

ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Fall 2001

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A Changing Moral Landscape:
How will the Church respond?

THOU SHALT HAVE BUT ONE GOD BEFORE ME
THOU SHALT NOT MAKE UNTO THEE ANY GRAYEN
IMAGE & THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF
THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN & REMEMBER
THE SABBATHDAY, TO KEEP IT HOLY & HONOR
THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER & THOU
SHALT NOT KILL & THOU SHALT NOT
COMMIT ADULTERY & THOU SHALT NOT STEAL
& THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS
AGAINST THY NEIGHBOR & THOU SHALT NOT
COVET



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A Changing Moral Landscape: How Will the Church Respond?

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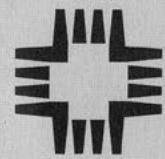
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editorials

reflections

Living the Gospel

Morality is not the heart of the church's message, but it is the expression of its life. At the heart of the faith is not what we do, but what God has done for us in Christ. As obvious as that may sound, it is probably more obvious to us as Lutherans than to many non-Lutheran brothers and sisters in Christ. Some other Christian churches are better known in the public's eye for their stand on moral issues than are Lutherans. Other than Lutherans for Life and a few isolated examples of individuals and efforts, we are much better known for our theology of salvation than for our theology of sanctification. It is absolutely on target that we should be primarily focused on the Gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ as our Crucified and Risen Lord. But salvation does not point us only to heaven. It points us to the new life we are called to live through our baptism into Christ. In baptism we begin a new life. Our baptism empowers us to live godly lives as the Spirit works in and through us to demonstrate the new life that is ours in the Lord.

When Lutherans do speak out on moral issues, they tend to do so in terms of Law, rather than Gospel. In fact, there are those who believe that speaking to the moral issues of our time by means of Gospel turns Gospel into Law. It shouldn't, for then it would surely be Law and not Gospel. But where Law tells us what is required of us, Gospel tells us what God has done to transform our lives to live as he has called us to live. As the proclamation of *who* and *whose* we are because of the Cross, our relationship with God is sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and we live on the side of faithfulness even in our moral choices. Where we don't, we repent. It is God who works in

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SOME HAVE CALLED THEM the "good old days," the time when I was growing up in a small rural community in South Dakota in the 1950s. Everyone in town knew everyone, including where they lived, and there was no need for street addresses. At times there was that feeling that everyone knew everything about everyone, including the strengths and weaknesses of our community populace. Our pastor was one of the most educated members of the community, and at times he was asked to teach a course in the high school. As an upper grade student attending our two-room Lutheran elementary school, I was asked to play the organ for the German Sunday worship services. The congregation invited its high school students to assist with vacation Bible school. There seemed to be unity—Lutheran, Mennonite, and Reformed church members lived together in harmony in a Christian community.

How different is the atmosphere in which many of today's youth grow up and mature. We all live in a changing moral landscape. Almost daily we hear about assisted suicide, sexual encounters, road rage, sex via the Internet, abortion, senseless vandalism, and much more. *Issues* contributor James Bachman points out, "People bemoan the decline of morals and wonder what this world is coming to. Commentators lay the blame at the feet of schools, parents, the government, and the churches. Someone needs to do something, but no one knows for sure who to blame nor what to do to make significant changes."

Cognizant of the decline in moral values of many youth and adults, the writers in this edition of *Issues in Christian Education* seek to identify consequences of the changing moral landscape in the life of the church, examine ways in which the early church transformed the lives of pagans, and consider how today's church can influence societal values in constructive ways.

The church today faces challenges in shaping moral character. The key to meeting these challenges is to link the transforming power of the Word of God to the lives of people in ways that will impact values and lifestyles. Indeed, an investigation of ways in which the church can respond to changing moral values is needed.

The "good old days" of my youth are probably gone forever in American society. We are forgiven by God's grace, but this side of heaven we are both sinner and saint. Our task is to look forward with vision to meet the challenge presented by the changing moral landscape. It is my prayer that this edition of *Issues in Christian Education* is one step in that direction.

Orville C. Walz, President

us, "to will and to do his good pleasure," and so we preach and teach the Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection and its relevance to the choices that are ours in life. Law is good for addressing moral issues, but Gospel is the transforming power that changes us into holy people. Holy people live holy lives!

How will the church respond to the changing moral landscape of our time? A faithful church will respond by preaching the Gospel and relating it to the moral issues of our day. The moral issue of assisted suicide and euthanasia, for example, will be addressed by helping those who suffer illness, disability, and the debilitating problems of aging to discover God in the midst of their suffering. As Bonhoeffer said on the eve of his execution, "In the suffering of the righteous God's help is always there, because he is suffering with God. God is always present with him. The righteous person knows that God allows him to suffer so, in order that he may learn to love God for God's own sake (and not just for what we can get out of God such as healing). In suffering the righteous person finds God. That is his deliverance." In the Word of the Gospel and in the Holy Communion at bedside, God is present!

The moral issue of using reproductive technologies will be addressed by helping those faced with infertility to learn the meaning of marriage and procreation from the Gospel. Ephesians 5 makes the connection between marriage and salvation by showing that the One Flesh of marriage is an icon behind which is revealed the meaning of our relationship with Christ as his faithful people. The One Flesh of marriage and the Oneness we have with God dare not be violated through the use of third party donors of sperm, egg, surrogate womb, or cloning. The faithful will live by the Gospel proclamation that children are a gift of God's grace, a particular grace given to some but not to all. And yet the Oneness with Christ is all-fulfilling for even the childless.

The moral issue of sex outside of marriage will be addressed by the Gospel message of God's intimacy with us as something that can only be experienced in the covenant he makes with us and which we reflect in marriage. Ever since the advent of the birth control pill we have been on a widening path in the separation of the biological from the relational. The moral issues that capture our attention, such as sex apart from marriage, the increasingly dysfunctional methods of reproduction, and the prospect of human cloning, have separated us from the deepest relationships we need most. As Christ comes as both God and man in one being on the cross, our deepest need for an everlasting relationship with God is met. We are physical beings, but the physical cannot be separated from the spiritual, that is, the relational without risking the loss of the fulfillment God intends for us as his people.

It is not enough for the church to merely complain about the immorality of our times, times which are probably no more immoral than other times in history. It is not enough for the church to withdraw from the world as if sin is outside and not also inside us. It is time to speak Law and Gospel, but especially Gospel, to those wrestling with the moral choices the culture puts before them. The current interest on the part of the media in the latest thing in technological possibilities, and the daily news reports of research, genes, and cloning give us the opportunity to speak meaningfully while the opportunity lasts. As troubling as the moral climate may be, these are also exciting times. Americans have all but come to agreement that there is no objective meaning in life's choices, and that each of us must give meaning to our choices on our own. But at a deeper level there is a hunger and thirst for more.

Having been seduced by postmodernism, many think that the old faith is not enough for today's problems. In fact, Christians do not lack what they need to resolve the conflict in bioethics. What people may lack is a biblical perspective that re-shapes them at the core. We will surely need rules and civil or criminal laws to prevent sinful human nature from outwardly distorting what God has created. The ultimate solution, however, is not Law; rather, it is Gospel. The task of Christians is to know and live the Gospel in the face of the autonomy, relativism, and loss of meaning around us. We are challenged to witness to something better by how we live. (Eyer, Richard. *Holy People Holy Lives* CPH 2000. p. 72)

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Shades of Gray (or is it grey?)

The problem with any discussion of change, either in terms of the *general mentalité* of a society or in the response of the church, is the all-too-frequent reduction of available options to either/or. We seem to have forgotten the very useful alternative to that kind of thinking that is the essence of Lutheran understanding—the both/and.

But both/and complicates things, and we like things simple, don't we? One of the primary tasks of higher education is to complicate, to add new and challenging

ideas to what students bring with them to the classroom. To handle all those ideas with care, whether as instructor or student, requires a respect for difference.

Where do we learn such respect? I grew up in a parsonage where lively discussion of politics, church and otherwise, was a regular part of family mealtimes. Wide and deeply held differences of opinion among parents, siblings, and later in-laws meant we had to learn not only not to interrupt but to listen to one another. This kid sister quickly learned that even boisterous disagreements were possible because we were first grounded in relationships of mutual respect and genuine care as family members. We were encouraged, with no distinction as to age or gender, both to express our own thoughts and to consider those expressed by others.

So it should be no surprise that I believe as I was taught, that church, home and classroom all need to be defined as places where differing points of view are welcomed without condemnation. In fact, different perspectives should be celebrated. But not everyone agrees, as the culture wars of the last decade demonstrate. Either/or is a seductive posture, one that offers both security and surety, if little subtlety.

The questions raised by the theme of this issue are vital to both church and society but themselves raise more questions, in particular about definition. Morality cannot be confined to matters of sexuality alone when by definition it embraces the larger question of how we treat each other as human beings—do we do so with respect, doing unto others as we would have them do to us? Or do we decide instead that we know better than they, thereby defining them as different or Other?

We need only look to history for evidence. For centuries distinction and discrimination on the basis of different race or gender remained unchallenged except by a courageous few. Then, in the middle of the century just past, the consciousness of society began to be raised by those who said indifference to injustice was no longer an acceptable moral stance. What followed was a profound correction of historic injustice in the achievements first of the civil rights movement and then the subsequent gains of feminism. Legislation long overdue brought the promise of equality to African Americans and women. And when the churches of America scrambled to respond, they not infrequently found themselves divided as to how to do so.

Such moral dilemmas continue to confront us. This spring we found ourselves debating whether family members should view the execution of Timothy McVeigh. The death penalty is only the latest issue to divide Americans, people who are kept at odds, says

philosopher John Roth, by the very things on which they agree. Well-meaning people, even within families, disagree about the morality of capital punishment. Survivors of the Oklahoma City disaster were not of one mind as to whether watching McVeigh's death would bring either relief or release to their enormous pain and loss.

So, if the moral landscape is larger than matters of reproductive behavior and bioethics, and if every issue offers a range of viewpoints, each complicated in its own right, then it is hardly helpful to judge as relativist those who hold a different opinion from our own. Very few of us are so cavalier or so calloused as to shrug off beliefs and behaviors with a causal "anything goes" comment.

Neither is the wholesale dismissal of ideas and individuals by labeling them either modern or postmodern a helpful approach. It doesn't advance the discussion we need to be having. In fact, labeling itself serves little purpose except to shut down essential and necessary discourse.

And what we need in America and in the church these days, more than ever, I would argue, is discussion—healthy, robust discussion about controverted topics and viewpoints. But such discussion will be possible only if all engaged admit at the outset a mutual respect for those with whom they disagree. The late Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago initiated such a conversation among Roman Catholics before his death. Called "Common Ground," it was designed to bring together individuals holding deep convictions on opposing sides of the abortion controversy. It continues today, with little fanfare and less progress, but the important thing is, they are still talking.

They are talking because they are grounded in the Gospel. Good people of faith can disagree on moral questions because we know we meet at the cross. The Gospel as moral proclamation? Absolutely! What freedom that Word offers us in a world of increasing complexity and change.

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Unchanging Reality and Truth

I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s. I have a nostalgia for certain things about the post-war years as I experienced them (not to make my experience normative). I grew up in a large

cosmopolitan city. In my neighborhood were Protestants and mostly Catholics from many ethnic groups. Yet the neighborhood seemed to be integrated as far as basic values, beliefs and moral expectations were concerned. There appeared to be a consistent message that I received at home, at church, and the public school. It seemed to me that the value and moral messages were a concert, not a cacophony. Life didn't appear to me that complicated. There seemed to be a predictability, an order, commonly accepted norms, and such a thing as "moral outrage." If there were discipline problems at school, I was held responsible by both my teachers and my parents (there was always double punishment). My parents were there for me—physically, emotionally, spiritually. From them I learned the meaning of commitment, love, caring, and endurance in the midst of challenges, morality, and delayed gratification. Home was usually a comfortable, safe place to be. And before we had our first television set in 1952, we gathered as a family about the radio to listen to our favorite programs. I didn't think, even as a curious and, at times, recalcitrant teenager, that life was twisted, perverted, or hopelessly out of balance. And yes, we were taught to respect our elders, say "thank you" and "you're welcome" because good manners were part of our way of life and that of others around me. In short, life was, overall, orderly. This isn't, of course, the whole picture. This isn't even the picture of everyone, everywhere. But it was a slice of Americana for me and, I suspect, many of my contemporaries.

Since the 1950s we have seen dramatic cultural shifts that have moved us now to the so-called postmodern, digital age. Whatever label one may use, especially for that cohort group born from 1965-1981, somehow "postmodern" seems to capture a mood and perception of reality of many of those living between the "modern age" and the future. And what might these folks have in common today (and is it just that cohort group?)? For one thing, as Kierkegaard described it, *Angst*. *Angst*, or maybe some would prefer the word "ambiguity," is generated from an inability to perceive and experience the world as reasonably lawful. *Angst* is generated from a lack of congruent patterns, even religious patterns, which give to the present and the future a sense of meaning and hope. *Angst* is generated by moral relativism, our current Tower of Babel. With *angst* life is more volatile, complex, and confusing, which, in turn, produces more *angst*. *Angst* may be experienced in the multiple family forms of today wherein

not only may a child be confused about who her or his grandmother is, but he or she hears and sees conflicting moral and religious messages. Perhaps "spirituality" is not only a search to soothe the soul of its *angst* (although for many it may be just that) but rather a relativism in a quasi-transcendent form. Perhaps this postmodern spirituality is a veiled way of saying what human beings have implicitly and explicitly said throughout human history, "I hurt inside." And in the midst of this postmodern relativism and spirituality, and in the midst of technological sophistication that brings us cyberspace, Internet, interactive this and that, here is the postmodern generation—lonely and in search of authentic relationship. One might suggest that it truly and basically is not different from the time of Kierkegaard or of the time of Carl Jung's *Man in Search of a Soul*. The *angst* and the search, however, has a new title, "Sex in the City."

In the world of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, many Greeks adopted the relativism of Protagoras and others the cynicism of the Sophists. There were yet the arguments of Heraclitus and Parmenides and Zeno. But the times of Socrates and Plato were times of moral confusion, chaos and hopelessness. They made their case for the Absolute and the Universal because they well knew that human beings are so constituted that they cannot live reasonably well in a world of constant change (Heraclitus) without some permanency (Parmenides). Plato and Aristotle gave us a profound natural theology and moral framework (perhaps some of the truest intuition of the soul). But God gave us His theology formed in a covenant with Abraham, then Israel, and ultimately in His Son Jesus Christ. Here is the unchanging reality and truth about God and about Man. Here, beyond a shadow of a doubt (because of the Resurrection) is the entire "fleshed out" meaning of spirituality. Here is not only the salvation of God for sinners but the whole pattern for human meaning and morality. And we are called to be in Christ above culture and, in Christ, within culture using the best of culture to communicate Him through whom we can truly relate to God, ourselves, and each other. "Follow me" is still that necessary call to discipleship—no matter what the cultural shifts and labels. And the Ten Commandments as the summary of God's will still stand! Genesis 3 and Genesis 3:15 haven't changed, although "the things" of this world have. On this side of heaven, however, it will always be a matter of Law and Gospel.

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A Changing Moral Landscape: Its Impact on the Church

GENE EDWARD VEITH

PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS been immoral. When considering our sinful nature, it is probably inaccurate to think that our age is more depraved than any other. Historians can point to evidence that prostitution, violence, cruelty, intoxication, child abuse, and other crimes and vices were even more rampant in the 19th century than in our own. Judging from the way Luther inveighed against the immorality of his time, the era of the Reformation was no age of virtue. Probably the sum total of human sin is pretty much constant, no matter what the culture or the era.

But something is different in today's moral landscape. People think about morality in a different way than they used to. While moral indignation is as common as it ever was, directed against others, ethical discourse seems more and more aimed at self-justification, at finding ways to excuse one's own behavior. In the past, people sinned, often with impunity, but they seldom denied that their particular vice was wrong. What is unusual today is that people sin but make a point of insisting that what they are doing is not really wrong. Instead of admitting they are sinners, they insist that they are really good, becoming very angry at anyone who suggests otherwise. People today are self-righteous, without being righteous.

Today, sex without marriage, including homosexuality, is widely accepted, shaking the traditional structure of the family to its core. The most cruel form of child abuse—abortion—is upheld with a politically-correct zeal. One of the few moral absolutes left, one that

is treated with the same abhorrence as the other vices used to be, is the evil of intolerance. Thus, someone who condemns a particular action as immoral, a critic of abortion or of homosexuality or of extramarital sex, is the one who is vilified, considered to be a bad person for not tolerating other people's lifestyle choices.

This moral inversion comes close to what St. Paul described in the first chapter of Romans as the course of God's judgment: how the rejection of God's truth leads to sin, with one sin leading to more and more, the conscience becoming increasingly desensitized as God punishes sin in the most horrible way, by letting people keep sinning:

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents, they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).

This catalog of vices—which sounds very much like today's moral climate, though it properly describes the human condition in every age—culminates with an indictment against not just behavior but a particular kind of moral reasoning. It is one thing to do these things. It is symptomatic of an even deeper problem that people "approve" of them, not

admitting that heartlessness and arrogance and God-hating and greed and the like are wrong, but that they actually admire people who practice this sort of thing. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20).

In theological terms, the particular kind of lawlessness that characterizes our times is a rejection of the First Use of the Law. The objective, transcendent moral order is a prerequisite for culture itself, in its most secular sense. Without the restraints that allow people to form families and nations and social systems, the realm of conscience and inhibitions and external constraints, sinful people would tear each other apart. Rejecting the First Use of the Law is thus a cultural problem, not just an individual one. The Second Use of the Law, through which we realize our lost condition and which drives us to the Cross of Christ, is also rejected, but for a different reason: in the easy-going moral climate in which every behavior can be excused, people do not consider themselves to be doing anything wrong, and thus they see no reason to repent. (The Third Use of the Law is for Christians, who find the culture putting up obstacles and temptations to their own struggles for holiness.)

So what is the current moral landscape, and how did it get this way? And how can the church teach morality—and proclaim the Gospel—in a culture that no longer thinks in moral terms?

Modernist Morality

THROUGH MOST of Western civilization, moral principles had the status of truth. Though the classical civilization of the Greeks and Romans—as well as most non-Western cultures—thought about ethics in a similar way, the influence of the Bible on the way people thought about morality was profound.

The Ten Commandments were revelations of a transcendent God, literally carved in stone. The moral law is thus objective and transcendent. Its authority is absolute, grounded in the character of God Himself. God's Law is not contingent upon the subjective feelings or desires of the individual. "Thou shalt not steal" is binding whether or not a person wants it to be, nor can it be changed by some cultural development or national legislation.

An important quality of a moral law that is grounded in the person of God is that it is transcultural, which means that cultural practices, political systems, and earthly rulers are all subject to God's judgment. Herbert Schneidau, in his book, *Sacred Discontent*, argues that the West's tradition of social criticism, social change, and eventually political freedom comes from the influence of the Bible. In the mythological cultures of the Israelites' neighbors, kings were infallible demigods whose word was absolute; in the Bible, though, kings are condemned for oppressing the widows and orphans and otherwise violating God's Law. This habit of thinking in terms of a transcendent moral law above the culture, and to which the culture is subject, according to Schneidau, allowed for people to criticize their governments (something literally inconceivable for the Canaanites) and to work for an ever more just society.

Those who believe in an objective moral law will approach an ethical issue by trying to apply the relevant principle. Is abortion right or wrong? A Christian might search the Scriptures, finding the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Does this apply to the killing of a developing baby in the womb?

Disagreements are still possible with an objective ethic. Some may argue that the developing fetus is not yet a human being, so the commandment does not apply. Scientific evidence and logical reasoning could then be brought to bear on the question. The final answer, though, will not depend on the subjective concerns of the person facing the dilemma, and the answer may not be what the person wants to hear.

Moral truths, of course, cannot be seen or empirically measured. They are in the realm of "should," not "is." When the Enlightenment insisted upon reason alone, and when the scientific revolution insisted upon empirical evidence alone, the West's approach to moral thinking began to change.

Making Moral Judgments. Under a modernist ethic, moral judgments must be based not on abstract principles but on concrete, observable facts. A new way of approaching moral issues emerged known as utilitarianism. Under this view, something is moral if it is "useful," or, conversely, it is immoral if its practical

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consequences get in the way of the observable, measurable social system.

Stealing is still wrong under this system, but not because God said, "Thou shalt not steal." Rather, a utilitarian would consider that stealing interferes with an effective economic system. Issues such as abortion or euthanasia, though, come out at a different place. Instead of applying a transcendent moral truth, "Thou shalt not kill," utilitarians will look at things such as health care expenses and the impracticality of a woman having a baby when it might interfere with her career.

Modernist ethics look to measurable data, not thinking about moral truths, to determine what is right and wrong, thus the intrusion of opinion polls and sociological studies into moral debates. Recent data showing the rise of unmarried couples living together and greater approval of homosexuality were trumped in the media as evidence of "changing definitions of the family." For those who believe in a transcendent morality, such facts are beside the point. Prohibitions against sex outside of marriage are valid, no matter how often they are ignored or violated. How many people do or do not abide by a moral truth or the findings of an opinion poll have nothing to do with the validity of a moral law. "Should" has nothing to do with "is." Modernists only understand an "is," while pre-modernists think "should" and "is" are two types of absolute truth.

Modernist Views of Sexual Practices. Both transcendent ethics and utilitarian ethics appeal to something outside the self, and on many issues the two are compatible. For most of our modernist era, sex outside of marriage was seen as immoral; after all, there are few things more "impractical" or harmful to society than getting pregnant out of wedlock, causing tangible hardship on both mother and child. Clearly, strong families, grounded in a high view of marriage, are beneficial to any society, as study after study confirms. Thus, the scientific-materialist Victorians and 20th century social engineers could agree with Christians that "thou shalt not commit adultery."

But then modernistic technology intervened. With the invention of the birth control pill in the 1960s, sex could be separated from its natural purpose of conceiving children.

Sexual pleasure became a goal in itself, as opposed to sexual pleasure as the foundation of the family.

It is not necessary to reject birth control entirely to recognize that the wholesale embrace of contraceptive technology has had a huge impact on the culture's sexual mores. Sex becomes a jolt of pleasure, unconnected to any family entanglements or consequences. There are many ways to get this pleasure, from one night stands to pornographic videos. As our entertainment industry finds sexual titillation an easy way to create pleasure in their audiences—and in the media universe one would never dream that sex has anything to do with the creation of children—marriage is often treated as something that gets in the way of sexual fulfillment. In these terms, it is hard to see what is wrong with homosexuality, if sex is just a personal pleasure, apart from its biological purpose.

In light of birth control technology, utilitarians have little or no basis for criticizing anyone's sexual behavior. The most horrific consequence of utilitarian sexual ethics—the point at which its cold, pseudo-scientific heartlessness is most apparent—comes when sex does engender a child (as it is, by objective design, liable to do). The intrusion of a new life into a sexual relationship can be thought to get in the way. It is easily seen as an unwanted byproduct. Under this mindset, it becomes completely acceptable to get rid of the unwanted "product of conception" (to use a common medical euphemism) by means of abortion.

Having separated sex from procreation, our culture is well on its way to having procreation without sex. It is no longer unusual for children to be conceived in a petri dish. When the sperm and egg are from a married couple unable otherwise to have children, and the microscopic child is implanted in the mother's womb, this may be a valid use of medical technology. Sometimes, though, either the egg or the sperm is from a "donor," so that one of the child's biological parents is a third party. How does "thou shalt not commit adultery" apply in this situation? Sometimes the child is implanted into the womb of a "surrogate mother," who carries and gives birth to the baby, then gives her up to the couple who

paid her. How does "honor thy father and thy mother" apply in this situation?

And as reproductive technology gets more and more sophisticated, as the human genetic code is cracked, and as genetic engineering becomes bigger and bigger business, expect more to come. Not just cloning, not just the genetic engineering of children according to our consumer preference, but childbirth itself may become a relic of primitive medical practices. Once an artificial womb is perfected, genetic material can be controlled in the lab in a way it cannot be in the human body. It is understandable that women in labor may well, at the time, wish they could have a baby some other way. But in the not-too-distant future it may become technologically feasible. We have conquered other kinds of pain, transcending the limits of the body in other ways. Freeing women from the pains of childbirth may well be seen as the final step in the emancipation and full equality of women.

At that point, the family will be technologically obsolete. A woman or a man—there will no longer be any distinction between them—can take a child off the rack, or have one made according to specifications. If the individuals are too busy gratifying themselves sexually, the task of re-populating the earth could be taken up by the state, which could manufacture the workers it needs and raise them in 24-hour day care centers and socialize them in mass parentless schools.

Modernist, utilitarian ethics, in which scientific possibility is the only authority, can hardly argue against this sort of thing, even though most people, due to some latent recognition of moral absolutes, instinctively recoil from many of these implications. Though we still have many utilitarians, the good news is that modernism is fading as part of the last century (the 20th) that is now obsolete. We are now in the postmodern age, which features yet another approach to ethics.

Postmodern Morality

DESPITE ALL of the scientific advances of the late 20th century, people today have a tendency to reject the scientific rationalism that characterizes the modernist mind. In fact, they are rejecting all claims of objective reality, whether

those of the scientist or the theologian. Both scientists and theologians have assumed that truth is something "out there," as they say on *The X-Files*, something that can be discovered. Postmodernists disagree, believing instead that truth is a *construction*.

Ideologies, religions, moral codes, and even scientific information are seen as *constructions*. The human mind imposes its own order on the chaos of experience, according to its needs and desires. Other postmodernists emphasize how cultures impose themselves to shape human perceptions and beliefs.

Consequently, truth is relative. What is true for you may not be true for me. There are no absolutes. Your beliefs are determined by your culture, and no one culture is better than any other. You have no right to impose your beliefs on anyone else. Such slogans, which can be heard everywhere today, signal a new world view that has profound moral implications.

The best example of postmodernist ethics can be seen in the abortion controversy. Those who believe in abortion do not call themselves "pro-abortion" but "pro-choice." According to postmodernist ethics, morality is a personal construction. If a woman "chooses" to have the baby, that action is morally right "for her." If a woman "chooses" to get an abortion, that action is right "for her." It is the fact of choice, a self-conscious act of the will, that makes something morally valid. If a woman is forced to have a baby she does not want, that would be evil, as would, presumably, forcing a woman to have an abortion (though the pro-choice contingent is strangely silent about Chinese forced abortion policies).

According to postmodernist morality, there are no transcendent moral truths binding upon everyone. Nor may objective information of any kind, such as scientific information about fetal brain waves or viability, which even the modernists would consider relevant, be allowed to interfere with the woman's choice. Whatever she chooses is right for her, and no one has the right to impose his or her own personal beliefs on anyone else. This pro-choice mentality is also evident in debates about euthanasia ("If the person *chooses* to die, who are we to say 'no'?") and other "lifestyle choices."

Moral Catechesis

LUTHER BELIEVED in the bondage of the will, that for fallen humanity our choices are in bondage to the devil, so that we will tend to choose sin. Postmodernism can be seen as another stage of human self-deification, as human beings take the role of Creator (truth being seen as a human construction rather than as the creation of God); Lawgiver (with whatever we choose being right for us); and Redeemer (since we do not need to be redeemed by anyone outside ourselves).

Underlying the moral problems are theological problems. What can the church do? First, Christians must not assume that the secular world, the general public, or even their own members who live in that world, will have any understanding at all of the Christian approach to ethics. Previously, one could take a general moral consensus for granted, but this is no longer the case. Just as the early church worked intentionally to re-orient their pagan converts to a biblical way of thinking, the church must catechize its members old and new, so that they can live as strangers in a strange land.

Its catechesis will not be the same as secular moral education. Today, there is a new interest in secular circles in moral training—thanks to the personal and social wreckage caused by the new morality—but it tends to reinforce the world views that created the problems in the first place. Thus, “values clarification” exercises, in which children construct their own values in response to impossible moral dilemmas, and other forms of “moral reasoning” or “sharing your feelings” in which there are no wrong answers, teach constructivist morality, even when done in Lutheran schools and churches.

The catechism, in contrast, follows the classical, liberal arts pedagogy, in teaching the Commandments as objective truths, but not stopping there, going on to develop moral understanding (“What does this mean?”) and moral application (as in the “Table of Duties” for everyday vocations).

Of course, the church’s most powerful, life-changing tool is not the Law at all but the Gospel. Both modernism and postmodernism can be seen as great moral evasions, futile attempts to escape guilt and a bad conscience through human ideologies. Neither modernists nor postmodernists follow their moral philoso-

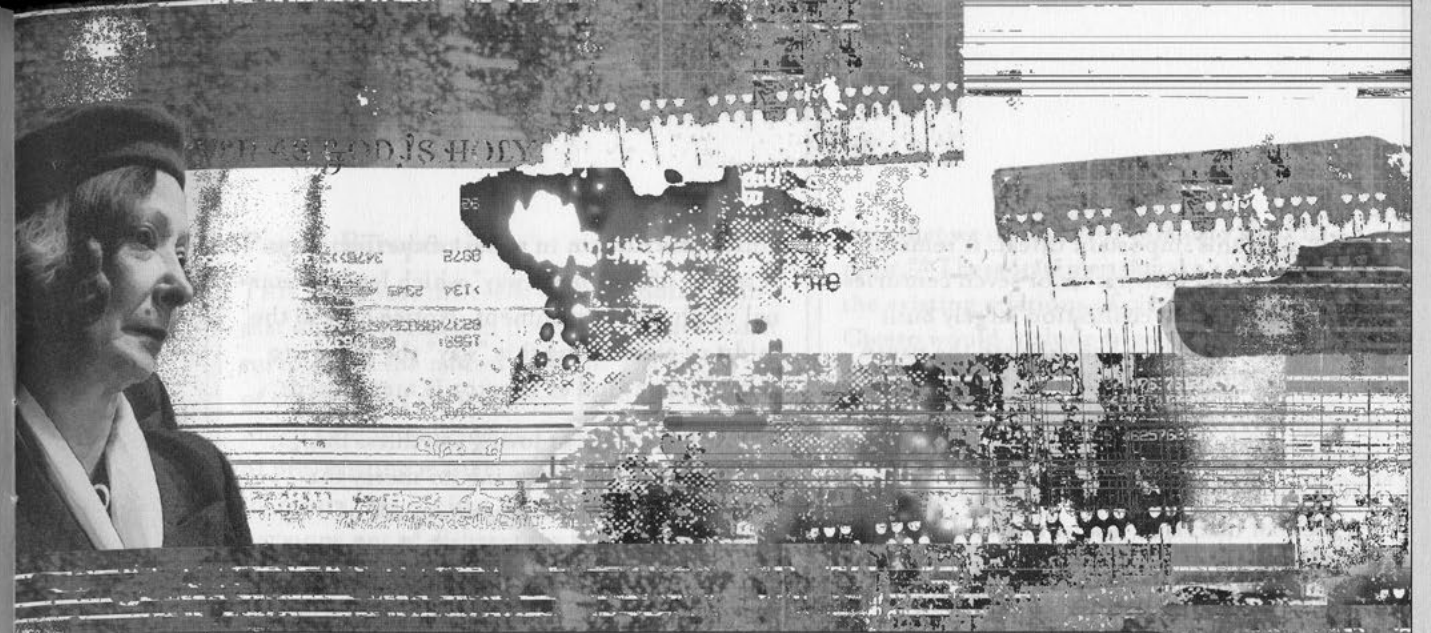
phies consistently. (Why should anyone act for the utilitarian good of the whole, unless there is some transcendent commandment to do good to others? How can postmodern feminists object to the treatment of women in oppressive cultures, if morality is only cultural, and one belief is as valid as another?) Both appeal to transcendent absolutes when they criticize others, demanding justice, calling for fairness, criticizing their society, becoming utilitarians or relativists mainly to avoid criticizing themselves.

Both, ironically, assume that Christianity is nothing more than a moral code, one which they want to avoid. Because of the theological collapse in many churches, they do not realize that morality is for everyone, Christian or non-Christian alike, but that what makes someone Christian is the Gospel, the reception of forgiveness from a gracious God for our failures to be moral.

It is this Gospel, not the vain attempt to obey external laws, but the knowledge of our failure to do so, leading to faith in Christ, who atoned for this failure and who fulfilled that Law in our behalf, that makes us Christians. And, ironically, it is this Gospel which makes us moral, insofar as we can be, changing us from the inside so that we do, unconsciously, what accords with God’s righteousness.

The task will be to make people today face up to their failures, not, as is often commonly done, to make God’s Law seem like an easy-to-follow prescription for earthly success. This is easier than we may suppose, since both modernists and postmodernists accept the dictum that “nobody is perfect,” by giving them a framework for confessing their inadequacies which can liberate them from their contorted moral rationalizations of what, deep down, they themselves know. Then they will be ready to receive God’s promises, in His Word and Sacraments, which bring to them the forgiveness and the righteousness of Christ.

This will not be a one-time event. They will need to be constantly catechized, constantly evangelized, taught to discern their culture and their times. They will have to be delivered not only from immorality but from legalism, that impulse toward self-righteousness which, ironically, is the source of both the modernist and postmodernist approach to morality.



WILLIAM C. WEINRICH

How the Early Church Transformed Pagan Values

THE TOPIC is important but also easy to romanticize. And we must, most importantly, not romanticize. Often Christians think that over the first few centuries the Church simply collapsed paganism with the sheer weight of its truth. It was not quite like that. When in 529 A.D. Benedict of Nursia took residence at Monte Cassino, not far from Rome, he found there an active cult of Apollon. A fifth century Syrian complains: “How many are only Christian in name but pagans in their acts . . ., attending to pagan myths and genealogies and prophecies and astrology and drug lore and phylacteries.” The sermons of Caesarius of Arles (+542) testify to the recalcitrant paganism of southern Gaul. And these instances are not few. After a well-documented study of the conflict between Christianity and paganism from the fourth to the eighth centuries, Ramsey Macmullen concludes: “[the conversion of Europe] did not and could not conclude in any sort of a total eclipse or displacement of the past. The triumph of the church was one not of obliteration but of widening

embrace and assimilation.”¹ In other words, when possible, the church tried to co-opt and reinterpret pagan practice, giving Christian substance to pagan form. A 12th century Syrian bishop gives a well-known example: the church fathers moved the January 6 celebration of Epiphany to December 25.

It was the custom of the pagans to celebrate on this same December 25th the birthday of the Sun, . . . and they invited and admitted the Christians to these rites. When, therefore, the teachers of the church saw that Christians inclined to this custom, figuring out a strategy, they set the celebration of the true Sunrise on this day.”²

Moreover, in his densely argued book, *The Pagan Temptation*, the Catholic philosopher, Thomas Molnar, maintains that Christianity never overcame paganism and that paganism awaits to reassert itself whenever the Christian view of creation as a mediate, sacramental reality gives way to the view that direct, immediate experience is to experience the divine.³ It may be, then, that Christianity never really “transformed” pagan values as much as it engaged them polemically on the basis of a very different set of convictions and was able to mute and to sublimate, if not always to eradicate, pagan values.

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Yet, with this important caveat, it remains true that during the first six or seven centuries of the present era a civilization largely built upon Christian values had eclipsed the pagan civilization of antiquity. And it did make a huge difference. Alvin Schmidt has recently documented the change of attitude and behavior which occurred under Christian influence in the areas of marriage, sexual morality, women, the poor, slavery, the sick and indigent.⁴ Certainly we ought not to underestimate the cultural, intellectual, and social importance of such changes. However, why did such change occur? Paganism was not merely a matter of the worship of dumb beasts and of immoral excess. Paganism possessed a rationale which received sophisticated philosophical explanations and could gain the commitment of serious persons such as Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca. What, then, did Christianity contribute which demanded the re-formation of personal and social behavior?

The Foundation of Christian Ethics

PERHAPS WE CAN BEGIN with what is often regarded as the oldest piece of Christian paraenesis we possess, Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul reminds his readers that they had "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). They were, therefore, to "please God" and to "lead a life worthy of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:4,12). The foundation of Christian ethics was the reality of God Himself, and the language of Paul suggests that it is God in His relation to the world as its Creator which is determinative. The life worthy of God was that life lived in accordance with the living God. Indeed, in early Christian ethical catechesis the fact that God is the Creator is made explicit. The *Didache* (c. 90 A.D.) presents its ethical instruction in the form of the Two Ways, the Way of Life and the Way of Death. The Way of Life is simply rendered as the great commandment. But, unlike the biblical renderings, the *Didache* bases the great commandment on the fact that God is the Creator: "Now this is the way of life: first, you shall love God, who made you; second, your neighbor as yourself" (*Didache* 1:2). Similarly, the *Epistle of Barnabas* presents its

ethical instruction in terms of the Two Ways. It speaks of the "black way" which leads to eternal death and punishment. Notice how in the midst of elaborating this "way" the failure to acknowledge God as Creator is mentioned:

It is the way ... of loving worthless things, pursuing reward, having no mercy for the poor, not working on behalf of the oppressed, reckless with slander, *not knowing him who made them*, murderers of children, corrupters of God's creation, turning away from someone in need, oppressing the afflicted, advocates of the wealthy, lawless judges of the poor, utterly sinful (*Epistle of Barnabas* 20:2; italics added).

The failure to deal charitably with the poor and needy was nothing other than to fail to acknowledge God the Creator. What lay behind this conviction?

The early Christians came to believe that God created "from nothing" (*ex nihilo*). This claim expressed the view that the sole "cause" of God's creating was his free will to create. In himself self-sufficient and in need of nothing, God freely by his will and command, through his Word, gave existence and form and life to that which had no existence, nor form, nor life. The "nothing" from which God created was nothing other than the sovereign will of God to give and to bestow upon that which possessed nothing. In this power to create *ex nihilo*, that is by mere will and command, God is distinguished from all other reality. Toward the world and man, God relates as the Creator, as the One who gives to that which has nothing.⁵ That is, the grace of God toward humankind lies fundamentally in His relation to the world as the Absolute Giver. Nor, was this will of God to create an arbitrary willing. Rather, the freedom of God to give life to the world, apart from any external constraint or necessity or self-benefit, was believed to manifest a will to love by the free giving of one's self and of one's possessions. The "living God" creates by the bestowal of life. God revealed himself to be God precisely in this, that he freely and apart from any self-interest gives both life and what is necessary for that life to those who have nothing.⁶

Pagan Perspectives

THIS WAS a very different understanding than that which obtained in the pagan culture which surrounded the nascent church. The pagan view of creation was derived from Plato's *Timaeus* in which God is depicted as a "worker" (demiurge) of pre-existing matter. God's creating activity, therefore, was limited to the establishment of harmony out of disharmony and of order out of chaos. As the Demiurge, God guaranteed regularity and purpose through order and law. However, this order and law was itself dependent upon the inherent potentialities of the pre-existent matter. God could not, as it were, make a cow out of mud, or a house out of milk. The capacity of God to work his will was limited by the limitations of the material on which he worked. The goodness of God was effected within an already existing arrangement of capacities and potentials for the purpose of establishing order and harmony. The divine freedom was limited by the "nature" of things.

The same thing was true of human activity. Human activity was located within an all-encompassing Nature governed by laws. This "Nature" could be the cosmos itself. But more important for our purposes is the fact that the structure of "Nature" was given in the various kinship arrangements and social affiliations which made up one's existence.⁷ These determined the arena of one's ethical action, and there was no ethical mandate to obligate anyone to help those persons who were external to these arrangements and affiliations. In fact, it would seem that no person possessed moral significance apart from the cultural and social nexus in which one lived. Listen to Cicero, certainly one of the noblest pagans, speak of the duties and obligations which a person owes:

In acts of kindness (*beneficentia*) we should weigh with discrimination the worthiness of the object of our benevolence; we should take into consideration his moral character, his attitude toward us, the intimacy of his relations to us, and our common social ties, as well as the services he has hitherto rendered in our interest.⁸

Or this: "But as to the affection which anyone may have for us, it is the first demand of

duty that we do most for him who loves us most."⁹ These statements make clear that the existing relations of city, family, and Cicero would include friends, determine the obligations which one owes to others. Obligations and acts of gratitude are bound to an existing nexus of relationships, which affiliations determine the moral and ethical requirements. To be sure, Cicero knows of the common bond that "unites together men as men and all to all." Nonetheless, there are "a great many degrees of closeness or remoteness in human society," and the relations of people, city, and kindred are of increasing closeness.¹⁰ The ethical egalitarianism sometimes assumed of the Stoic never seems to have been realized. Moreover, one's benevolence must not be in excess: "Our beneficence should not exceed our means."¹¹

The True Arena of Ethical Activity

ESPECIALLY this last statement of Cicero may be compared to the words of Jesus to the rich young ruler, who asked Jesus concerning what was good and necessary for eternal life. Finally, Jesus responds: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me" (Matthew 19:16-22). For Cicero, this would have most likely seemed an excessive demand on the benevolence of the young man, and for persons outside the traditional social/familial relationships and, therefore, outside the arena of necessary obligations. But for Jesus, the true arena for human ethical activity is not the city, nor the natural family, nor the circle of intimate friends, and not even the universal bond of all to all. For Jesus, the true arena for human ethical activity is "heaven."

This demand of Jesus to the rich young man to give all that he has, so that he possesses nothing, to those who possess nothing, betrays the structure of God's creating *ex nihilo*. God freely gives of that which is His so that that which possesses nothing in itself or of itself receives the good gifts of God, the *beneficia* of God. Our treasure is to be in "heaven," and more: our city and our family are in "heaven." Christians belong to the "kingdom of God" and their conversion to the "true and living God" entailed a separation from neighbors and rela-

tives, placing them into a new society and a new family in which Christian life is to be lived. In this new society God is king and his commandments the Law of the Kingdom, which enjoin upon the heavenly citizens a life like that of God. "Be holy, even as God is holy" (Leviticus 19:2; Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:16). In this new family, God is the Father and the Church will be Mother and other Christians will be brothers and sisters. The so-called *Epistle to Diognetus* speaks of this self-understanding of the Christians, who know themselves to be living in the world, but who know themselves to be truly not of the world:

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.¹²

Baptism: New Life

THIS NEW CITIZENSHIP, this new family affiliation was established in baptism. The transcending of the natural bond of family in Christian baptism is already indicated in the words of the Prologue to John's Gospel: "To those who believed in his name, he gave the power to become the children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). The truth and significance of humanity reality lies in no natural social, cultural, or familial ties. The truth of humanity lies in "heaven," in God Himself. God's own reality defines what it means to be a human being, and for that

reason when the divine Son of the divine Father assumed flesh for the salvation of the world, humankind was given the revelation of what it means to be truly human. This fact is confessed in the ecclesial doctrine of the two natures, classically voiced by Leo the Great: "He who is true God is also true Man."¹³ It was in the death of the Son of God that the love of God for the world was demonstrated (John 3:16). That is simply to say, in the death of the Son of God, God as our Creator who freely gives his life that we might have life was revealed. When, therefore, Paul writes to the Thessalonians that he need not write concerning love of the brethren, for they have been "taught by God to love one another" (1 Thessalonians 4:9), he is simply echoing the statement of John: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the expiation of our sins" (1 John 4:9f). If you would be perfect, Jesus said to the rich man, give all to the poor, and come follow me. The life of Jesus is the revelation of the Life which came from God. This Life we receive in baptism through the gift of the divine Spirit, so that we might walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4). Earlier we indicated that in the *Didache* the ethical catechesis of the Two Ways was based upon the conviction that God was our Creator. From the *Didache* it is also clear that such instruction was a prelude to baptism.

Consequences of One's Baptism

THROUGH BAPTISM Christians were born "from above" and became citizens of the "kingdom of heaven" and members of the "household of God." As the "new creation" they acknowledged God to be their Creator and therefore the source of the life of all. This had consequences for the way Christians conceived the ethical life. First of all, "nature" was regarded as a creature, and as such could not be and was not the basis of human reality. The "natural" reality of each person did not rest in the various "natural" associations which make up our earthly life. The truth and meaning of each person lay in God, for each person was the direct expression of the will of God as the Cre-

ator. That meant that each person in his need presented a "fleshly" commandment for the doing of good. One could not worship God as the Creator and ignore those in need. That is why Ignatius of Antioch complains about the failure of the Docetists to care for the widow, the orphan, the hungry: "They have no concern for love, not for the widow, not for the orphan, not for those under duress, not for the imprisoned or the released, not for the hungry or thirsty."¹⁴ Each person was, as it were, a vesture of God, so that to do good to those in need was to serve God. Polycarp can even refer to the widows as the "altar of God," implying that they are the place of Spiritual sacrifice to God.¹⁵

Secondly, because each person was the expression of the will of God to give life, not to do good to those in need was not a matter of indifference or of ethical neutrality. It was a sin, a sin of omission perhaps, but yet a sin. And obviously, to work evil upon the needy and oppressed was also sin. For that reason, to enter upon the life of the Creator Spirit involved a conversion, an active turning away from the darkness of sin, and an active turning toward the life which God proffers. And that is exactly what Paul noted to the Thessalonians: "You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Moreover, transgression against one's neighbor could be, if serious enough, cause for exclusion from the meal of this new household, the Lord's Supper. Paul expressly admonishes the Corinthians to examine themselves so that the unity of the Supper is not broken by sin against the neighbor (1 Corinthians 11:18-32). Transgression against the neighbor required repentance, for it was sin to harm one's neighbor. The ideas of conversion and repentance themselves indicate the fact that the Christian life is grounded in God's transcendence. As such, the ethical life is a spiritual warfare which requires the ongoing and continuous exhortation to repentance and the forgiveness of sin. The New Testament and the Early Church are full of agonistic metaphors about the life of the Spirit, and the figure of the Devil as the Tempter is commonplace.

The history of the "transformation" of pagan values can be told in terms of changes of

laws and customs and attitudes which accompanied the expansion and increase of the Christian religion. Alvin Schmidt in his new book, *Under the Influence*, does a marvelous job in documenting such changes and transformations. However, I would suggest that the really important transformation was the change which took place in the understanding of God and of his nature and reality. The belief that God was the Creator who gave life by his will and command through his Word gave transcendent meaning to the life of each person. To the extent that the true God was known and worshipped, to that extent the needy and the oppressed became the objects of charity. Irenaeus of Lyons says it all: "To believe in Him [God] is to do His will."¹⁶

Notes

- Ramsey Macmullen, *Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 159. Similarly, Pierre Chuvin describes the tenacity of paganism against the Christian opposition, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, translated by B. A. Archer (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- Quoted in Macmullen, *Christianity & Paganism*, p. 155.
- Thomas Molnar, *The Pagan Temptation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987).
- Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).
- Irenaeus gives early and classic expression to this early Christian conviction: "While men, indeed, cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is in this point pre-eminently superior to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation, when previously it had no existence" (*Adv. Haer.* 2.10.4; "And in this respect God differs from man, that God indeed makes, but man is made" (*Adv. Haer.* 4.11.2).
- One is reminded of Luther's words in his explanation of the first article of the Creed: All this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him." (*Small Catechism*)
- For example, Cicero, *De officiis* I.4: "Nature likewise by the power of reason associates man with man in the common bonds of speech and life."
- Cicero, *De officiis* I.14.
- Cicero, *De officiis* I.15.
- Cicero, *De officiis* I.16f.
- Cicero, *De officiis* I.14.
- Epistle to Diognetus* 5.
- Leo the Great, *Epistle* 28 (the "Tome").
- Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 6:2. The Docetists were those who denied that the Christ had come in the flesh. A disregard for the fleshly existence of others, therefore, was a logical consequence.
- Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians* 4.3.
- Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* 4.5.5.



The Communion of Saints: The Church's Unique Contribution to the Changing Moral Landscape

Introduction

TODAY'S CHANGING MORAL LANDSCAPE is the result of a changing social landscape. People bemoan the decline of morals and wonder what this world is coming to. Commentators lay the blame at the feet of schools, parents, the government, and the churches. Someone needs to do something, but no one knows for sure who to blame nor what to do to make significant changes.

The church does have many resources for responding to the changes. I believe that our most effective ways to respond will emerge from our own responses within congregational life to the challenges posed by the changing social landscape. In this essay I try to shed light on the challenges we must address in our lives together in Christian congregations.

The Individual Frightened of but Longing for Communal Life

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I was teaching a graduate nursing class on health ethics. During discussion of assisted suicide a nurse reflected on her experiences in caring for patients in a nursing home. She suggested that the interest some frail elderly have in assisted suicide seemed to be connected with fear of dying alone. However troubling assisted suicide might be, at least at the end someone would be there with you.

I've been struck by how often our discussions of issues, both in the church and in the culture at large, begin and end with the individual. Life in community comes into the picture only as one of several possible contexts for addressing our problems. Yes, we have

much talk about "community" both within the church and without. But the talk tends to treat community as an optional part of the individual's life. We extol "community," but we do not want community to be more than one possible beneficial option to enhance the individual's life. The world knows that communal life can bring blessings: family life enriches, civic clubs expand horizons, sporting groups add variety. But the world has also experienced the many ways communal life brings oppression. Many people today prefer to forego most communal blessings in order to limit the risk of oppression. This helps explain why many people also choose to abstain from Christian congregational life.

The church is the Body of Christ, and God's Word teaches that individual persons in Christ both receive the blessings of life in community and triumph over the perils of ordinary communal life. Life in the Body knits us together with Christ and each other, and it does so without stifling our unique personal identity. So our life together in the Body is more than a possibly beneficial communal option.

But this radically new life of distinct persons in one essential community lies "hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). It requires our dying to the old anxious self-seeking that marks our identities in a fallen world. Consequently, we cannot simply identify life in the Body of Christ with life in a typical congregation. This is why people both within and without the church treat life in the church as too much like ordinary human community with all the attendant perils. This is why many who have freed themselves from other social structures also run away from church social structures.

As a consequence, we must carefully examine how congregational community combines both the old sinful human dynamics with the emerging new life in Christ. When we are

able to speak a clear witness to our new life in Christ, then we are in a position to invite contemporary culture into an adventure that transcends the otherwise irresolvable conflict between the individual and the community.

But our witness will always be complicated. It will be complicated because, as we shall see, congregations are always communities of sinful people as well as expressions of the Body of Christ (*simul justus et peccator*). We will need to find ways to encourage skittish moderns to risk life among sinful humans for the sake of the new Life given by the Christ who graciously dwells in the midst of our congregations.

The Hidden Reality of Life in Christ

WE ARE TOUCHING here on hidden realities, so we must first let God's Word point us to the reality in which the Baptized live but which we too easily overlook. St. Paul famously ponders the unique character of Christian life in the Body in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another (Romans 12:4-5).

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Corinthians 12:24-27).

"Body of Christ" is more than a metaphor for the possibility of Christians forming groups with the usual human possibilities and perils. "Body of Christ" is the reality into which each Christian is baptized. Life together is essential for Christians, and in our life together we each also achieve our true personal identities in Christ.

God's own triune being sheds light on our own life in the Body of Christ. God's being encompasses the life of three distinct Persons in eternal relationship. Similarly, the Body of

Christ encompasses the life of the distinct persons who are baptized daughters and sons of God now also in eternal relationship with the triune God and with each other. In this light St. Paul writes that

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living (Romans 14:7-9).

Christians experience and strive to understand how communal relationship is essential not only to God's triune being, but also to our new personal identities lived out with others in the Body of Christ. What our changing world needs from us—more than anything else we Christians can provide—is a sustained witness to and invitation into the unique communal life of the Baptized. For this reason, we who are the Body of Christ are in a position to address one of the most pressing problems of contemporary life, the attenuation and loss of genuine community in the midst of individual fears of communal oppression.

The All-Too-Human Reality of Congregational Life

BUT WE HAVE ALREADY NOTED that our unique life in Christ is hidden. There is a mystery and a difficulty just at this point. In life this side of the grave forgiven sinners remain sinners nonetheless, and sin drives us away from communal life with God in the Body of Christ. Christians keep hearing God's Word that draws us into the Body, and we regularly admonish one another not to neglect meeting together (Hebrews 10:25). Yet, sinners that we are, we keep treating life in the Body as an option. We join the world in thinking that we are individuals first and only secondly and optionally members of this, that or another community.

As a result, the church has suffered attenuation and loss of community along with the culture in which it finds itself. And the way out of this loss is not obvious to us. A (doomed) response to the loss of community has been to long for good old days when German (Irish,

Latino, Italian, Vietnamese, French, . . .) Christians lived together in a more total and integrated community. Those of us who are old enough think back fondly to the days when the Christian congregation was at the center of our most important family and friend relationships. In those days there was real community, we say.

What we fail to notice, however, is that the old familial and ethnic social dynamics that sustained congregational communities were not identical with what it means to be in the Body of Christ. Indeed sin complicated and distorted communal life in those old congregations. Families were oppressive as well as supportive. Ethnic social dynamics harmed as well as helped the people and congregations touched by them.

As Jesus made clear, family loyalty and ethnic social solidarity are not at the heart of the Gospel. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37). Jesus made plain that life with him transcends ethnic social boundaries.

The beauty of Christ's admonitions is that today he frees us from trying to recreate a world of familial and ethnic social solidarity in contemporary contexts where such solidarity simply is and will be no longer available. He frees us from the temptation to idolize the "good old days." We are living through a painful transition from congregational dynamics governed by what I call the "hidden hand of familial and ethnic social structure" to dynamics that are today much more in need of "visible hands" to build, shape and guide our church communities. And how we in the church fuss, feud and fret about how to build, shape and guide today's congregational communities!

I will try now to explain why some of our disagreements about congregational community are both inevitable and healthy, while other disagreements are theologically misguided. Let's begin with our misguided disagreements and then turn to disagreements that are healthy.

I believe that Lutherans in America, as in other places, have been slow to recognize a crucial theological distinction that needs to be

made between the Body of Christ and the contingent social communities—congregations—in the midst of which the Gospel is preached and people come into the Body of Christ. We have been slow to recognize that the familial and ethnic social structures that marked Lutheran congregational life in the 19th and early 20th centuries were *necessary for* but *not essential to* what it is to be the Body of Christ. Bear with me while I first explain "necessary for" and then "not essential to."

All-Too-Human Structures are a Necessity for Congregational Life

GOD CAME to us in Christ in a thoroughly human way and made use of the human social structures of his day and time. The earliest congregations arose in quite recognizable first century social circumstances, and this marked those congregations both for good and for ill. Similarly, Christ's Body in the world today, the church, is thoroughly human and *necessarily* makes use of the human social structures in the midst of which the church finds itself.

Our immigrant Lutheran predecessors necessarily made use of the familial and ethnic social structures that marked their daily lives. They used these structures to provide suitable congregational contexts in the midst of which the Gospel was preached and people came into the Body of Christ. They could not dispense with human social structures in favor of some unique "heavenly" social structure that somehow comes with the Gospel. Because extended familial and ethnic bonds were crucial to their way of life, these bonds also functioned to provide the congregational contexts in the midst of which the Gospel was preached.

No Particular Human Social Structure is Essential for Congregational Life

TODAY WE ARE continually reminded that the social structures that helped our predecessors organize their communal congregational life no longer have the power they once had. Both ethnic bonds and familial bonds have weakened. Fortunately, the social structures that helped our predecessors are not *essential to* what it is to be in the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ will *necessarily* be found in the

midst of *some* form of human social structure, but no particular social structure is *essential to* the Body's life.

When we recognize this, we are able to put disagreements about the social organization of congregational life into a correct perspective. It is pointless to argue about what is the one essential social structure that goes with life in the Body. There is *no one essential structure*, so there is no point arguing what it is.

Questions Worth Arguing About

ON THE OTHER HAND, it is very much to the point to argue about what are the appropriate human social structures that may today provide helpful contexts in the midst of which the Gospel can be preached and people can be brought into the Body. In fact, it is healthy for us to critique past social structures and to argue about present ones. Because we are sinful, whatever structure we use will be marked by sin as well as by blessing, with a different balance of sin and blessing in different times, places and circumstances. When we recognize this fact, we are freed to examine (and argue about) what the available social structures are today and what are the elements of these structures that help us limit sin and increase blessing for the sake of the Gospel.

To those outside the church our struggles with congregational community will look too much like the dynamics found in any other human social endeavor. So while we argue about the social dynamics appropriate to congregational life, we must also constantly hear God's Word concerning the Body of Christ and proclaim that Word to the world around. Human congregational community is not itself our salvation; human congregational community provides the context in the midst of which forgiven sinners experience the reality of their lives hidden together with Christ in God. If we can come to agreement that particular social dynamics in congregational life are penultimate and subject to change and adjustment, then we can perhaps disagree with one another about these penultimates in a more charitable spirit and manage to continue together to point more effectively to Christ. I turn to some specific issues.

Our Human Disagreements

THE HIDDEN HAND of familial and ethnic social dynamics no longer constructively shapes and supports congregational life. Pastors and those who prepare them are scrambling to think through how pastors along with other congregational leaders must today be community creators, builders and sustainers, as well as witnesses to Christ and stewards of Word and Sacrament. Congregations are struggling mightily to discern how choices concerning liturgy and hymnody have not only theological implications but also communal/social implications. Ritual and music have human social implications as well as Christian theological implications, so it is necessary for us to examine their human social implications in order to enhance the ability of today's ritual and music to help us bear witness to Christ.

In a similar way we are experiencing and coming to understand that our church schools and church-related colleges are not simply extensions of Word and Sacrament ministry but have complex, puzzling, but potentially fruitful entanglements with the social and political dynamics of what we Lutherans call God's left hand rule. We must examine the human social implications of our educational initiatives so that we can maximize the potential of these human institutions to help us bear witness to Christ.

At this moment, we Lutherans are deeply perplexed about fellowship with Christians whose past history and ways of proclaiming Christ are not fully congruent with our own. In the past, questions about Christian fellowship were decisively handled by the invisible hand of familial and ethnic social divisions. German Lutherans had little occasion to ponder questions about fellowship with Irish Catholics. Today, however, it is no extraordinary surprise when an Italian Catholic marries a Vietnamese Pentecostal. Indeed, people marry with remarkably little attention to their religious commitments. It does us no good to long for the days when marriage supported an ethnically and confessionally well-defined congregational life. Christ calls us to make our witness now, today, to these people. It is not sufficient simply to wring our hands and wish for the

good old days. Wishful thinking does not effectively proclaim Christ.

I work with the Lutheran Bereavement Ministry of Concordia University and the Pacific Southwest District, and I am coming more and more to see that the pressure for such a ministry is related to the loss of old familial and ethnic social dynamics. Pastors today are as capable as pastors a hundred years ago in bringing Word and Sacrament to bear upon people's losses, grief and bereavement. But pastors a hundred years ago could more regularly count on familial and societal relationships to enfold the bereaved in a rich network of relationships. Fifty years ago, when my little sister died at 18 months, my parents and I lived in social structures of blood and soil that brought Christian people into many moments of caring presence with one another. All of my father's extended family and most of my mother's lived within ten miles. Many of my father's kindergarten classmates still lived in the neighborhood and belonged to St. Paul's Lutheran Church, as we did.

Pastors today cannot count on these networks based in blood and soil. We can no longer proceed on the assumption that people are already in social structures that promote caring presence with one another. We need to provide something more than reminders to capitalize on already existing opportunities to be present and to care. We need to help people actually create those opportunities. Today congregations have to plan for and build social structures that promote genuine presence with one another. No wonder there is so much interest in "small group ministry." No wonder there is so much ferment and controversy about "church growth" techniques.

Teaching Them How to be Human

TODAY'S RAPIDLY CHANGING social dynamics are touching every facet of congregational life from the cradle to the grave. We are puzzled about everything from music and liturgy to evangelism and preaching to loss, grief, dying and bereavement. Matters that people and pastors could take for granted as "settled" by the "invisible hand" in the past are now each and every one in need of conscious attention and direction. And for the sake of the Gospel and

of those perishing in today's culture, we must make our arguments and decisions fruitful so that our witness to Christ may go forward.

The way must be forward, not simply seeking to recover the past—in so many ways we cannot and should not go back there. Furthermore, we need to see clearly that the messy and too often sin-filled business of social organization is necessary for congregational life even while it is not of the essence of our life in the Body of Christ. When we see this, we can perhaps turn down some of the heat that attends so many of our arguments about how to lead, support and grow congregations.

Scott Murray, one of our pastors in Houston, mentioned to me once that he was daily discovering how much work he needs to do these days to help his people "learn to be human" on the way to his being able to proclaim Christ to them. This is a clue for the new work we need to do today. In previous generations, when familial and ethnic social dynamics were at the heart of congregational life, pastors and congregational leaders could devote most of their energies to the direct preaching of the Gospel. Family and ethnic tradition could be counted upon to teach people how to be human. By contrast, in the midst of today's confused social dynamics, pastors and congregational leaders have to attend to many "human" questions for the sake of the people who come to us and whom we seek out.

Men and women come to us trying to figure out the puzzles of their sexuality. Parents (often single) come to us trying to learn how to care for their children. Young people come to us needing guidance concerning the very most basic questions about how to live a civilized life. Workers and employers come to us seeking wisdom about the choices they face in business and industry.

We can complain that "that's not why we are here." And indeed, our central task of witnessing to Christ always transcends these human social questions. But if we fail to help these people become more human, we will likely fail to gain a hearing for our witness to Christ. Furthermore, many of these confused people are already members of our congregations, and congregations cannot long survive when people are untutored in the basics of human social interaction.

Taking Up Again an Old Challenge

THE CHURCH'S NEED to ponder and be wise about human social dynamics is not a new challenge. In Acts 2, 4, 5 and 6 and in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 we see that the first Christian congregations struggled with human questions concerning the best ways to hold and distribute earthly goods. The pastoral epistles (Timothy and Titus) might also be called the community-building epistles, for in them we find much advice about how to organize Christian social life together.

We need to learn again how to discuss Christian congregational community with much more theological and social sophistication than we have managed in the recent past. For example, we need carefully to examine the community-building/community-sustaining tasks that are now part of most pastors' callings. In our Lutheran circles we hesitate to name these new tasks "pastoral" tasks, because we want never to lose sight of the Word and Sacrament ministry that is central to the pastor's Call. But however we name these tasks, they are tasks that are now falling to pastors and other leaders in our congregations.

Those of us involved in the recruitment and training of new pastors do not yet sufficiently attend to the need to teach pastors how to build human community. Congregational community is a complex interaction of ordinary, sinful human social dynamics (God's left-hand rule) and the extraordinary reality of life in the Body of Christ (God's right-hand rule). Word and Sacrament ministry speaks to the extraordinary reality of our life in Christ, but it is a confusion of Law and Gospel to expect that Word and Sacrament ministry is all that is needed to address ordinary human social dynamics. We have a wonderful history of preparing pastors for the fundamental tasks of Word and Sacrament ministry, but we have a long way to go in teaching today's pastors how to deal with ordinary community dynamics and how to help their people become more civilized and decent humans.

I believe that many of our heated arguments concerning "church growth," "contemporary music," "seeker services" and other proposals for congregational life are an indication that we are gradually coming to see how complex is the work that pastors and congregations today must undertake. Many of our arguments are

misguided, because our past history has led us to think that congregational life is a direct and simple expression of being baptized into the Body of Christ. If we can come to see that congregational life is a complex interaction of ordinary human social dynamics with the extraordinary reality of life in the Body, then perhaps we can together agree to preach Christ and then more fruitfully examine (and argue about) proposals for building human social communities (congregations) in the midst of which the witness to Christ can go forward.

And What About the Changing Social Landscape?

I AM CONVINCED that the crisis of community addressed in this essay is the defining problem not only of contemporary church life but also of contemporary cultural life. My message for our life together in the church is that, in addition to sound biblical witness to Christ, we also need community-building insight to enable us to address the loss of the "invisible hand" community dynamic that once complemented pastoral ministry but that for the most part is rapidly disappearing and in many cases no longer exists. Admittedly, my theological training to be a Word and Sacrament pastor did not prepare me for this work. But today's circumstances require that this work be done, and because the work touches on a wide variety of issues that have theological and pastoral implications, the work needs doing in a context where pastoral sensitivity works along side community-building expertise.

My message concerning our response to the changing social landscape in the world at large is twofold. First, we need to become sufficiently sophisticated concerning the social dynamics in our own congregations, so that we more effectively welcome in the lost and wandering sheep that crowd today's social landscape. Second, we need to find ways of helping people today see that the final resolution of the tension between communal and individual life comes only with the extraordinary reality of life in the Body of Christ. And while this extraordinary reality will be fully revealed only in the eschaton, we have foretastes of the feast to come even now in our all-too-human congregations.

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book reviews

Christ and Culture in Dialogue

Angus J. L. Menuge, editor

St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 1999

While I was reading *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*, a friend, a Lutheran teacher from Dallas, called me. As we discussed its content, she remarked that as a Lutheran teacher who lives in the Bible-belt, she should read the book. Indeed, she should, as should all who value their Lutheran identity as thinkers, teachers and lay people. The book is a good reminder that Luther has important things to say to Christian laity, teachers and pastors teaching and living in a postmodern society.

The greatest strength of the book lies in its first part, in which the authors outline and respond to H. Richard Niebuhr's classic, *Christ and Culture*, and its implications for culture. The authors show the importance of Niebuhr's classifications of Christian response to culture while creating a helpful argument for the Lutheran approach to culture—what Niebuhr calls dualism—"in the world, not of the world." The authors articulate the value of serving one's vocation fully, such that the Christian may lead others to Christ's saving grace. One cannot escape or try to recreate culture but, rather, should understand how to live in culture as a Christian disciple.

In part two, the book offers some rather impressive testimonials to the work of Christians who live in the world and devote themselves to sharing Christ in spite of and through culture. Two articles were of particular interest to me. As one involved in missions over the years and with close Chinese Christian friends, I enjoyed Wayne Martindale's explication of the challenges of Christian evangelism in China. Christ does work through Christians in spite of culture. In addition, as a student of media criticism and literature, I appreciated Michael Ward's essay on film and the Great Story. The article, departing from the transformist and separatist rhetoric of much of Christendom, argues for the value of secular film (and other artistic media) to relay facets of the Christian story. As I often tell my own students, art and literature are rarely a prescription for Christian living, but they are very often a description of the human condition. Ward's article explicates that which Luther himself argues, the teaching of poetry and rhetoric illuminate theology.

Part three of the book examines the church and church-based education and asks readers to consider many contemporary debates in the church in light of Lutheran approaches to culture and evangelism. Timothy Maschke challenges readers to think about what liturgical worship is (and isn't) and examine how liturgical worship interacts with culture. In the closing chapters, authors raise important questions for the Christian educator. Are cultural ideals of relativism, materialism or individualism hindering our teaching of the Gospel? What is the role of diversity in the Christian educational institution? Are we forsaking Christian principles for accreditation? Do we understand the multicultural nature of western thought? How do we teach of and like Christ without taking on values of a postmodern society that are impossible to reconcile with Christianity?

While occasionally an author allows the views of "Christ Against Culture" (such as fear of the media or of a particular political ideology) to slip into his work, the book overall has much to offer. The less—for lack of a better word—"orthodox" Lutheran will find articulate arguments to challenge alliances with other than Lutheran approaches to culture, and the more "orthodox" among Lutherans will find an in-depth response to Niebuhr and an insightful application of Lutheran theology to contemporary culture.

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Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs

Rodney Clapp

Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2000

Rodney Clapp examines postmodern challenges to Christianity that remove it from effective engagement with American popular culture, economics and public affairs. He analyzes how Protestant theology sometimes unwittingly supported the development of these conditions in the United States. He also suggests how contemporary Christians can bridge the separations of mind and body, private and public, and the secular and sacred that exist today.

Clapp compares the consumption of competing theologies with the theology of consumption prevalent today. He proposes that

the modern shopping mall not only destroys city centers, but also replaces democratic civic spaces with more feudalistic profit-driven ones. He provocatively speculates that today's transnational corporation is "more church than church" and challenges Christians to match corporate zeal in public professions of Christ and in living by this vision.

However, *Border Crossings* also warns against emulating consumer approaches to corporate worship and advocates a reliance on Scripture, the sacraments, and liturgical worship to strengthen Christian community in the postmodern era. The author urges Christians to heed the biblical call to resist consumerism's appeals of instant gratification and individualism because these values destroy community as well as God's created world. According to Clapp, creation is a "sign and means of God's love, wisdom, and power," and priestly stewardship "preserves and enhances the natural world given to our care." He calls Christians to be faithful to family virtues of friendship, commitment, and fidelity that extend past the nuclear family to include every member of the body of Christ.

The book's most useful chapters contain proposals for overcoming consumer values that are in opposition to Christian precepts. These include case studies of individuals and families who resist the negative values of consumerism in their lives and relationships. The book also finds some positive aspects of popular culture, such as jazz, that could enrich Christian worship and community. *Border Crossings*, Clapp's third book about Christianity and popular culture, contains many additional references for the reader who would like to pursue these topics in more depth. This stimulating work could spark lively discussions and assist Christians to live values that witness their beliefs in contemporary American culture.

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Education, Religion and the Common Good

Martin E. Marty with Jonathan Moore

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 2000

This book is a product of Public Religion Project, which sponsored conversations on public religion and education as part of a three-year endeavor funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and hosted by the University of Chicago. The grant was given to promote efforts to bring to light and interpret the forces of faith within a pluralistic society. The process included dialogue with religious leaders from many different educational entities and denominations.

The project had a number of different objectives. One was to help ensure that religion was well represented in North American public life. Another was to clarify the many resources for healing of body, mind, and spirit in public life that religion manifests. The third objective was to clarify the roles of religion in public spheres, even those faiths that are repressive or deemed destructive. The final goal was to identify settings in which dialogue, mutual respect, and the search for common values and solutions have been successful in the past.

The project was pro-public, diligently avoiding a sectarian perspective. The overriding theme is that American society is better off when it is aware of the religious forces and voices that comprise its citizenship. The project directors worked to maintain the concept of public religion while honoring or safeguarding the unique sources and outlets of the faiths of different religious groups.

The project considered the various areas of public life where faith is very much at work. Focusing on education, the project invited educators and administrators from elementary and secondary levels, private colleges, and public universities, as well as scholars of education to the discussions. The book reflects the concerns heard from all of these various sources.

The author points out that he has tried to keep this book unique with its own themes and message. He expresses the belief that many treatises by religious experts give the impression that life is snipped up and fragmented. He sets out to weave together the various educational endeavors while focusing on what happens to the individual who progresses from childhood to adulthood and is thus shaped and molded by experiences with education and religion.

The common good dimension relates to the development of citizens whose lives are

such that they can contribute to society while enjoying and exploiting their own individual freedom. The book attempts to unite common concerns of educators around a single issue, that is religion, with the various topics considered in the project and reported in this book. The attempt is to stimulate the thinking of readers from a broad range of backgrounds. The common good refers to a larger public and so transcends individual interests.

The project's agenda was to bring to light and to interpret the forces of faith in a pluralistic society where so many people think of religion as a very private affair. The contention of the authors was that in a society such as ours religion is much more of a public affair than we are inclined to admit. The major concern addressed is the role of religion in the development of the American culture as it becomes more and more diverse.

Fifty years ago America was less pluralistic in its religious beliefs and in the make-up of its population. Today there is more need to understand the faith or non-faith of other groups within our communities. The contention is that faith is such a critical part of everything that motivates and drives individuals that it must be taken into consideration in any discussions of the common good of our citizenry.

This text is a summary of the input from many representatives of religious and educational entities. It also provides an annotated bibliography of many recent books which deal with the topic of religion and education. It is an excellent resource for individuals considering what has happened in American society since World War II with a view toward what we should be providing for generations of the future. The author raises appropriate issues in a manner that does not trigger one's defenses. The intent and style are to bring issues to the table for careful and deliberate consideration and discussion.

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On the way to learning better how to build our own communities, we are likely to find that we can learn from and to a certain extent link up with social structures in the surrounding culture that are providing for caring human relationships. I was given much food for thought at a recent conference in Baltimore by a very active lay Christian's claim that he was more helped in his time of grief and loss by non-Christian colleagues from his place of work than by the (often absent) ministry of his pastor and fellow Christians. These non-Christians brought no resurrection hope, but their social presence was a comfort. Meanwhile, his congregation had not figured out how to make sure that fellow Christians would be with him in his time of need.

At that same conference I learned about a congregation in Lenoir, North Carolina, that provides a fascinating example of pastors who have partnered with dynamic community builders to create a semi-independent and incorporated hospice that is an outreach ministry of the congregation. Such work is not direct Word and Sacrament ministry, but it provides contexts where Word and Sacrament ministry can happen.

In Conclusion

PROCLAMATION OF THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL always makes "left-hand rule" social structures penultimate and even tends to destabilize them lest they become ultimates: slavery that the New Testament mostly takes for granted is gone; the family structure that Timothy 5 invokes is radically changed among us; the community property of Acts has rarely worked in the Church's history. For this reason the community building tasks are time bound, and each new generation will likely need to learn new skills.

The nurse I mentioned at the beginning of this essay suggested that the interest some frail elderly have in assisted suicide seemed to be connected with fear of dying alone. However troubling assisted suicide might be, at least at the end someone would be there with you. What a sad commentary if our frail elderly are desperately grasping for community through assisted suicide because we are not cultivating the skills needed to build caring communities around them. What a worse catastrophe if our perplexities about today's changing social landscape cause us to consume our energies in internal battles while the Good News of Christ is no longer spoken by us to a world in need.

The better we can create and live in loving Christian communities, the more effectively we can tempt people to join us and with us to hear about our ultimate salvation in the Body of Christ.



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