

Cultural Barriers to the Understanding of the Church and Its Public Role

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Note

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The Lockean myth upon which American social life is based presents a fundamental challenge to the churches. The freedom of the solitary individual and the establishment of government by social contract have repercussions for political, economic, and religious life. Christian leadership is faced with the difficulty of communicating the deep social realism of biblical religion to an individualistic culture. This individualistic heritage, so susceptible to defining the human as relentless market maximizer, has reduced the notion of common good to that of the sum of individual goods. "Consumer Christians" may see the church as simply existing to "meet their needs," but having no claim to their commitment and loyalty. The church's calling is to demonstrate how different its understanding of human existence is from that of the surrounding culture.

The Legacy of John Locke

There are difficulties inherent in some of the central presuppositions of American culture for the understanding of the church, of priesthood, and so necessarily of the episcopacy. These difficulties present problems for the bishop as leader in the church and in society. In the successor book to *Habits of the Heart* (1985) which my four co-authors and I are presently completing, entitled *The Good Society* (1991), we develop the commonly accepted idea that if there is one philosopher behind the American experiment, it is John Locke. Locke, as we know, begins with a state of nature in which adult individuals who have worked and gained a little property by the sweat of their brow, decide voluntarily to enter a social contract through which they will set up a limited government, one of the chief responsibilities of which is the protection of their property. There are many peculiarities about this myth, which is one of the fundamental myths of origin of American society (fortunately, not the only one). Where did these adults come from? Did they have no parents? Who took care of them when they were little? How did they learn to speak so that they could make their social contract? Locke leaves us in the dark about all these matters.

Our founders were certainly devoted to the idea of the freedom of the individual, but they linked that freedom to an understanding of economic life that would have consequences they did not expect. It is remarkable how much of our current understanding of social reality flows from the original institutionalization at the end of the eighteenth century (the "founding") and how much of that was dependent on the thought of John Locke. Locke's teaching is one of the most powerful, if not the most powerful, ideologies ever invented. Indeed, it is proving to be more enduring and influential, which is not to say truer, than Marxism. It promises an unheard of degree

of individual freedom, an unlimited opportunity to compete for material well-being, and an unprecedented limitation on the arbitrary powers of government to interfere with individual initiative.

Locke exemplifies the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the act of appropriation by the solitary individual of property from the state of nature. Government is then instituted for the protection of that property. Once men agree to accept money as the medium of exchange, the accumulation of property is in principle without any moral limit. Locke rejects all limits on the freedom and autonomy of individuals other than those they freely consent to in entering the (quite limited) social contract. He specifically attacks the patriarchal family, arguing implicitly for the rights of women and explicitly for the lack of obligation of children to parents. Limited government exists to provide a minimum of order for individuals to accumulate property. All traditional restraints are rejected and nothing is taken for granted that is not voluntarily agreed to on the basis of reason. That is an overly condensed but not unfair statement of Locke's position, or at least how Americans have come to understand Locke's position. In many respects this vision has turned out to be as utopian as Marx's realm of freedom.

The Lockean myth conflicts with biblical religion in essential ways. It conflicts fundamentally with the Hebrew notion of covenant. The covenant is a relation between God and a people, but the parties to the covenant, unlike the parties in the Lockean contract, have a prior relation: the relation between creator and created. And the covenant is not a limited relation based on self-interest, but an unlimited commitment based on loyalty and trust. It involves obligations to God and neighbor that transcend self-interest, though it promises a deep sense of self-fulfillment through participation in a divinely instituted order that leads to life instead of death.

Again the Lockean myth conflicts profoundly with the Pauline understanding of the church as the body of Christ. If through participation in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ we become one with his body, members one of another, we are freed from the bondage of sin and enabled to live in harmony with God and our neighbor. Christian freedom is very different from the negative Lockean freedom to do whatever we want as long as we do not violate the limited contract entered into on the basis of self-interest.

The problem is that the Lockean notion of contract does not exist only in the economic and political spheres. It influences our understanding of all human relations, including both family and church. With respect to the family, a legal scholar has recently written, "Instead of the individual 'belonging' to the family, it is the family which is coming to be at the service of the individual." With respect to the church, the Lockean contract model, itself historically descended from, though I think a profound perversion of, the Protestant idea of voluntarism in the church, has become widely accepted. Consumer Christians shop for the best package deal they can get, and when they find a better deal, they have little hesitation about switching.

In a Lockean culture it is very hard to get people to see that the church is objectively there, rooted in the very structure of reality, and that our membership in it is formative of our very identity. Even American Catholics have been known to say, "As long as I'm all right with Jesus, I don't need the church," and such a sentiment is widespread in Protestant churches. One wants to know how they know they are "all right with Jesus," but I am afraid the answer is clear

enough: they know if they “feel” they are all right with Jesus. In a Lockean culture religion becomes radically subjective and privatized. But how can such subjective Christians understand the role of the priest or the role of the bishop? How can they understand leadership in the church, or, dare we use the word, authority? Clearly the answer is, not very well.

Under these cultural conditions, the teaching role of the church is placed under a considerable strain, and tact and prudence are certainly necessary. It seems to me the first problem is at the same time theological and sociological – how to communicate the deep social realism of biblical religion to an individualistic culture. To understand, in our bones, so to speak Paul’s great organic metaphor of the body of Christ is to understand that there are many gifts, that we all have our gifts and the body cannot function without all of us, but that the gifts are nonetheless different.

The role of the priest, and of the bishop who represents priesthood in its fullness, is a special calling. We are all called and yet we are not all called in the same way. The priest is called by God and ordained by the church to represent, in the administration of the sacraments and in the preaching of the Word, the objective reality of God’s presence in the world. The priesthood, and therefore the episcopacy, carries an objective authority that cannot be shirked, even when, as individuals, those who carry this authority may feel uncertain and unworthy. We know enough about the prophets in the Old Testament and the disciples in the New Testament not to confuse the calling with the individual merit of the called.

Yet it is this whole complex of ideas that Americans have great difficulty in understanding. If religion is a purely private matter, and essentially a matter of subjective feeling, then one person’s feelings are as valid as another: there is nothing objective against which to test them. Thus there can be no such thing as authority in religion. Indeed, to individualistic Americans there is little sense of valid authority in any sphere, certainly not in politics, or even in law. Perhaps the only exception is science, where something indubitably objective is generally admitted. Even within the family any notion of legitimate authority is remarkably weak.

It is indeed an exacting discipline to try to be the church in a culture such as ours. All the assumptions upon which we could rely, which we could take for granted in other times and places, are missing. It is therefore necessary to demonstrate, in the face of cultural skepticism, what a community of loyal and committed believers is really like. In the midst of a culture of divorce, it is also very important that we have families who can demonstrate what lasting commitment and mutual devotion in family life are really like. In fact, the church, in manifesting its own essence, strengthens all those communities that are based on loyalty and commitment, on covenant rather than contract.

But in demonstrating what the church as the body of Christ is really like to an individualistic culture, we have the delicate task of showing that the stereotypes of the culture are mistaken. In its mistaken stereotype of authority, an individualistic culture confuses it with power, with the exercise of arbitrary coercion. Authority is based on consent, and consent is gained through persuasion, not coercion. Even God, Creator of all that is, has dealt with us through persuasion, through his prophets, and through his crucified Son. He does not arrange for everything on this earth to turn out right, as some immature believers wish he would, but leaves us free to make our mistakes and to accept his freely offered grace. So leadership within the church,

though it carries a legitimate authority, also recognizes the legitimate gifts and concerns of everyone within the body of Christ.

As I understand it, authority belongs to the whole church, just as Karl Rahner says that it is the church itself that is the essential sacrament. But bishops and priests have a special responsibility to represent that authority, which comes from God and belongs to the whole church. Thus in including the laity in the decision-making process, the bishops do not dilute their authority, they enhance it. Yet, unlike a democratic official, the bishops do not just represent the opinions of the people, whatever they happen to be. What is particularly difficult for an individualistic culture to understand, within the church or without it, is that the authority with which the bishop speaks is not his own, that it is his obligation to represent as best he can an authority that transcends us all, that is the authority of reality itself. It may be precisely the responsibility of the bishop or the priest to say things that most people do not want to hear, not because of arbitrary opinions of his own, but because that is what he understands God to be saying to us now. But just because of the caricature of authority in our culture, where it is generally confused with the arbitrary exercise of power, it is especially important that the bishops make clear that they speak out of their understanding of Scripture and tradition as part of the obligation of their role, not out of any desire to exercise personal power. And it is important that they remain in dialogue with those whose opinions differ, both because new light can come from any quarter, and because without conversation there can be no persuasion.

Words are very important. I believe the task of interpreting Scripture and tradition to our society and applying them to our present need (and I agree with Hans-Georg Gadamer that if we cannot apply the words to our present situation we have not understood them) is particularly urgent today. Biblical literacy is in decline in our society, and it is part of the responsibility of the church to restore it. But I know as a teacher in a secular institution what others probably have also discovered as teachers in a sacred institution, that we teach most powerfully by what we are, whatever we say. If there are many of us who do not understand very well what it is to be a Christian today, then it is probable that there are some priests who are not entirely certain about what it is to be a priest, and there may even be some perplexity about what it is to be a bishop here and now in this society.

Nevertheless. I hope bishops will have the courage to be what they are as authentically as they understand what that is, and will not be too intimidated by the confusions of our culture, or will not fall back too readily on our central cultural stereotypes of leadership – the manager or the therapist. For if we are to demonstrate what the church is as a community based on unlimited loyalty in a covenant, and membership in the same body, we must all, with the grace of God, fulfill the particular gifts with which we have been entrusted, to the best of our ability. Bishops have indeed been pastors, prophets, and leaders in this society in a way that demonstrates what the people of God is. The remaining part of this essay will attempt to encourage them to continue what they have been doing, not only in the church but in public life as well.

The Totalitarian Authority of the State

One of the ironies of a Lockean culture is that it has unleashed such extraordinary energy that, like the sorcerer's apprentice, it seems to have gotten beyond human control. This is true in

the economy as I will discuss in a moment, but it is also true in the state. The uncontrolled forces of economic and technological dynamism have led in the twentieth century to the rise of a defensive nationalism to try to control the chaos, but this in turn has led to the rise of totalitarian statism, one form of which was destroyed in the Second World War and another form of which only recently (1989) we saw crumble before our eyes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But we have not in the United States so far faced the degree to which we have participated in demonic nationalism and statism.

In 1990-1991 the United States was involved in one of the most serious international crises since World War II. In August 1990, Saddam Hussein took our attention away from bringing the cold war to an end, and we found ourselves mobilizing again instead of demobilizing. It would certainly have been preferable if we could have avoided a major military crisis for a few years after the collapse of Communism, but history does not often act as we might wish. In the face of the military aggression of Iraq against Kuwait, Americans were torn between the impulse to adhere to and strengthen the international rules of the game as we hoped they might work when the United Nations was first established, and the impulse to go it alone at whatever cost to ourselves or others. Each day we anxiously watched for signs of which way things were going. But regardless of how things developed in the Middle East, there are features of the national security state that came into existence at the beginning of the cold war that must be challenged, that must not be sheltered from criticism by this Gulf crisis. Because we are faced with a ruthless and repellent aggressor, we cannot let ourselves off the hook and suppress what the theologian Johann-Baptist Metz calls the 'dangerous memories' of our own past.

In our democratic certainty that we always represent the good and the right, the United States has traditionally fought its wars with particular ferocity. In the Second World War, in the light of the correct perception of the evils of our enemies, we engaged in actions that rivaled the worst horrors of this most horrible of centuries. I am thinking of the carpet bombing of Dresden and Hamburg, of the use of napalm in Japan, where in one night in Tokyo we incinerated 185,000 civilians far more efficiently than the Germans were able to do in Auschwitz. And we were, of course, the only nation to use atomic bombs against defenseless civilian populations, indeed, the only nation to use them at all. While the Russians are apologizing for so many horrors in their own past, it might be well for us to make some apologies of our own.

But what concerns me even more at the present is that national mobilization on a totalitarian scale did not end in the United States at the end of the Second World War. Rather we saw the emergence of the cold war as the dominant preoccupation of the executive branch of government in the years of the Truman administration leading to a new and unprecedented level of centralized state power, one the Lockean founders of our republic would have been horrified to see.

The report written in 1950 by Paul Nitze for the National Security Council (NSC-68) became a kind of blueprint justifying the emergence of a national defense state within a state for the next 40 years. Nitze's logic was that America had to use Soviet means to counteract the Soviet threat. The ironic consequence was to create a powerful apparatus of centralized authority outside the normal constitutional structures of democratic accountability that curiously mirrored the Stalinist state itself.

I am personally involved in contesting one part of this structure at the moment because my own institution is deeply implicated with it. The University of California manages the Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos National Laboratories where atomic bombs and other advanced weapons systems, including Star Wars, are designed and produced. But university management is a facade for secret and arbitrary decisions, not subject even to scientific review and criticism, and certainly not subject to any ethical debate. The faculty at all nine campuses has voted to end this unholy connection and to urge democratic review and oversight of the laboratories, but it is doubtful if the regents will listen to us.

Up until the present all congressional and public efforts to control the national defense state structure have been successfully resisted in the name of a constitutionally dubious claim of the president's "sole power" over foreign affairs. America had known something close to national mobilization in both World War I and World War II, and indeed Lincoln assumed extraordinary powers during the Civil War. But only since the late 1940s has such a centrally mobilized power as the national security state been able to continue decade after decade to exert powerful and arbitrary influence over every aspect of American society.

In Eastern Europe the churches played a key role in the collapse of totalitarian statism. In Poland, for a long time it was only in Catholic parishes that there was space to question the arbitrary control of Communist state power. Catholics and Protestants both have played key roles in the changes in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania.

The American churches have for a long time raised questions about United States military policy from the position of the ethical understanding of the Christian church. To this day those questions have not been answered. We have made significant advances toward arms control, yet atomic bombs continue to be manufactured on a large scale and new systems, including Star Wars, have only been slowed, not abandoned. What is worse, the quasi-Stalinist structures of the cold war national security state remain in place. They are compatible neither with a democratic nor a Christian understanding of social life. Yet we have not seen a dramatic challenge to the continuation of these structures at a time when their objective necessity, in spite of events in the Middle East, has become doubtful, and when other needs for the resources they consume are so pressing.

The invasion of Kuwait is only one of a long series of disturbing military conflicts in the Third World, though one that concerned us more directly than most because of our dependence on oil. But it is not part of a gigantic worldwide "Communist conspiracy" which was used to justify the creation of the national security state in the first place, and it should not be used as an excuse for its perpetuation. That the United States will need an effective defense establishment for a long time, I do not question. That we need a secret state within a state, I doubt very much. These are questions that it is very hard for politicians to raise, especially in the midst of a military crisis. It is therefore all the more the responsibility of the churches to point out the deeper problems and realities and not be stampeded by momentary feelings.

The Totalitarian Power of the Market

But the United States today is not only threatened by a quasi-totalitarian national security state. I would argue it is threatened by another kind of totalitarianism, one that, with our Lockean presuppositions, we find it hard to recognize, namely, market totalitarianism. For over a decade now the errors of Lockean economic individualism and thin contractualism have been pushed to unheard of extremes. The result is an unprecedented polarization of wealth and poverty in our society and public evidence of widespread misery which amazes visitors from other advanced industrial nations and reminds them of Third World countries.

In a situation where economic advance had slowed and fewer people were willing to bear the burden of helping the weaker neighbor, the market metaphor has taken on a singular power in the American consciousness.

The weakening of the languages of biblical religion and civic republicanism which traditionally moderated Lockean individualism (*Habits of the Heart* provides a full-scale description of this situation) has led to a situation in which the market maximizer has become the paradigm of the human person.

One powerful version of the market paradigm derives from the teachings of Milton Friedman and the school of economics he founded. In the view of Friedman and his successors, human beings are exclusively self-interest maximizers, and the primary measure of self-interest is money. Economics becomes a total science that explains everything. Alan Wolfe (1989) in his book *Whose Keeper?*, describes the Chicago school of economics, suggesting how in its teachings economics is attempting to become our new moral philosophy or even our new religion:

When neither religion, tradition, nor literature is capable of serving as a common moral language, it may be that the one moral code all modern people can understand is self-interest. If social scientists are secular priests, Chicago school economists have become missionaries. They have an idea about how the world works. This idea seems to apply in some areas of life. It therefore follows, they believe, that it ought to apply in all....

Chicago school theorists insist that the tools of economic analysis can be used not just to decide whether production should be increased or wages decreased, but in every kind of decision-making situation. Thus we have been told ... that marriage is not so much about love as about supply and demand as regulated through markets for spouses. ...and a man commits suicide "when the total discounted lifetime utility remaining to him reaches zero." From the perspective of the Chicago school, there is no behavior that is not interpretable as economic, however altruistic, emotional, disinterested, and compassionate it may seem to others.... (1989:36, 32)

Wolfe cites an extreme example of two economists of this school who argue that a free market in babies would allow the solution of many current social problems in this area. They hold that women should be allowed to sell their babies on the open market and suggest that our

situation would be better if “baby prices were quoted as soya bean future prices were quoted” (1989:37-38). We may not be surprised that the French speak of American capitalism as “*le capitalisme sauvage*,” savage capitalism.

These bizarre ideas are not, unfortunately, just theoretical. They influence many aspects of our lives. They have a powerful influence, for example, on government. Ann Swidler, one of my co-authors in *Habits of the Heart*, when doing interviews for our new book, *The Good Society*, talked to an expert at the Environmental Protection Agency about how they figured the tradeoffs in the costs of human lives saved versus the costs of the safety devices that would save them. Ann suggested: “Some people believe human life is priceless.” The government expert replied, “We have no data on that.”

In spite of a long history of governmental measures taken to alleviate the harshest consequences of rapid industrialization, compared to most other advanced industrial nations, the United States has emphasized economic opportunity for individuals (and corporate “individuals”) at the expense of public amenities. Indeed, David Popenoe (1985), in a book comparing the United States with Sweden and England, says that, relatively speaking, “Americans live in an environment of private affluence and public squalor,” where a “very high standard of private consumption represents a trade-off with public services” (1985:82). Since we have much lower levels of taxation than West Europeans, we can use our “saved taxes” to purchase more consumer goods than English or Swedes of comparable income, but we do so at considerable cost:

The environmental squalor of American metropolitan communities stems in part from their dispersed character and the associated dominance of the automobile. But the relative lack of public funding dooms public services of all kinds – parks and playgrounds, public housing, public transportation – to a level of quality that is meager at best by European standards. The poor quality of older communities, for example the inner-city slums in most older American cities of even modest size, also results from the lack of publicly financed planning efforts to direct urban growth and renew town centers. (1985:82)

Popenoe recognizes that most Americans seem to be not unhappy about “this trade-off of public services for private consumption.” We like our spacious homes and our automobiles, and we don’t like taxes. Yet for all but the strongest, our way of doing things makes us extremely vulnerable:

At least as compared with life in European societies (and Japan) American life is also marked by a high degree of economic insecurity. American society has the character of a gambler’s society: You may hit the jackpot and become really rich (something that is extremely difficult today, for example, in Sweden), but you can also with relative ease find yourself “out on the street.” American employment policies are much less geared to job stability than are European policies. Many health care costs require private payments to the extent that a serious medical problem can be financially disastrous to the individual. And the pressures for ever-expanding personal consumption can quickly lead to indebtedness and even bankruptcy, to cite but a few examples. (1985:84)

Differences between income brackets are much greater in the United States than in Britain or Sweden. Whereas Americans in the top five percent income bracket earn 13 times as much as those in the bottom five percent, the difference in Britain is a factor of six and in Sweden merely three. Yet, as Popenoe points out, even this disparity is not the whole story, for the poor in America can count on much less community support than in Europe.

Thus to be reasonably well-off in the United States with job stability and economic security in old age, is to have a life of great personal freedom and affluence. But to be poor, or even economically marginal, is to be a second class citizen in a way that is not found to be acceptable by the English or Swedish societies. (1985:84)

No sphere is immune to market pressures. A student of mine who is a Lutheran minister brought me a story from a suburban newspaper in the Bay Area:

The members of St John's Lutheran Church have a money-back guarantee. They can donate to the church for 90 days, then if they think they made a mistake, or did not receive a blessing, they can have their money back. The program is called "God's Guarantee" and the pastor is confident it will work. "We trust God to keep his promises so much that we are offering this money back policy," the pastor said....

The program is modeled on a similar program at Skyline Wesleyan Church in San Diego. When my student called this pastor to remonstrate that there was nothing in the Bible compatible with a 90-day, money-back guarantee, the pastor gave a theological defense but also indicated that the program seemed to be popular with the congregation. Unfortunately there are many churches today that see themselves as competing for market shares of believers and will try whatever seems to work to make sure that they compete successfully.

For those of us in the university, these pressures are also very evident. The research university has grown in tandem with the business corporation, yet for all the interpenetration, there has always been a difference in structure and a difference in aims. Now that difference itself is under attack. The prospectus of Stanford University's new Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research states:

Advances in economic theory and empirical analysis methods, developments in organizational behavior, and refinements of managerial technique have reached the point where we can hope to understand the complexities of non-profit institutions – including colleges and universities – to a degree approaching that for business firms.

William Massy, Stanford's vice-president for finance and a member of the School of Business is the chief instigator of this new institute and now holds a professorship in the School of Education as well. Massy, in a recent interview, said: "Ever since I joined the central administration in the early '70s, I have become really fascinated with higher education as an industry where institutions with many interconnections interact in a kind of marketplace."

Massy's new institute has placed high on its list of research questions "an examination of the productivity and cost effectiveness at universities. Are universities delivering the product that the public expects?" Central to this concern is the question of, in Massy's words, "the effectiveness of teaching and learning. What is a good set of measures for each of those?" Much of the public, Massy recognizes, sees university education as primarily "job preparation," and he feels the university is obliged to meet that concern. For him the university is just one more element in the market system:

It's hard to deny that when students come for a particular service, someone will supply it. Tastes have changed: people used to be interested in the classics; now they are interested in making money. In the end, we have fundamental and deep social changes – and they are what they are. I do believe in the market. If there is a demand, we have an obligation to meet it. We need to provide an interesting menu at the university – a menu of where we think the world is going – but we can't dictate what people are going to want. If they don't like the menu, we have an obligation to change it.... (All these Massy quotes are from *Stanford School of Education*, a supplement to the *Stanford Observer*, January, 1989, p. 2.)

In Professor Massy's view, the education industry should be responsive to market demand. If people used to be interested in the classics but now are interested in making money, so be it. He rejects any notion of the university as a community of discourse which might prepare citizens for participation in our common world. In this market model students are seen as consumers with fixed preferences to which we, as teachers, are passively to respond. In this conception of the university, there is no room for the idea that we might have anything to say that would surprise the students, perhaps challenge them to think more deeply about themselves and the world.

Instead education is merely a market for the skills and methods to get ahead in the world. What is clear is that this economic ideology which turns human beings into relentless market maximizers is destructive to everything we can call community, to family, to church, to neighborhood, to school, and ultimately to the world. In *Habits of the Heart* we documented what this kind of thinking does to our capacity to sustain relationships in every sphere, private as well as public. But the final irony is that this apparently economic conception of human life turns out to be profoundly destructive to our economy! If a sense of community would make us poorer, I would still advocate it. But the embarrassing fact is that community turns out to be a much stronger basis for an effective economy than the individualistic pursuit of self-interest. We have only to look at the Japanese case to see that.

Let me give an illustration of what I mean, one that applies particularly to our high-tech industries. The old neo-classical categories of capital and labor no longer apply. The productivity of a high-tech company resides in the quality of its work force, in the competence and responsibility of individuals, but also, critically, in the trust and confidence they have in each other so that they can nurture and support creativity and innovation. What is required today is not "hands," labor in the old sense of routine manual performance. What is required is brains, but not just brains but also persons, persons who trust each other and genuinely enjoy working together. A company that has that will outperform many times over another with the same amount of fi-

nancing and the same kind of physical equipment, but where the workers are not responsible and where no one trusts anyone or is willing to take any risks.

But what is happening to our companies under the logic of interest-maximization? We have over the last ten years seen an advance of what is called the commodification of the corporation. Any effective company will be looked at hungrily by those who would make an immediate profit by buying it, stripping it of its assets, firing managers and employees, and reorganizing for immediate gain. What the commodification of the corporation does is to destroy the corporation as a community, to make everyone suspicious, ready to bail out, looking out for number one, looking to make the next quarterly statement look good at whatever cost so that one can get another job. By strip-mining our most valuable economic asset, namely the creative interaction of people who have grown to understand and trust each other, we sink our long-term economic viability. And then we set up another commission to study American “competitiveness”!

But the principle that cripples our economy weakens every aspect of our lives together. People in our large urban areas are worried about the high cost of housing and the problem of clogged transportation arteries. But if every affluent person is simply intent on buying the best possible house for his or her family with no concern for the provision of low- and middle-income housing in the community, then the cost of housing will soon go out of sight and even the affluent will become indentured servants of their mortgages, while the disappearance of low-cost housing means many will go homeless. If we all think only of our own convenience in driving our individual cars to work, then we all spend ever more time on the freeway breathing the polluted air our cars are creating, rather than working on better public transportation that would serve the good of all.

In short, our individualistic heritage has taught us that there is no such thing as the common good except as the sum of individual goods. But in the complex interdependent world in which we live, the sum of our individual goods produces a common bad, that eventually erodes our individual satisfactions as well.

There is, thus, much to be done if Americans are to see that our market idolatry is not good for our own society and not good for the world. The collapse of command economies in the Communist world in no way justifies the evils of market capitalism operating with no moral constraints. So here, too, where others are slow to speak, it is important for the churches to point out how far our society needs to go to realize the dignity of the individual through shared economic participation in a good community. This again is to demonstrate what the church really is by showing how different its understanding of human existence is from that of the surrounding culture.

Conclusion

Let me close, if I may, by quoting some words of Frederick Borsch, Bishop of Los Angeles, based on a study of Episcopalian parishioners. Borsch argues that there is a new receptiveness to serious theological education. “We can no longer rely on our attractive liturgy nor the warmth of our congregational life to draw people in,” he said. “People are hungry for fellowship to find meaning in life, and they are seeking answers” (*Episcopal Life* 1990:19).

He suggests that parishes today must certainly be alive with the presence of the Holy Spirit, but they must also “be involved with the real problems in our society and seeking to make a difference in their neighborhood and the lives of the people who are there. Our studies show that baby boomers want to know whether the churches are concerned with real societal problems.” Ecology, peace, and social justice are all on people’s minds, and, says Borsch, “I don’t think people expect the church to have answers to all questions, but I do think that people expect the church to be seriously concerned with these questions” (*Episcopal Life* 1990:19).

Borsch emphasized the educational role of the clergy: “It is terribly important that the clergy of the future see themselves as educators,” he said. “All sorts of wonderful people can do the administrating, can do the pasturing – but clergy may be the only people in the parish trained to do the education at a high level – to be the teacher of the teachers, to supply the energy for the whole program” (*Episcopal Life* 1990:19). What Borsch says of the clergy is even more true of the bishops, who are indeed the teachers of teachers. Finally, Borsch emphasized that education is not just for the formation of the individual student, but must move to a new understanding of the formation of the community of faith.

So to sum up my argument, I would say that the bishop as leader must help the whole church demonstrate what it is, to show forth to itself and the world what a covenant community based on faith and love is like. For people caught up in the ideology of self-interest and minimal commitment to anyone else, the very presence of a community based on radically different premises can be salvific. But if the church is to be the church, it must not only practice its beliefs within the community, it must show forth what they imply for the larger society, not to coerce acceptance and not to be swept up into activism at the expense of spirituality, but to hold up an alternative vision of reality, to give witness to what, as best we can discern it, God is saying to the world today. It is our responsibility as clergy, and laity, not only to help the church show forth in its life what we profess by our faith but to engage in public discussion with all others in our society about pressing matters of the common good.

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