

THE PROBLEM WITH COMMUNITARIANISM

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What is one to make of communitarianism? For a Christian, answering this question presents no small difficulty. Certainly Christians have no difficulty with community *as such*. At core of our faith is the salvation story, and it turns out that without the notion of a people or nation -- without the concept of a group of human beings that share a way of life and agree about ultimate loyalties -- the story cannot even be told. The problem lies in which community one is speaking about.

The briefest summary of the salvation story as it has been passed down to us will make this clear. In the earliest times, we human beings, made by God in his image for intimacy with himself and with each other, ruined ourselves beyond all human means of cure by seeking autonomy instead. Even so, he took initiative to redeem us. From all the nations, he drew one nation apart to be His own: "Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other." (Deut. 4:34-35, NIV.) From this nation God promised to raise a suffering servant and messianic king, who would not only fulfill God's promises to it but also offer redemption to the other nations. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says to this savior: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles [literally, other nations], that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6, NIV.) This savior was Jesus, who bore the sins of the people according to prophecy. (Isaiah 52:13-53:12, NIV.) After his resurrection, first telling his followers that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him, he commanded them to "go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:18-19, NIV.) Thus, through the action of the Holy Spirit, the people of promise has entered a radically new phase which will end only with Messiah's return. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:28-29, NIV.) Although the members of the redeemed community are to respect earthly governors and human institutions, their former commonwealths can no longer command their final allegiance: "[M]any are enemies of the cross of Christ. ... Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven." (Philippians 3:18,19b,20a, NIV.)

You see the problem. The temporal community -- my school, my club, my town, my nation or what have you -- does surround me with neighbors, each of whom is a matter of transcendent consequence. Moreover this community does occasion genuine duties, for God

has commanded my submission to legitimate authority. Because of this -- because the temporal City is an unwitting backdrop for a greater drama -- what goes on within it does matter to the Christian. But the temporal City is not the eternal City. The pageantry and shadow play of its patriotic songs and rituals all trade on a longing for That which no earthly commonwealth can satisfy; they make love to the citizen with words and tokens that are really native to another clime. So in the final analysis, every community but one, the community of faith, is merely external. And although this Commonwealth transcends all old communal lines, it does so only for those who enter within its gates. All of these facts put the Christian sharply at odds with any program to make the temporal community the starting point for ethical or political theory -- if that is what communitarianism is. That which is secular is not thereby neutral.

Another way to explore the difficulty with "communitarianism" is to point out that there are at least three communitarianisms, each of which poses problems of its own. The *demonic* variety makes the community itself the source of value; the *accountable* variety submits the community to values of which it is not the source, but which can be identified by all; and the *narrative* variety submits it to values of which it is not the source, but which *cannot* be identified by all. With a single necessary digression, we will briefly consider each in turn.

First, demonic communitarianism, the discredited ideology of the *Volk*, or People, epitomized by Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. It was an idolatry, which like all idolatries eventually demanded sacrifices of blood. By treating the community itself as the source of value and the criterion of truth, the Nazis opened vaults of wickedness so vast that they have hardly yet been fathomed. Yet the problem was not chiefly that they were monsters. It was that their theory of value *makes* monsters of all who live it to its logical conclusion, be they angry German socialists or merely clever American relativists. Christians have a special responsibility to guard against the demonic sort of communitarianism, not only because the Church was so slow to condemn it the last time it reared its head, but also because on that occasion it drew strength from a specifically Christian heresy: the heresy of Jewish blood-guilt.

Second, accountable communitarianism, represented by Amitai Etzioni and the authors of the *Responsive Communitarian Platform*. While stressing the importance of communal integrity, they firmly deny that community *as such* is the criterion of truth, or that values become good "merely because such values originate in a community." Therefore they declare that "communal values must be judged by external and overriding criteria, based on shared human experience."

The problem is that when put to the test they decline to render such judgment. For after urging that schools provide moral education, they answer the question "Whose morals are you going to teach?" with the simple statement that "We ought to teach those values Americans share" --

for example, that the dignity of all persons ought to be respected, that tolerance is a virtue and discrimination is abhorrent, that peaceful resolution of conflicts is superior to violence, that generally truth-telling is superior to lying, that democratic government is

morally superior to totalitarianism and authoritarianism, that one ought to give a day's work for a day's pay, that saving for one's own and one's country's future is better than squandering one's income and relying on others to attend to one's future needs.

The presupposition behind the counsel to teach the values that Americans share is presumably that American values do pass the test of external and overriding criteria that are based on shared human experience. But this is not obviously true. Most of the values on the list reflect not so much external and overriding criteria based on shared human experience as a watery compromise among our warring political subcultures. Giving meaning to these glittering generalities requires making specific commitments which *Platform* avoids. One wonders: do the authors of the *Platform* themselves agree about whether the "dignity of all persons" is offended by abortion, whether racial quotas honor or violate the principle that "discrimination is abhorrent," or whether the virtue of "tolerance" requires putting up with obscenity in the music of rock and rap? Consider too the values left *off* the list. Not even the American people themselves seem completely at ease about whether their admitted obsessions with sexual pleasure and material possession meet the test of external and overriding criteria. But this unease does not make them any less obsessions; they remain "values Americans share."

Now so far, the worst one could say about Accountable Communitarianism is that it hasn't taken its premises to their logical conclusion. It needs to *declare* the external and overriding criteria, based on shared human experience, that its qualified defense of communities requires; it needs something like Natural Law. But here we find ourselves in an extraordinary predicament. Natural Law is far from unproblematic itself, and communitarianism is often regarded as a maneuver for getting *around* its the mysteries rather than entering into them. Making matters worse is that although Natural Law is widely (and somewhat misleadingly) considered a Christian doctrine, Christians often find it no less mysterious than others do. Because this article is supposed to be a Christian response to communitarianism, let us investigate this mystery. Not until we do so will we be in a position to consider Communitarianism Number Three.

The earliest antecedents of Natural Law theory are all pagan, from Antigone's appeal to a law that surpasses the king's decree, to Aristotle's distinction between natural justice and merely conventional justice, to the Stoic doctrine of a Law of Nature proper.

Scripture, one might think, would say more yet, for it testifies that God is the creator, and surely his purposes would be reflected in his creation. In fact it says very little about the subject. Scripture declares God's message in plain words. If one has that, what need has one to scan the hieroglyph of nature? The Old Testament has no term for "nature" at all. The New Testament does, but uses it in a normative sense only once; this usage is found in a passage contrasting natural with unnatural sexual relations (that which is *phusikain* with that which is *para phusin*). (Romans 1:26-27, NIV.) As to Natural Law proper, only once in all of scripture are we told that anything of the sort exists. Even here it is mentioned only parenthetically, by way of explaining how it is that unconverted Gentiles, who have neither waited at the foot of Sinai nor sat at the feet of Jesus, can be responsible for their sins at all. Paul says:

Indeed, when Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature (*phusei*) the things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them. (Romans 2:14-15, NIV.)

Just how much of the requirements of the law *is* written on the human heart? This is open to doubt, for whatever the heart's original condition, both Testaments make clear that its present condition is abnormal. Jeremiah proclaims that "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9, NIV.) Paul reminds the Ephesians that before the experience of transforming grace, both he and they lived among the disobedient, "gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature (*epithumiais tais sarkos*, "strong passions of the flesh") and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest," he says, "we were by nature (*phusei*) objects of wrath." (Ephesians 2:3, NIV.) He further holds that persistence in sin darkens or perverts even what natural knowledge there is:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ... 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 invent ways of doing evil.... 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 1:20-21,28,30,32, NIV.)

Christians have understood these passages in a variety of ways. Thomas Aquinas seemed to think that the mind had not fallen as far as the rest of human nature; more exactly, he held that the damage of sin lay not so much in the faculty of reason itself, as in its ability to regulate the passions. Thus he saw no obstacle to the development of a complete doctrine of Natural Law. Such a doctrine would be common ground even between Christians and unbelievers.

If Natural Law doctrine did provide such a common ground, the Accountable Communitarians would truly have the "external and overriding criteria, based on shared human experience" that they desire. Catholics and some others say it does. More than that, within the doctrine of Natural Law they would have an explicit doctrine of community itself. As Pius XI declared in 1931 in *Quadragesimo Anno* ("On Reconstructing the Social Order"):

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity

ought of its very nature to furnish help (*subsidium*) to the members of the body social, and never destroy or absorb them.

The principle of subsidiarity is *pro-community*, but *anti-collectivist*. Those who propose a communitarian alternative to the liberal state would do well to give it close consideration. Its basis is the honor due to persons on account of their being made in the image of God. To be sure, there is a hierarchy of human organizations from families right on up to the central government -- but this is a hierarchy of scale and power, not of dignity or resemblance to the Almighty. To be sure, there is such a thing as suprapersonal solidarity -- but the Church, not the state, is called the Body of Christ, and the only union to have sacramental existence besides the Church is the union of husband and wife. To be sure, we are to lose ourselves -- but in face-to-face service to persons who are known to God by name, not in thrall to impersonal abstractions that are known to nobody. Nothing that families can do for each other should be taken away by associations; nor anything that associations can do, by government; nor anything that local governments can do, by that vast power at the center.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. I said that different Christians understood the scriptures on human nature in different ways. We have spoken of Catholic Christians; what about the others? By contrast with thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, the most radical of the Reformers thought a normative doctrine of Natural Law deeply problematic. In the first place, they held, the corruption of the passions would make it impossible for even a perfect human mind to trace, within their disorder, the original intentions of the Creator. In the second place, the lapsed human mind is no longer perfect; sin has twisted the faculty of reason at least as much as it has the passions. That which is written on the human heart may be sufficient to generate consciousness of guilt -- Paul meant no more -- but it is surely insufficient either to guide or to motivate.

This bleak interpretation left the Reformers but two possibilities for the project of developing a normative doctrine of Natural Law. One was to develop a *new kind*, by reasoning not *backwards* to creation but *forwards* from the fall. Of course, both kinds of doctrine draw attention to what we share by being human. But whereas the older Natural Lawyers drew attention to the pattern that was broken, the newer ones drew attention to the brokenness of the pattern; whereas the former asked "What clues to the divine design have *survived* the corruption of human nature?" the latter asked "What follows from the *bare fact* that human nature is corrupt?" This project left much to be desired, for the new Natural Lawyers never explained why a mind that was too corrupt to answer the former question was not also too corrupt to answer the latter. Nor did they succeed in banishing all assumptions about the proper ordering of human desires. Thomas Hobbes tacitly made a *summum bonum* of life, while Samuel Pufendorf tacitly made one of sociality.

The other possibility was to give up Natural Law and rely on scripture alone, trusting the grace of God to hold the wayward mind steady in the effort to understand it. There is much to be said for this, and it remains the choice of many evangelicals. But that brings us to the third kind of communitarianism.

By *any* means, whether those of the Old or the New Natural Lawyers, can external and overriding criteria for judgment, based on shared human experience, be identified to the satisfaction of all? Narrative Communitarianism says crisply: No.

To be sure, narrative communitarians admit that there may be such a thing as shared human experience. The problem, as they see it, is that the only resource any particular human being has for *interpreting* this shared experience is the tale his community tells of itself -- whether a story of Exodus, of Revolution, of Death and Resurrection, or of Poor Boys Making Good. The story does several things. First it tells how life should be lived and identifies the proper object of unconditioned loyalty, be this God, Success, or the Classless Society. Second it sets the boundaries of the community, because it shapes those who enter into the story in a way that it cannot shape mere hearers. Boundaries remain boundaries even when others are invited to cross them and make the story theirs, for not all will accept such an invitation. According to narrative communitarians, the lesson of these boundaries is stark and immutable: *That which makes sense of shared experience is not itself a shared experience; that which makes common humanity intelligible is not itself common to all humanity.*

On this view, even Natural Law would be viewed as merely a part of some community's story. This view could be taken of either of its forms. How so the old? Asked for his scriptural authority, Thomas Aquinas would have cited Paul's remark about the law that is written even on the hearts of the Gentiles. But Paul was a Pharisee, trained by Gamaliel in both oral and written Jewish Law. Thus he may have been thinking of the rabbinic tradition of a Noahide Law, different from the Mosaic Law in being written on the hearts of all of Noah's descendants -- the whole human race -- rather than being proclaimed to Israel alone. This tradition was in turn a *mishnah* on Genesis 6:5-9:19, a story of wickedness, Flood, and deliverance. And how so the new? Asked for *their* scriptural authority, Hobbes and Pufendorf would have gone directly to another story, the story of the Fall in Genesis 3, perhaps including the ensuing violence of Cain against Abel in Genesis 4:1-9. From this they would have abstracted the idea of a pre-political state of anarchy and confusion, ended, through social contract, by the Civil State. For them the Natural Law is nothing but the prudential theorems which culminate from which the contract originates.

In each case, the narrative communitarian would claim, the idea of moral principles that are recognized among all mankind is rooted in a story that is *not* recognized among all mankind. His claim would be that without some such story, such moral principles are (1) mere regularities rather than Law, and (2) too thin to be of service in the very predicaments where we need them most.

Driven by such reflections, some Narrative Communitarians wander into a sort of relativism which leaves them defenseless against communitarians of the first, Demonic sort. Alasdair MacIntyre is perhaps the most brilliant example of a thinker in this predicament. In better shape, I suggest, are theologian Stanley Hauerwas and his colleague William H. Willimon, who recognize a crucial point: the impossibility of passing judgment on communal

stories from a vantage point somewhere outside them all does not preclude the possibility that a particular story is, simply, true. In fact they do claim truth for their own story -- which, in a very un-modern but very Christian sort of universalism, they invite the participants in the other stories to join. Disconcerting those who still cling to the withered dugs of the Enlightenment, they blazon in *Resident Aliens* that "any political slogan that does not need God to make itself credible" is suspect. "Apart from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth," they explain, the Church "really does not know" the meaning of abstractions like peace and justice.

My own position is that of a Christian believer in the classical sort of Natural Law who finds himself much closer to the Hauerwasian stance than Christian believers in the classical sort of Natural Law usually do. On the tablets of the heart a law is written indeed, the same for all men (as Thomas Aquinas said) not only as to rectitude but as to knowledge. But it is a far cry from knowing something to acknowledging it, and the human race has been in the condition that psychologists call "denial" ever since the Fall.

Denial is no modern discovery; Thomas himself recognizes it. He divides the precepts of the Natural Law into categories: primary, or general principles, and secondary, or detailed principles. It seems that when reason is perverted, the secondary principles *can* be blotted out of the heart -- as it were, forgotten! Thomas lists five ways in which such perversion can occur. Reason can be perverted by *passion* as when, momentarily blinded by grief and rage, I unjustly strike the bearer of the news that my wife is deep in adultery with another man. Reason can be perverted by *evil habit* as when, little by little, I get into the habit of using pornography or cutting corners on my taxes. At first my conscience bothers me, but eventually I can see nothing wrong with my behavior. Reason can be perverted by *evil disposition of nature* as when, by defect in one of my chromosomes, I suffer a genetic predisposition to alcoholism. I am still capable of restraint, it is more difficult for me than it might be for someone else. Reason can be perverted by *vicious custom* as when, having grown up among people who do not regard bribery as wrong, I take it for granted. Finally, reason can be perverted by *evil persuasion* as when, justifying my behavior on the theory that I am merely exploiting the exploiters, I use electronic tricks to make free long-distance telephone calls. Another name for evil persuasion might be "depraved ideology."

Although the primary precepts cannot be simply forgotten as the secondary precepts can be, even the primary precepts can be blotted out from the heart in "particular actions" -- that is, misapplied. A pair of illustrations will make this distinction clear. Consider the precept against theft. According to Thomas this precept is secondary; I can forget it, as Julius Caesar wrote that the ancient Germans had forgotten it. Contrast the precept against the taking of innocent human life. This precept is primary; I cannot forget it without ceasing to be human altogether. But I can rationalize. I can say, "Yes, but the bastard I killed wasn't innocent! He took the job that should have gone to me!" In the same way, I can tell myself that the unborn child whose blood I shed was not human, or that it was not alive. One of the most remarkable phenomena of our century is the rise of entire political movements devoted to the rationalization of particular sins. Paul could have explained this to us; to those who are determined to make themselves stupid, God says "Your will be done." (Paraphrasing Romans 1:28.)

To be sure, at some level I pay a price for my rationalizations. Denial takes up so much psychological energy that eventually something has to give. For instance women in literally thousands of recovery groups report symptoms of Post-Abortion Stress Syndrome: they vary from case to case and take different amounts of time to appear, but commonly include depression, anxiety, inability to bond with wanted children, resentment of other women's children, and many other indications of distress. Yet whether we pay a price for our rationalizations or not, the fact remains that we can rationalize. Instruction in ethics is no remedy; the more we know, the better we are at it. The lesson I draw from this is that to *profess* moral truths, even when they are not only universally valid but even, in some sense, universally known, cannot be a theologically neutral act. It will inevitably be tied -- to a story.

Now the polity is not a community in the simple sense, but a community of communities; not a hearth, but a vestibule. That means that many stories contend. Two things follow. First, any "communitarianism" feasible for the polity as a whole could be reached only by strategic mutual accommodation; second, it could be reached only among those communities whose stories were sufficiently related for them to find some common ground. For instance Catholics, Orthodox, evangelical Protestants, and religious Jews might be able to reach such an accommodation. One could say in this case that they had agreed about the precepts of the Natural Law.

The problem is that secular humanists have their own "communitarianism" -- a counter-accommodation, involving different groups, with different stories, sharing a different common ground -- and these two communitarianisms are utterly at odds. In order to know which ground one can occupy, one must decide whose story is true. There is no other way.