gathered* without much fear or many restrictions.

What liberalism's demand for "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. Here again, I take my lead from the Himes Bothers (and Martin Marty) who write:

In short, we share the conviction of Martin Marty "that purely private faith is incomplete." Public theology wants to bring the wisdom of the Christian tradition into public conversation to contribute to the well-being of society. But public theology also aims at tendering an account of Christian belief that articulates what it means to be a member of the church. An interpretation of the Christian creed that ignores the social dimension of human existence falls far short of the fullness of faith (Himes and Himes 1993, 5).

To summarize the argument so far, Christians are created as social beings and called (obligated) toward community with others in a manner consistent with the notion of agape or self-giving love as the primary means by which they demonstrate their obedience to God's commandment to love one another as he loved us thereby coming 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 (and especially the least among them to say nothing of the obligation to spread the Good News), they cannot simply remain private in their orientation—Christianity is a public faith with social and political obligations that result from its very nature. Liberal-individualist 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 on the basis of liberal conceptions of justice and fairness unless that participation meets the threshold of “neutrality,” public reason,” or has the attribute of being widely shared by those who do not accept the faith itself for reasons of their own choosing. 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 “liberal” 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 (remember it was originally a revolutionary ideology) 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, to say the least. 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 did and 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 until such time as they are changed as the result of the same process conducted again. 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 that they are grounded in were/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 deep reservations and tentativeness (see Kraynak 2001). 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, and 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” (Hollenbach 2002). 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.

Clark and David Cochran put this argument as well and succinctly as anyone, writing: “It is not that Catholic thought disvalues freedom, but it understands freedom as directional; God endows human beings with freedom in order to accomplish certain things. Freedom is not ultimate; its use is judged by whether it builds up community, contributes to the common good, and pursues justice” (2003, 13). This simple 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. . . (O’Brien & Shannon 2003, 154-55 ).

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 (*Imago Dei*)—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. In other words, 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 as they pursue 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. This, once again, is both a mystery and a paradox with which modern individualism is ill-prepared to deal with 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." Both terms can be quite positive, but the difference between them can matter quite a bit.

### **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 (see Bender 1982). 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. Take for example, the notion of the "common good" from

the last section and John Coleman's very apt description of its place in American social and political discourse, including the discourse of most Christians and Catholics:

Notions of the common good move deeply against the American individualist grain. And then, second, appeals to the common good, in any precise meaning of the term, are increasingly rare in law and politics. The dominant voices in jurisprudence dismiss as meaningless or authoritarian any appeal—beyond mere rhetoric—to the common good (Coleman 2004, 3).

Americans are not as shallow as they seem according to David Brooks, 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,” but that we just not sure that such a thing could really work in practice without creating pernicious consequences—intended or not—in the process. Hence, metaphorically, the idea dies for want of a second—it didn't sell. 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 Shymalan illustrate, such lives are in fact very demanding in their own ways. Only in country like this does the notion of utopian conservatism make any sense at all. As a people we are bred to love the pleasures of the chase or the pursuit rather than the catching or the keeping. In other words, we are post-modernity enacted; we do not read Derrida or Foucault—we live them.



The existential philosopher Nietzsche once received a letter from a woman who claimed that she had no morality at all, to which he replied that he thought that was the most difficult and demanding type of morality there is. His point was that living provisionally or “deconstructively”<sup>4</sup> is hard work. As Edward Walker put it in his impassioned speech to the village elders—“I hope that I am always willing to risk everything!” The quest for order and stability—“par” for David Brooks—by committing oneself to a life of “disciplined tentativeness” is not altogether logical of course, but it is not without its charms. One of those charms, however, is not the call to 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 a 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 demanding and requires great discipline as well. 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

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<sup>4</sup> From *Dictionary.com*: “A philosophical movement and theory of literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth; asserts that words can only refer to other words; and attempts to demonstrate how statements about any text subvert their own meanings: “In deconstruction, the critic claims there is no meaning to be found in the actual text, but only in the various, often mutually irreconcilable, ‘virtual texts’ constructed by readers in their search for meaning” (Rebecca Goldstein).

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. History—if there is to be such a thing—however, is, I would argue, ultimately on the side of the “settler.” Why?

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—though not optimistic.<sup>5</sup> 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. Ninety-six percent of Americans believe in God. Eighty-six 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 Bellah et al. (1984) called a “second language” in common; a language that does not take the solitary-rights-bearing individual as its sole point of departure or ultimate metric of success and failure. 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” (1993, 7). Hopefully, what many believe is

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<sup>5</sup> Hope is the product of a belief that God is good and that through him all things are possible. Optimism, on the other hand, is a misguided (on my account) belief in the ultimate goodness of human beings.

manifestly true—that human beings are made for and by community—will be made evident and, indeed manifest. However, the road is long and The Village beckons.

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