

THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader.

This issue of the Alternative is about the direction of the country and religion as reflected in judgments about the health of community. The religious right sees the country and religion in a downward spiral especially since the 1960s. The two following essays by Moran and Gopnik are resistant to that belief. They do not necessarily think that everything is going smoothly and for the best but they do point to positive developments.

The third essay is by the prominent Catholic writer Ross Douthat; it is an excerpt from his recent book, *To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism*. It is one of a half dozen books already published this year that see the present pope as leading the Catholic Church over a cliff by accepting the “sexual revolution” and other aspects of political liberalism. These books continue a genre of Catholic writing that originated with William Buckley’s first book, *God and Man at Yale* (1951). As a brash 26 year old, Buckley declared war on the secular forces that were beginning to close in on a longstanding consensus about American culture.

From the beginning of the country, a “Christian America” had not been friendly to the Roman Catholic Church. But by the 1940s that church had marshalled political and economic power reflected in the 1940s Supreme Court decisions that introduced the language of church and state. By then, the Catholic Church was happy to find acceptance when it could within the Protestant-based culture. Fulton Sheen was outdrawing Milton Berle every Tuesday evening. The Legion of Decency decided which movies would succeed in the country. But beneath the seeming placidity of the 1950s a cultural revolution was brewing. It exploded in the 1960s.

Today with far more material than Buckley had, a generation of Catholic writers view the 1960s as the downfall of the culture if not the end of civilization. During that decade, the political-cultural changes in secular society were joined by changes in the church brought about by the Second Vatican Council. The Council changed the attitude of most Catholics but the structure and official teachings of the church remained largely the same. Liberals thought the official church should catch up; conservatives thought that liberals had gotten the wrong attitude. The birth control encyclical in 1969 became the test case which caused a split in the Catholic Church that remains today.

COMMUNITY, MODERNITY AND THE CITY

By Gabriel Moran

One of the central problems in the modern world is a sense of the loss of community. The problem seems intrinsic to modernity wherever and to what degree any part of the world can be called modern. What people mean by community is often vague but there is a core meaning that has endured for centuries. A perfect community would be a union of humans in which the union enhances rather than diminishes each member. Any actual group called a community falls short of perfection but it can be experienced as approaching that ideal by several characteristics.

Community is a group rather than two people although the love that is possible between two people is an ideal for the union of the group. The group should be large enough to embody the main divisions of the human race, including age and gender. At the same time, the group must be small enough that everyone knows each of the members by face-to-face encounters. The bonds of a community are at the level of convictions, beliefs and ideals not just tasks to perform. Furthermore, the bonds have to endure beyond a short time in the direction at least of permanence

At the heart of modernity was the emergence of individuality, the freeing of the person from traditional bonds that included all forms of community. Empirical and mathematical science with applications to ordinary life created new forms of government and new machinery to relieve human suffering. The human race spread across the whole earth. Childbirth became safer and people began to lead healthier and longer lives. Modernity had succeeded. But starting in 1900, population began to increase exponentially, which has raised new challenges for the human race and its environment.

The result of the world becoming modern is that every human relation, whether co-workers, marriage and family, or close friends, seems to be fragile and temporary. If people have no sense of community there is no one whom they can rely upon for support when they most need it. People are forced to rely on their immediate family and sometimes not even that is available to them. Many people seem to live isolated lives without any deep human connection. An individual who feels completely alone in the world is in danger of physical ailments, loneliness, or dangerous outbursts.

For the last fifty years a steady stream of books has bemoaned the direction that the modern world, and especially the United States, has taken. The religious right has proclaimed that the world is headed for ruin or has already arrived there. It says that since the 1960s the family has ceased to be the repository of society's ideals with the result that society is dominated by individuals who are only out for themselves. Any remnant of community experience has been constantly eroded by the advance of an urban culture that disdains the virtues of small town life where some appreciation of community might survive.

One problem in the history of the United States is an anti-urban bias. Jefferson envisaged the country as a collection of family farms where people would not be corrupted as they were in the crowded cities of Europe. "God made the country, man made the city" expressed the 19th century attitude which has continued to be the outlook in the United States. When the Irish, Italian, Chinese, and Jewish immigrants came to the country they congregated in cities which were known as cesspools of crime. When negroes fled north they went to the big cities looking for work. These people changed the complexion of the country where an American had been defined in 1790 as a white person. (Irish, Italians, and Jews as well as Chinese were not considered to be white).

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in the 1890s coined the distinction between society and community. Social scientists and politicians in the United States readily embraced this difference as one between the city as a society of isolated individuals and the rural town as a community. Any hope for community meant fleeing the city and finding people who look and think like us. The relentless movement of the modern world has been toward urbanization and an accompanying feeling that society is overwhelming community.

In 1776 thirteen British colonies declared themselves free and independent states, each with all of the powers that a state has. In the convention of 1787 the state representatives tried to create a nation out of the states but the states refused to give up their power. The result was a precarious unity of thirteen states. The government was composed of representatives of the states (the Senate); and representatives of the people (the House). The United States Constitution had no plan for cities; the founders seemed to pretend that cities did not exist. At that time Philadelphia was the largest city with 40,000 people; New York was second largest at 25,000.

If anyone were to encounter the current USA for the first time, the arrangement of 320,000,000 people into 50 states would seem bizarre. It is as if the whole country were gerrymandered into illogical and inefficient units. The states have complete control of the senate and the majority power in the election of the president. People have recently asked why there is an electoral college seeming not to recognize the country that they live in. The states not the people elect the president.

If one were to start with how people's lives are actually organized today, the states would play a minor role. The main units would be cities, suburbs, and small towns. The great majority of people live in the cities and their suburbs. A national government would act for the good of the nation's cities, suburbs and small towns. Instead, Senators are concerned with their states, and Representatives in the House are concerned with units which are dictated by each state, often in (deliberately) crazy arrangements.

The idea that the states are local governments which are close to the people is a bad joke today. Most large cities have to fight the state government to get anywhere near a fair share of power and money. Most state governments, large and small, are inept bureaucracies. The people who complain about big government are usually talking about the government in Washington. They might better start with state governments, most of which are too big for what they accomplish. For example, New Hampshire has the third

largest legislative body in the world; but with almost no tax base it can accomplish very little. There are problems with the government in Washington but not because it is too big. The problem starts with how congress and the president get elected, especially the hundreds of millions of dollars it takes. Those moneyed interests do not go away after the election. A government that would deal with national and international issues might have to be larger than the present government but it would represent the people in cities, towns and suburbs.

A government that was built up from communities would be qualitatively different from masses of people organized by geometric units such as counties and states. Actual communities have not disappeared but they may be invisible to people who think only of size and voting districts. Some large cities are sad places which have been abandoned by everyone who could flee. But many large cities that have art, communication, transportation and history have flourishing communities within them. Some small towns are suffocating places which are called communities because things run smoothly most of the time. Other small towns are alive with the same qualities found in the liveliest big cities. They are places in which the old and the young can easily move about to share in arts and education within the town or nearby.

There is an assumption that the main division of the country is between big cities, mostly on the two coasts, and the rural heartland. Instead there is an urban culture that spans the country (and the globe). It creates similarities in the cities as a result of the mixing of races, religions, ages, art, and technology. There are poor and suffering people in the cities but very few of them look for salvation by fleeing the city. The rich and those who are relatively well-off do not flee the city either but they try to partake of the city's advantages while not living there. The result is the suburb which, since the domination of the automobile, has extended further and further from the city. Some suburbs become small towns with a sense of community; other suburbs seem to be nothing but a collection of highways on which houses have been strewn.

The single most important test of whether a community exists is the means of transportation available to everybody in the community, including children, the old, and the disabled. Unless a town is very compact in size, public transportation is indispensable. A Greek city planner, Constantinos Doxiados, after studying cities throughout human history, concluded that a place is a community if one can reach the center from the boundaries in 30 minutes by whatever means of transportation is available. Most middle size cities in the US fail the test though they may still cultivate communities in different parts of the city. Most towns lack anything that can realistically be called a public transportation system.

To recover a sense of community and save what community life there is it would be necessary to stop contrasting the small town as community and the city as a collection of rich people out for themselves and a criminal underclass. Communities in the future will be mainly in cities. Small towns that are communities have to be spatially or at least technologically near a city. There will always be a need for people who live outside cities but today they need diversity, art and transportation while remaining close to the land.

AFTER THE FALL

By Adam Gopnik

In the United States over the past three decades, while people argue about tax cuts and terrorism, the wave of social change that has most altered the shape of American life has been the great crime decline. It is the still puzzling disappearance from our big city streets of violent crime, so long the warping force of American life – driving white flight to the suburbs and fueling the rise of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. The murder rate in New York City has fallen 85% to the lowest rate since the first half of the twentieth century. The crime rate continues to fall each year. It isn't just New York. Violent crime fell in Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Washington, and not by a little but by a lot.

More important, the quality of life changed dramatically, particularly for the most vulnerable. As the degree of violence has fallen, the gap between the neighborhoods of the poor and the nonpoor has narrowed. In Cleveland in the eighties the level of violence in poor neighborhoods was about seventy per cent higher than in the rest of the city; by 2010 that number had dropped to twenty-four per cent. From Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon the transformation of the country's inner cities from wastelands to self-conscious espresso zones became the comedy of our time.

Yet little trace of this transformation troubles our art or much of our public discourse. Our pundits either take the great crime decline for granted or focus on the troubles it has helped create, like high housing prices in San Francisco or Brooklyn. Some politicians pretend it hasn't happened, with Donald Trump continuing to campaign against crime and carnage where it scarcely exists. If people really thought that urban crime still flourished, of course, Trump wouldn't be able to sell condos with his name on them on the far West Side of Manhattan. Jeff Sessions, meanwhile, feels free to tell the outrageous lie that "for the first time in a long time Americans can have hope for a safer future."

This lack of appreciation is partly a question of media attention-deficit disorder: if there is little news value in Dog bites Man, there is none whatever in Dog Does Not Bite Man. It is part of the neutral unseen background of events, even though there had previously been an epidemic of dog bites. Liberal urbanists who had been, mostly by chance, in power when the crime wave began, were discredited for a generation. The neo-cons gained credibility on foreign policy because they once seemed right about the Upper West Side.

Liberal-minded people do not merely want mass incarceration to be the moral scandal it obviously is. We want it to be a *practical* scandal as well – it won't and can't do any good. But the facts suggest that, for some period and to some measurable degree, it did contribute to the crime decline. It's just the most expensive, inefficient and cruel of all ways to combat the crime wave. And the moral horror thereby incurred is intolerable to a liberal democracy that does not want to have millions of men under permanent penal restraint. The social cost of that mass incarceration is as high, in its way, as the crime wave it was meant to hamper. The real challenge in the decades to come is to take advantage of the decline in crime to engineer a parallel decline in incarceration, sending noncareer criminals back to safer streets.

The curious truth is that the decline in crime happened across the entire Western world, in East London, just as it did in the South Bronx. At the same time, the relative decline in New York was significantly bigger than elsewhere. The crime decline can be attributed to the uncomfortable but potent intersection of community action and coercive policing. Many small walls are a better barrier to crime than a single big one. Still, the magnitude of the shift remains mystifying. A good comparison might be the contemporaneous war on drunk driving. There too the decline in deaths has been impressive, and there too there was no one solution but a host of them, ranging from the Mothers Against Drunk Driving campaign to raised ages for legal drinking.

With the crime wave, it seems, small measures that pushed the numbers down by some noticeable amounts engendered a virtuous circle that brought the numbers further and further down. You didn't have to change the incidence of crime a lot to make people worry less about it. What ended violent crime, in this scenario, was not an edict but a feedback system – created when less crime brought more eyes onto the streets and subways, which in turn reduced crime, leading to people feeling safer, which in turn brought out more eyes. The self-organized response of society to crime was, in effect, to outnumber the muggers on the street before they mugged someone.

Anecdotal evidence is not to be taken very seriously, but artistic evidence is the best kind we ever get – Dickens saw far more deeply into that Victorian miasma and its causes than anyone else did. And it is certainly the case that a dominant mode of American entertainment that paralleled the crime decline was comedies about young people in Manhattan looking for love: “Seinfeld” and “Friends” and the almost too neatly named “Sex and the City.” The people who are generally thought to have merely profited from the new reality may have had something to do with making it happen. The pursuit of small pleasures helps provokes social sanity. This was Adam Smith's actual insight, this time put in motion in small apartments and sofa beds.

A real problem, going forward, is the one identified by Black Lives Matter and associated groups: police violence. As the social cost of stop-and-frisk and mass incarceration has become rightly intolerable, we ask if the crime decline, with its unprecedented benefits for the marginalized populations can survive. Since the nineties New York has kept lowering both its incarceration and its crime rate. The plunge continues under the supposedly soft-on-crime Bill de Blasio as much as it did during the ironfisted Rudy Giuliani. Effects that we don't normally track are surely related to the crime decline, not least the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement itself. Without a general understanding that crime was no longer the real problem but that the response to crime might be, the movement could not have caught a surprisingly large, sympathetic audience. Ironically, though the urban crime wave is over, it still persists as a kind of zombified general terror, particularly in places where it was never particularly acute. Trump can continue to campaign against crime largely in places where crime never happened much but where, having long been molded to preexisting bigotry, the specter of violence still occupies a fetishistic role. The symbolic depiction of crime, crafted nationally as the great wave rose, is still a bloody shirt that can be effectively waved even if the bloodstains on it are decades old.

POPE FRANCIS AND THE FUTURE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Ross Douhat

The 1930s may not have returned in full, but older ideas are current once again. The younger left is reading Marx; the new right is dabbling in fascist and nationalist thinkers; the neoliberal consensus is being hacked away at by a multitude of populists. In certain ways as the “people’s pope,” Francis was a harbinger of this trend. His highly personalized style, his willingness to “make a mess” in the service of internal revolution, his insulting rhetoric, his impatience with circumspection, tradition, and taboo...in all this and more he resembles many of the Western populists who have risen toward power, or in the case of Trump attained it.

The comparison to Trump is a fraught one, of course. Many of Francis’ admirers have him as the anti-Donald and in certain ideological ways he clearly is – a populist of the left rather than the right, a defender of the rights of immigrants who dismisses talk of a confrontation with Islam, a universalist and near-pacifist rather than a nationalist, and so on.

But mirror images resemble one another even when the features are reversed, and as a ruler of the church, in the context of existing Catholic doctrine and discipline and norms, the pope has turned out to be far more Trumpian than most of the cardinals who elected him ever anticipated. Rome under Francis is much like Washington under Trump – a paranoid and jumpy place, full of ferment and uncertainty. Francis’s opponents, like Trump’s, feel that they’re resisting an abnormal leader, a man who does not respect the rules that are supposed to bind his office. Meanwhile to his supporters, as to many of Trump’s, all these discontents are vindication, evidence that he’s bringing about the change required to Make Catholicism Great Again.

But in reality what may be happening is that the populist pope is missing Catholicism’s Opportunity. Under the last two pontiffs the church engagement with Western politics was often polarized between a conservative Catholicism that upheld church teaching on marriage and family while sometimes compromising the church’s message of economic solidarity, and a more liberal Catholicism that basically did the reverse. There were neoconservatives and neoliberals and not much on offer further to their right or left, let alone in the kind of radical center where Catholic teaching seemed to properly belong.

Now, though, everything is more fluid. Technocracy is cracking up, the right is turning from libertarianism to populist, there is more impatience with existing ideologies and more doubts about the utopia that secular elites have long imagined themselves building. Which makes it an ideal moment to raise the church’s banner, to offer a distinctively Catholic sort of synthesis; one that would offer a Christian alternative to the aridity of secularism, the theocratic zeal of Islamism, and the identity politics of right and left.

Such was the great promise of Francis’s pontificate, five long years ago – that by stressing anew the church’s themes of economic and social solidarity without compromising its metaphysical and moral commitments, he could offer a vision of Catholicism that unified

its warring factions and made it more attractive and influential in the wider world. But much more often as the debate over communion for the remarried has proceeded, the papal message has lost any distinctively conservative element, instead offering simply liberalism in theology and left-wing politics – German theological premises, Argentine economics, and liberal-Eurocrat assumptions on borders, nations, and migration. The stress of what liberalism gets wrong has faded, and meanwhile less charity is extended rightward. As theological conservatives have turned on him, he has turned on conservatism generally, so that instead of correcting its errors he is ignoring its insights, its warnings, its understandable appeal.

The Vatican under Francis always seems to have time for secular and liberal and non-Catholic opinion, whether it's organizing conferences that feature population control advocates or searching for common ground with pro-abortion politicians or sending the pope off to celebrate the Reformation's anniversary in Sweden while sticking Martin Luther on its stamps. But the theological concerns of conservative Catholics are waved off as pharisaism, and the cultural-political fears driving large parts of Francis's flock into the arms of Trump and other right-wing nationalists are left unacknowledged or dismissed.

People in France and Britain and the United States fear Western Christianity's eclipse, they fear the collapse of community outside the posh mega-cities and the disappearance of the natural family everywhere, they fear what global capitalism, elite secularism, and Islamic self-assertion will mean for what remains of Christian civilization in Europe. These fears are not irrational, and recent trends have sharpened them, which is part of why Western politics has moved in a more populist and nationalist direction. But under Francis Rome has moved the other way, so that instead of a fully Catholic alternative to right wing nationalism the Vatican seems to be offering conservative Catholics only judgment on their shortcomings, their chauvinism, their anxieties and lack of charity toward all.

Judgment is a father's right. But Francis has judged his church's conservatives harshly while confirming the fears that pushed many of them toward conservative politics in the first place – the fear that a left-wing politics is inextricably linked to revolution in theology as well. The hope in Francis's early days was that he would revive a form of Catholic engagement with modern political economy that was populist or anti-plutocratic but also orthodox in its theology, countercultural in its attitude toward the sexual revolution, zealous in its commitment to the essentials of the faith.

Instead he has thrown away the opportunity, by wedding his economic populism to Kasperism and the moral theology of the 1970s, making enemies of conservatives (African, American, and more) who might have been open to his social gospel, treating economic moralism not as a complement to personal moralism but as a substitute and driving the church not toward synthesis but toward crisis.

The story could end with Francis as its hero. But to choose a path that might have only two destinations – hero or heretic – is an act of great and dangerous presumption, even for a pope. *Especially* for a pope.