

Life in the American Experiment

Every Christian is called to “discern the signs of the times.” We have to have, that is, at least a little bit of sense of what our culture is like, if we are going to be serious about living faithfully in it. As an introduction to Catholic Worker thinking on the matter, I want to focus on just one key aspect of our lives: the way we are isolated from each other. And one way to get at this issue is to begin with our basic sensibilities about the place of religion in our lives.

We all know that America is an experiment, for better and for worse (and don't get me wrong, there are some very good things about it), founded on trying to have government be neutral when it comes to faith and morals. This is our famous separation of church and state. Now, when most of our culture was at least habitually Christian in many ways, then, even when it formally rejected Christianity, the result was a certain amount of residual societal and political coherence. There was a vague atmosphere of something smelling of Christianity that made up what you might call our common sense. Jesus Christ was not supposed to publicly matter, but he did. Over time, however, that separation principle has worked itself out more consistently. It's become part of our everyday habits and practices.

Now, the intentions behind the separation principle are certainly understandable, even laudable. But, what separation of church and state has come to mean is that Christianity should not matter for our public practical lives together. It is the assumption that Christianity, in spite of the sometimes minute practicality of the Sermon on the Mount, does not actually have to do with social, economic or practical matters. The result has been that by our day Jesus Christ, and certainly Christianity, and certainly certainly Catholicism, shape very little of most of our day to day existence. Likewise, that the Church does not matter in public life means that we have increasingly had to look elsewhere for our national common sense – some sort of minimal set of truths we all agree on. And it is becoming increasingly apparent that to a large extent we now locate this in something that gets called “science.” We need such a baseline of course, for society to go on at all. But it is now becoming clear that this is not enough, and that it is even possible to be critical of science. There are almost no moral or religious principles upon which even most can agree.

One of the main reasons the American experiment wanted to bracket moral and religious claims and keep them private was freedom. With both some good and some not so good motivations, it is true that the quest for personal freedom lies at the heart of America. The assumption was that not only religion and morals could be oppressive, but *other people* too. So our basic mode of existence became one of seeking *convenience*, by which we meant being able to live without the help of others. Personal autonomy became perhaps our central value - to let each do his own as he sees it - and to get on as a culture in that way, without having to share traditions or ways of life.

There are lots of understandable things about this. But, ironically, this attempt to do without a shared life became a way of life itself. For when we bracketed religion and morals, a couple things happened. The first, as I mentioned, was that we increasingly had to look elsewhere for our common sense. But a second was that something would step in to fill the cultural vacuum left by Christianity. Of course, what filled both these holes was science and technology. So, today, there is no doubt that we continue to build a society where technological-based institutions and goals dominate. We live in a mechanical world where the solution to every

problem is more engineering and greater control, put to the purpose (ironically) of increasing the personal autonomy of someone.

And so it's hard to deny that life is increasingly regulated and controlled by government and corporations, an ever-creeping market-state bureaucracy, drawn up on the model of technological progress. Bureaucracy is simply the attempt to scientifically organize social life, and the market and the state pitch in by reducing relationships as nearly as possible to dollars and laws. Our relationships look more and more like contracts, reducible to economic formulas. And of course, applied science – technology – determines life together at more and more minute levels, with an increasingly disturbing level of surveillance and imposed impersonal social discipline. It is especially here that government and business merge so that every aspect of our lives comes under the potential purview of some kind of measurable control. All this is the strange result of a policy that was originally supposed to *limit* our government's claims on us.

But the strange thing is, this technocracy does not seem to be run by those in high places. We should be increasingly impressed with the fact that those in power can, almost by definition, offer us anything but more of the same. Far from some conspiracy theory, I'd say our modern world isn't run by anyone at all. From one point of view it's the rule of technology itself, in all its bureaucratic, scientific, and economic guises. We are oppressed not by someone else's power, but simply our own impotence. No one is in charge, and no one could be in charge, of our society. The supreme irony, then, is that, more than ever, we are dependent upon a new clergy of impotent "experts" – doctors, lawyers, politicians, scientists, and endless technicians - who base their claims, on their exclusive access, almost always by means of quantified statistics, to the truth about our lives.

For the Christian, one of the most important aspects of this modern world is the way that it breaks up the social body and isolates us. In contrast to the small communities of the Catholic Worker and the early monastics, ironically the increasing mechanization of our society has profoundly *fragmented* us. We are more isolated, lonely, and atomized than ever. In one way, this is the opposite of what you'd expect, because we are now *connected* in a thousand ways, and, as I have said, dependent, like never before. On the other hand, this makes a certain amount of sense. After all, every new gadget, law, or medical advance is supposed to make us more *free* to live life on our *own terms*. So, pretty soon, after a million changes with this intention, it's no surprise that we don't need other people anymore. I wanted a life I could do by myself, and I got it. I'm alone. When I do need others, I can buy them, preferring the impersonal and contractual, because in a way it preserves my independence. One stranger will do my laundry, another will take care of my kids, a third will drive me around. Even my friends I can "manage" online. So what remains between us endless are bureaucratic rules, mediated by screens and money. That's the social fabric.

The economic aspect of all of this also has a role in splintering us. The motor driving the advance of technology is the market's *free* functioning by the law of supply and demand, which means, again, that we are *free* to buy, sell, and acquire as we like. Economics is another public sphere that religion and morality are supposed to stay out of. And this free market, we are told, is supposed to mean more opportunity for all of us. The theory is that everyone should be free to get as much as one can, and (so goes the story) this competition of everyone against everyone ironically makes winners of us all. So, the rules, screens and money that make up the social

fabric are animated by what one economic philosopher called the war of all against all. Accordingly, we are all raised to see others as potential dangers – the competition. It's a war, after all. And we are positively encouraged to take an impersonal attitude towards economic transactions. "It's just business, don't take it personally." But what if most of life is economic transaction? Then one thing at least will be for sure, it *won't* be personal: most of our relationships are now nothing more than one bank accounting with another.

What this way of life has all but completely destroyed is what you might call local community. Its logic is to try to meld the whole world into a single atomized mono-culture, and it does this by destroying the idiosyncratic relationships of dependence particular peoples and cultures have always maintained. For instance, a century ago in St Paul, the Irish, the Germans, and the Italians all had many of their own ways of conducting life, and their own ways of seeing the world. There was, in other words, an *ethic*, that went with an *ethnicity*. Today, such identities are vanishingly rare. But one thing that held such communities together was exactly their ethical sense of a *common* good. That's what made these local communities different from what we have today.

To seek a *common* good is to engage in corporate actions – let's call them "projects" – that seek after shared goals for a community. This is what those ethnic communities used to do. The common good in this sense is *not* simply cooperation so that each person can achieve her *own* goals more effectively. It's the opposite of that. The common good is a good that can *only* be *shared*. Take a community garden as an example. Beautifying the neighborhood, learning teamwork, sharing, generosity, neighborhood trust, and friendship, are all *common* goods that might only be had by taking part in this kind of local project. As you participate in the project, your goals become the goals of the community – they are shared. A key point is that this means you have to become a particular sort of person to have these goods, because part of the point is that in order for the garden to be successful, one's own goals will have to become the same as others'. In fact, if a member of the project does pursue his *own* goals, which are not common, he will *not* be able to achieve the *common* goals as well: if someone decides he will do as little work as possible but still share in the produce, he will thereby exempt herself from many of the common goods listed above.

A hundred years ago it was typical of these local communities that they would be engaged in a wide variety of these "projects" at the same time. When this is the case a rich and complex sense of the common good arises, which necessarily produces people with the dispositions and character – the virtues and habits – suited to these goals. And so rich and complex communities were the result, which, precisely because of their own projects, achieved a high degree of independence: they were self-sustaining and able to get on in their own peculiar way. Their thick social ties to each other gave them a relative degree of informal popular sovereignty; because they organized themselves, they did not need a bureaucracy, a state, or technology to organize life for them. And so it is that, in human life a particular kind of community is required if you want to be a particular kind of person. Ethnicity and ethics – community and character, always go together.

It is sometimes said that these kinds of communities are old-fashioned, meaning that "of course" they don't exist today. But their disappearance is anything but natural. They have not slowly decayed on their own, but rather rapidly dissolved as they were drawn into the market and

technology. We can imagine how this might go. Once, these communities could appeal to shared ethical standards, often grounded in Catholic faith, for their way of life. Daily actions centered on the common good made sense in that context. But, once the market is in town, suddenly the only motivation that counts is how to get the best deal – the common goods of local communities are quickly replaced by whatever consumer good each member of that community desires. Reason like this for a while, and before you know it life becomes about being the most efficient manager: of our children, jobs, money, even our emotions. The goods we look to are no longer internal to a small community, binding it together, but “out there”, wherever the best offer is. And so each pursues his own, and we are fragmented. The market transforms our desires so that our habits no longer centered on a local, common good, but on whatever I think is good for *me* (at least today, it might be different tomorrow!). So it is funny that sometimes being pro-capitalism is associated with being *conservative*. It seems to me there is nothing more revolutionary than the constant advance of the market to the “next new thing”; whatever’s cheaper, faster, shinier. Such novelty is what sells, what drives the market, and what makes it next to impossible for traditional communities to survive. There is nothing conservative about the market. It is the permanent revolution.

The result of fragmentation and constant pressure for novelty, of course, is that the community is no longer able to be relatively self-sustaining, meeting many of its own wants; now it must look elsewhere for them. And this, after all, is what the entire apparatus of modern technology, law, and bureaucracy is for: to help us manage life (the life it created) without other people, at least without any people we are not contractually obligated to. The once-internal bonds of society are now transferred to external agencies and strangers, which are supposed to give us more freedom to direct our lives the way that we want. In practice, of course, the cost is an extraordinary degree of dependence on large, impersonal institutions and services, and ultimately on the centralizing state. At the same time, we lose all those relationships that were once naturally embedded in everyday life. “Having friends” now becomes one more thing to manage, rather than something that simply comes with being alive.

By now, of course, most of us are simply born into this world. We can’t imagine anything else. Cars, personal computers, smart phones, fast food delivery, Uber, daycares, and a thousand other devices, are things that few of us could imagine doing without, and they are the only social bonds that we have, bonds that paradoxically keep us isolated. Of course, as we noted, one of the results of traditional or ethnic community life was the development of certain virtues as a result of being dependent on one another, so one of the results of isolation is that such virtue does not develop. So I don’t mind sounding like an old fogey when I say that it *is* true that a hundred years ago there was a sort of baseline “character” that could be expected of people that has disappeared. And now we can see a little bit of why.

So what you get is the culture that we see around us. Life proceeds on the assumption that God does not matter, that all there is to life amounts to physics, and that you ought to get as much comfort and pleasure out of it as possible. It sounds crazy, but if all I’ve got to work with is my isolated body and some technical means of manipulating it, it is no surprise that we are increasingly a society, as Catholic Worker Larry Chapp says, of “opioids, techno gadgets, virtual reality stimulation, porn, and various other forms of addiction. We will be, if we aren’t already, a nation of addicts. Because if there is one thing we know about our bodily appetites it is that they

are insatiable, requiring ever more of the same things to slake our rapacious desires. But partaking of the same thing, addictively, over and over again, is boring. It crushes and kills the soul. And so what we really end up with is not a society of liberated selves, but a society of bored, libidinous, pleasure addicts trending toward suicidal despair...and live as radically atomized, alienated, and isolated individuals devoid of love or meaningful relationships” (“The Collective Concupiscence”, unpublished).

You can call this reality any number of different things. It’s Individualism, it’s Technocracy, it’s Liberalism Mechanized, it’s the Isolation Liturgy, or, as Chapp says, it’s the System. But I think I’ll just use perhaps the oldest Christian word for there is for it. Let’s just call it the World.