

9-21-2000

## Redeeming the City: Exploring the Relationship between Church and Metropolis

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### Recommended Citation

Ramsay, Meredith (2000) "Redeeming the City: Exploring the Relationship between Church and Metropolis," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 3.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol16/iss1/3>

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## Redeeming the City

## Exploring the Relationship between Church and Metropolis

*Meredith Ramsay*

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*The author calls attention to a neglected force in urban political life by highlighting how positivism undermined scholarly interest in cultural forces, particularly religion. She shows that although community organizing was formerly led by leftist radicals, today it is led by the church. Five factors contribute to the leading role of congregations in grassroots organizing and urban revitalization. Analysis and interpretation of these factors led the author to conclude that secularization and urban restructuring have left only the church with a sufficient moral and institutional presence in distressed urban neighborhoods to spearhead a return to more direct participatory forms of democracy.*

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As the twenty-first century dawns, devolution is well under way, and there is evidence of renewed interest in urban revitalization. Suddenly there is a vast infusion of resources into community policing to reduce crime and the fear of crime. Large sums have been allocated for the Clinton administration's Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community program. Chain stores, having saturated suburban markets, have rediscovered the city and are moving back in. At the same time, there is a revitalization of community activism among those who are determined that working-class and poor people not be left out of the policymaking process and that there should be no return to the gentrification that occurred in the past.<sup>1</sup> But the nature of community activism has changed during the past fifty years.<sup>2</sup> No longer is grassroots organizing led by Left radicals working with political clubs and labor unions, as in the 1930s and 1940s. Religious groups take the lead in community organizing today. The object of this article is to examine the nature and role of this faith-based activism.

From antiquity onward, governing the polis was viewed as a moral project that aimed to conform the political order to the unchangeable law of the heavens. The study of politics concerned practical and philosophical questions about how citizens might cultivate moral excellence in their life in community and thus realize the highest attainable good.<sup>3</sup> This "formative project" is central to the classical republican tradition.<sup>4</sup> But the appearance of Nicolai Machiavelli during the Italian Renaissance prefigured the collapse of the project. The explicitly moral and metaphysical aspects of politics were eventually to give way to rationality, liberalism, secularization, and science. From the

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Enlightenment onward, these forces of modernity established deepening dichotomies between sacred and secular, public and private, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, until discourses that explicitly address questions of morality and faith were relegated to the private domain.<sup>5</sup>

Liberal democratic theory, like the classical republican tradition it has largely replaced, was originally based in natural law doctrine and is itself a deeply normative system. It locates moral authority not in the state but in the individual conscience. Liberty is protected less for its own sake than to ensure that the state remains forever subordinate to the relationship between the individual and the Creator, whose will can be known to humans through reason.<sup>6</sup> But the modernist mind in its purest cast, which has come to disavow natural law as a normative system of political order, holds that values derive from subjective passions and are inaccessible through reason. Reason, it is claimed, is instrumental; therefore, neither science nor politics can establish end values.

By the mid-twentieth century, the separation of reason from the transcendent dimension of natural law doctrine seemed complete.<sup>7</sup> Rationality had come to signify nothing more than efficiency. “The term rational is never applied to an agent’s ends, but only to his means. This follows from the definition of rational as efficient, that is, maximizing output for a given input,” according to economist Anthony Downs.<sup>8</sup> Scientific positivism had placed values outside the pale of the political and even the scholarly enterprise.

But the loss of a moral vocabulary in politics, education, scholarship, and public discourse generally has adverse implications for democracy, as well as the individual and society, the magnitude of which scholars are just now beginning to grasp.<sup>9</sup> With positivism’s dominance apparently ebbing, there is a growing appreciation for the importance of culture. In 1987, Aaron Wildavsky expounded the need for a cultural approach in his presidential address to the American Political Science Association. In *Community, Culture, and Economic Development*, I offered theoretical and empirical arguments for the value of a cultural approach that would yield a more fine-tuned understanding of the causes and consequences of development policies than theories that are based on self-interest alone.<sup>10</sup>

By replacing normative theory with a narrow focus on interests — generally construed to mean economic interests — and conflicts surrounding their distribution — “who gets what, when, and where” — political science has fostered the widespread acceptance of two harmful fallacies with policy ramifications for cities. The first reduces human choice to a rational calculus of profit maximization and overlooks the social embeddedness of preference formation.<sup>11</sup> The second, which derives from the first, equates economic growth with the general good and glosses over its inevitable social costs and inequities.<sup>12</sup>

Urban scholarship has been criticized for contributing to this naive economism.<sup>13</sup> Its economistic assumptions have bolstered the ideological underpinnings for disastrous development initiatives in cities, because market calculations of the impacts of development projects that fail to take account of nonmarket values are susceptible to the error of overestimating their benefits and underestimating their real costs.<sup>14</sup> The real costs include population displacement, commodification and destruction of indigenous cultures, environmental degradation, economic and environmental injustice, destruction of social capital, and the moral and spiritual impoverishment of society.<sup>15</sup>

Robert Waste takes urban theorists to task for neglecting the larger normative and prescriptive questions concerning the democratic prospects for urban governance in the United States and abroad.<sup>16</sup> Elaine Sharp contrasts urban theory with the work of cultural

theorists,<sup>17</sup> arguing that urbanists' single-minded focus on interests, to the exclusion of moral and cultural values, leaves them ill-equipped to deal with the morals-based social conflicts into which local governments are increasingly drawn.<sup>18</sup> But a growing body of scholarship shows that urbanists are enlarging the scope of their inquiry beyond political and economic elites that drive policy from "above" and focusing on less instrumental voices and values that are gathering force from "below."<sup>19</sup>

D. C. Leege, J. A. Lieske, and K. D. Wald urge political scientists to give closer attention to cultural differences associated with religious, ethnic, racial, and social class outlooks in explaining political behavior.<sup>20</sup> The fruitfulness of this kind of inquiry has been demonstrated by a handful of scholars who have investigated the political impact of religion in local communities.<sup>21</sup> This article explores the role of religious institutions in urban revitalization. It considers the possibility that the moral and political vision and the long-term commitment necessary to address the urban crisis will come from faith communities working from the bottom up to redeem individual lives, distressed neighborhoods, and whole cities, as claimed by some scholars, community organizers, religious activists, and other observers.<sup>22</sup>

How is one to interpret the fact that in the mid-1970s, after the Nixon administration had reduced funding for the War on Poverty, the Campaign for Human Development, a Roman Catholic agency that funded thousands of ecumenically sponsored, community-based organizations was named by the Ford Foundation as the largest and most important source of financial support for community organizing in the United States?<sup>23</sup> Is it not significant that religious congregations provide the bases for the most vital and enduring of all institutions engaged in civic activities, community organizing, and community development in U.S. cities today?<sup>24</sup>

Pursuant to these questions, I first discuss historical shifts in the place of religion in public life generally and then present an overview of the community organizing and development activities in which urban missions and ministries are engaged. Next, I identify the intrinsic and contextual factors that, to a large extent, account for the leading role of that set of diverse faith communities referred to collectively as *the church*. Interpretation of these factors leads to the conclusion that the church has a unique capability to act as a catalyst for transforming distressed urban communities and renewing the cultural, moral, economic, and political life of the cities.

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### **Homo Religioso in Exile**

In the medieval world, economics and religion were inextricably linked. But capitalism began to emerge during the Renaissance, and by the end of the seventeenth century, *homo oeconomicus* had driven *homo religiosus* out of the marketplace.<sup>25</sup> Warren Nord describes this transition.

The free market had become the key to economics: usury, which had once been a sin, was rehabilitated as interest and took its inevitable place in the process of capital formation; the concept of a just price gave way to supply and demand; guilds collapsed before the need for free labor; charity and begging, once cardinal virtues and signs of saintliness, became vices; self-interest and acquisitiveness, once vices, became the governing virtues of the economic world; economic guidance was no longer sought in theology but in the value-free calculus of economists and hardheaded businessmen . . . The world of economics had been secularized.<sup>26</sup>

By the nineteenth century, a strict division of human activity into two discrete spheres, public and private, had become the reigning principle in American political practice. Religion would be consigned to the private sphere for all but ceremonial purposes, religiously based popular movements notwithstanding.<sup>27</sup> Once the sharp dichotomy between sacred and secular had enabled the market and the state to secure their domain over the secular, a category that includes politics, economics, science, and technology, the republican democratic tradition, which explicitly seeks to realize the good, was replaced by the liberal tradition. In Michael Sandel's analysis, the transition from "formative republic" to "procedural republic" was complete by the mid-twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the liberal democratic state is now limited to maintaining a neutral framework in which unencumbered individuals can enter into contracts for the maximal attainment of their individual interests.

Until fairly recently, the functional dichotomy between public and private, sacred and secular, was bridged by various "mediating structures," namely, "Those institutions standing between the individual in his [*sic*] private life and the large institutions of public life."<sup>29</sup> Among those institutions which serve to attenuate the individual's experience of social isolation and political powerlessness are family, neighborhood, church, civic organization, club, settlement house, political party, electoral system, and labor union. Many of those institutions, however, are either decaying or have already died out. Even the (theologically) liberal church, having largely abdicated its prophetic role as a witness against abuses of state power and generator of new visions, largely limits its influence and activities to the private sphere by "helping individuals to be more kind and honest within existing structures," according to theologian Harvey Cox.<sup>30</sup>

With the liberal philosophy of the procedural republic ascendant and the mediating institutions that traditionally served to bridge its two spheres declining, it would appear that the quarantine of religious and moral values is all but complete. But there is a paradox to be reckoned with here: for many theorists, the freer an individual is from any prior moral claims or attachments, the deeper is his or her sense of the anomic precariousness of individual existence in isolation from the larger society.<sup>31</sup> The decline of those structures which traditionally functioned to translate private values into public purposes, together with the resulting impoverishment of civic discourse, have contributed to a resurgence of religious activism in recent years.

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## A Religious Resurgence

Contrary to predictions that the secularization of advanced modernity signified the irretrievable decline of religion as a significant force in the world, there was evidence, by the early 1980s, of a worldwide reappearance of religion as a potent political force. "New forms of religion and spirituality directly address issues of the moral meaning of existence, which modern institutions so thoroughly tend to dissolve."<sup>32</sup> Belying the assumptions about human nature that undergird economics and public choice approaches to political science, human beings evidently still strive to find purpose and meaning in life precisely because the acquisitive roles of profit-maximizer and consumer leave them feeling diminished, powerless, and unfulfilled.<sup>33</sup> Given religion's promise of personal and collective empowerment, the recent upsurge in popular religion, especially among women and minorities, should not be surprising.<sup>34</sup>

It seems that the procedural republic, by apotheosizing the market and "liberating" the worker from social attachments and moral encumbrances, so that he or she might

respond more freely to market forces, serves well the interests and values of a small class of industrial and postindustrial capitalists; however, it systematically excludes the values and visions of the vast majority, especially women, minorities, the poor, and those whose national origins are in what is called “the periphery.” The expansion of their individual rights and entitlements has not mitigated their sense of powerlessness before vast structures of power that they can neither understand nor control. The reason is a paradoxical loss of agency that results when liberty is detached from the formative project of democratic self-government and located in the individual will.<sup>35</sup> This is not to suggest, as some do, that human agency would be increased by weaning the poor from their welfare entitlements. The point here is that although such rights and entitlements may well be a precondition of freedom, they are far from the whole of it.

The conservative thrust of U.S. politics toward devolution and privatization, which has been gaining momentum since the 1970s, has provided another stimulus for the return of religion to the public sphere insofar as it has revitalized the tradition that Lester Salamon refers to as “third-party government.”<sup>36</sup> Third-party government relies on voluntary associations and nonprofits to provide social services as an alternative to direct government action. Channeling millions of public dollars to faith-based and other nonprofits has stimulated enormous growth in the quantity and range of activities undertaken by religious organizations. The implications of this development are numerous, but outside of Stephen Monsma’s work, they have been little explored.<sup>37</sup>

Religion brings people together in mutual solidarity around matters that concern their most exalted hopes and deeply held values; therefore the political potential in religious movements is high.<sup>38</sup> Regardless of whether the direction of these movements is radical or conservative, they are usually of a populist political cast in the sense that they pressure elites to respond to mass-based demands.<sup>39</sup> U.S. history is replete with examples of powerful, church-based popular crusades such as the antislavery movement, the temperance movement, the populist movement, and the civil rights movement. Cox interprets such seemingly disparate contemporary movements as Liberation Theology in Latin America and Pentecostal movements in Africa, the United States, Latin America, and Asia as signs of a worldwide populist revolt against liberal theology’s accommodation to modernity and secularization.<sup>40</sup> These and other spiritual movements signal the restoration of faith as a political force in history making.

In the United States, conservative evangelicals are the most vocal and visible but by no means the only example of religiously based efforts to generate moral vision and moral discourse in the public arena. There is a new generation of believers, including Jews, Muslims, Roman Catholics, and members of mainline Protestant denominations, who envision a new public role for the church. A sizable number of them have formed ecumenical partnerships to bring their ideas to fruition. Michael Lerner, editor of the Jewish magazine *Tikkun*, charges that the political Left missed the boat by continuing to focus on economic interests and individual rights in the face of a pervasive and deeply felt hunger for meaning and spirituality.<sup>41</sup> Lerner is launching a progressive movement based on a spiritually rooted political vision that aims to overcome the selfishness and cynicism which so thoroughly contaminate the public arena.<sup>42</sup>

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## **Church and Metropolis**

To speak of the church is to speak of a universe of religious entities, so it is important to stress the high level of pluralism that characterizes religious life in the United States. The

definition of the church, as used here, includes the entire body of U.S. faith communities, dioceses, synods, councils of churches, and ecumenical coalitions. Major faith communities include Buddhist, Hindu, and Caribbean religions in addition to the Protestant, Roman Catholic, Islamic, and Jewish faiths. Even single-faith communities are divided into branches, factions, and schisms. Recognizing the diversity within and between faith communities, Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll posit four ideal types or mission orientations — activist, civic, sanctuary, and evangelistic — each of which represents a different stance with regard to the polis.<sup>43</sup>

1. The activist orientation perceives the here and now of the world as the main arena of God's redemptive activity, and humankind as the primary agent of establishing God's kingdom on earth. For the activist church or synagogue, achievement of a more just and humane society is a high priority, and the posture toward the existing social and economic order tends to be rather critical.<sup>44</sup>

The activist orientation is based on a theological tradition that is common to a number of the world's major faiths. This prophetic tradition embraces the concept of a God who is deeply involved in human affairs and the unfolding of history. Churches, mosques, and synagogues that embrace the prophetic tradition look at the world from the vantage point of those who bear the social cost of prevailing arrangements and give voice to the suffering. The Reverend Doe West, writing for *Spare Change: New England's Journal of the Streets*, adds that the prophetic vision includes the foundational belief, based on shared faith principles of the Judeo-Christian tradition, that "social justice requires those with the greatest need as having the first claim on the resources of the community."<sup>45</sup>

Not every religious faith is guided by a prophetic tradition, and not every Christian, Islamic, or Jewish congregation taps into that particular cultural heritage of the church. Some congregations conform more closely to the larger culture in which they are embedded, thus devoting the major part of their resources to building up membership, increasing revenue, acquiring and maintaining buildings, and otherwise securing an advantageous position in the religious marketplace. Others are doctrinally opposed to becoming actively engaged with the secular world.

2. The civic orientation shares the activist orientation's focus on this world and its sense of responsibility for public life. But civic congregations are more comfortable with, even affirming of, dominant social, political, and economic structures: less willing to accept, even opposed to, the use of confrontational techniques in the service of change; and more likely to define their public role in educational and cultural terms than in political terms.<sup>46</sup>

Political disclaimers notwithstanding, many civic congregations have not hesitated to employ the moral authority of the church to legitimate secular power relations and prevailing social and economic arrangements. Many white churches assumed this stance during the great civil rights struggles, as Martin Luther King, Jr., charged in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."<sup>47</sup>

3. Whereas the activist and civic orientations are decidedly this-worldly in emphasis, the sanctuary orientation is primarily focused on a world to come in which the cares of this world will be surmounted. The church or synagogue exists mainly to provide people with opportunities to withdraw, in varying degrees, from the trials and vicissitudes of daily life into the company of committed fellow believers.<sup>48</sup>

The sanctuary orientation shuns involvement with the secular world. Matters of politics and economics are not viewed as properly within the church's purview. In the past, liberal theology fostered this perspective among various mainline denominations.<sup>49</sup> It was also the norm among evangelical Protestants until they became politically mobilized in reaction against the political gains made by feminists and gay rights activists in the 1960s.<sup>50</sup>

4. The evangelistic orientation has much in common with the sanctuary orientation. Its focus is on a future world in which temporal concerns are overcome. There is also concern over the deterioration of traditional standards of personal morality. The major difference is the evangelistic orientation's clear sense of a publicly proactive role. Members are encouraged to participate in public life, not for the purpose of social reform or change, but to share the message of salvation with those outside the fellowship.<sup>51</sup>

Political mobilization has been growing among conservative evangelicals for the past thirty years. On matters concerning the culture and individual morality, they are active at all levels of government, including local school districts. They appeal to a widely felt need to introduce an ethical and spiritual dimension in the public arena. "The religious left lost its soul and we stepped into the vacuum," said Ralph Reed, former director of the Christian Coalition and chief spokesperson for Pat Robertson's pro-family movement.<sup>52</sup> But the New Christian Right gives scant attention to fundamental matters of social injustice such as official indifference to the AIDS epidemic, increasing inequalities, breakdown of the social contract between employers and employees, and the abandonment of the children of poor women and immigrants.<sup>53</sup>

Although the majority of white evangelicals have aligned themselves with the Republican party, it is important to note that not all evangelicals are political conservatives.<sup>54</sup> Black evangelical churches blend theological conservatism with a prophetic, liberationist message,<sup>55</sup> as illustrated by their central role in the civil rights movement.<sup>56</sup> Their loyalty to the Democratic party remains solid. While James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson stake out positions in such policy areas as abortion, gay rights, and welfare reform and support the election of conservative candidates at all levels of government, other evangelical groups, for instance, Sojourners and Evangelicals for Social Action, have joined together to proclaim publicly that the religious right does not speak for them. Their political concerns focus more on structural and institutional injustice and what they view as a biblical mandate to serve as advocates and mediators for outsiders, the weak, the disenfranchised, the despised, and the poor. This places them squarely within the prophetic tradition and the activist orientation.

One controversial theory that has been offered for the sometimes intense disagreements between conservative Christian groups and progressive forces in local communities is the culture wars argument, according to which U.S. society is in the grips of an epic political power struggle between orthodox Christian values versus progressive, ecumenical religious, and secular orientations.<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Wald cautions that political orientations do not divide as neatly along religious lines as this theory suggests.<sup>58</sup> Nancy Ammerman reports that her empirical research and that of others have failed to uncover such a cultural divide.<sup>59</sup> Robert Fowler and Allen Hertzke, restating the culture wars argument, view the fundamental issue being contested as "What kind of society should the United States be?"<sup>60</sup> This is the question, so central to classical democratic theory, that some religious leaders view the modern procedural republic as being unable to address effectively.



Eugene Rivers, pastor of the Azuza Christian Community in Boston, articulates a belief, widely held in faith communities that range from the politically conservative to the politically radical, that “only the church has the moral authority and the vocabulary to introduce transcendent concepts of personal worth and the sacredness of life that will both inspire responsibility on a personal level and introduce purpose and definition to the role of civil government on a societal level.”<sup>61</sup> Rivers considers the church a mediating structure with two functions in the public arena. First, it has an effect as a norm-generating institution, either by its absence or its presence: it cannot be neutral. Following William J. Wilson, Rivers argues that in the early 1970s, when middle-class black churches abandoned the cities, they opened the floodgates to gangs, drug addiction, family breakdown, violence, and despair.<sup>62</sup> Second, he argues that because the church’s Resurrectionary vision of civil society requires a moral vocabulary that is backed by institutional infrastructures that will reproduce, maintain, and promote these religiously based norms, the churches may be in a position to generate the social, moral, and cultural capital without which the state is often powerless to implement its own social policies effectively.<sup>63</sup>

Alexis de Tocqueville provided intellectual support for these ecumenical visions, noting that in America, religions established a common base of morality, which prevented majoritarian rule from descending into tyranny and served as an independent voice of authority interposed between the individual and the state. More recently, this argument has been deepened by intellectuals and scholars for whom the preservation of freedom depends on the strongly felt presence of an autonomous church that will not allow itself to be used or co-opted for political purposes.<sup>64</sup>

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### A Guiding Paradigm

“What image, model, or paradigm of the city, inner city, or metropolitan area has informed the churches’ policy and strategy in cities?” In 1989, when theologian Clifford Green posed this question to an ecumenical group of urban religious leaders who had gathered for a conference at Union Theological Seminary, a comprehensive, guiding paradigm of the city was articulated in response.<sup>65</sup> In contrast to the culture of privatism, which views the city as a producer of private capital and little besides,<sup>66</sup> and in contrast with televangelism’s “health and wealth gospel” and the “name it and claim it” theology preached in suburban megachurches,<sup>67</sup> this paradigm reflects a prophetic vision of the divine commonwealth that explicitly and comprehensively challenges the individualism and materialism of the commercial culture of cities. In contrast with the self-regarding individualism of the market culture, it proclaims that the church’s mission of charity is about human connection. It is a vision “rooted in a shared biblical understanding that human life before God is not the life of isolated, utilitarian individualists but life in community.”<sup>68</sup>

Overcoming the divisions between inner city and suburbs, white and nonwhite, rich, middle class, and poor presupposes a metropolitan paradigm. In the hope of transcending the postwar urban-suburban bifurcation that has made the word *urban* into a code word for inner-city blacks or Hispanics, all races and social classes are viewed as interdependent members of a holistic system that includes the people, institutions, and activities of the whole city.<sup>69</sup> This religious perspective is critical of the secular culture’s issue-related approach to urban life, in which particular problems are typically related to particular groups or neighborhoods and may not be viewed as problems of the city as such. It views

single-issue agendas as harmful because they obscure the interrelatedness of such things as violence, urban economics, unemployment, and drug addiction and because they lend themselves to quick fixes when what is needed is a faithful presence and long-term commitments.<sup>70</sup>

Congruent with this view of the metropolis as a single structural entity, the church, not uncommonly, improvises metropolitan and ecumenical forms, directly opposing the centrifugal forces associated with economic restructuring.<sup>71</sup> The reorganization of the black community along economic lines has physically isolated the extremely poor in the inner cities, leaving them increasingly alienated, even from black institutions.<sup>72</sup> Baptist minister and sociologist Cheryl Gilkes views reaching the extremely deprived members of the black community as the major challenge facing a predominantly middle- and working-class black church.<sup>73</sup> But growing inequalities, middle-class flight, and social and cultural fragmentation are not problems of the black community only; they increasingly characterize metropolitan areas generally. Again and again, this has driven congregations into ecumenical coalitions and paracongregational groupings in their efforts to bridge the inner cities and suburbs and span the divisions between neighborhoods, races, and social classes so that the assets and resources of the church might be made accessible to those most in need.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, many denominations and other religious organizations, for example, Habitat for Humanity and Prison Fellowship, operate on a global scale, as do all the major faiths.

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### **No Opiate for the Masses**

Far from an opiate or an instrument of domination that reconciles the oppressed masses to their subordinated status, as some Marxist scholars have argued,<sup>75</sup> religious faith grounded in the prophetic tradition inspires belief in the possibilities for real social change, promoting political mobilization.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, people who believe they are subject to divine guidance make significant sacrifices for the sake of their religious ideals.<sup>77</sup> Faith-based community organizing and development provide contemporary examples of religiously inspired political action in cities. While basic information about faith-based and other nonprofits is “grossly lacking, making it difficult to perceive the sector or gauge its scope or role,” it is nevertheless possible, by gleaning pieces of evidence from scattered case studies and insights from interviews with community organizers, nonprofit intermediaries, and church leaders, to assemble a picture of these activities, albeit a partial one.<sup>78</sup>

### ***Community Organizing***

The church's involvement in community organizing grew out of Saul Alinsky's movement, which began in the 1930s in Chicago's “Back of the Yards” neighborhoods.<sup>79</sup> Alinsky believed that poor people could achieve political empowerment by forming alliances among existing neighborhood institutions.<sup>80</sup> He also believed that “the end justifies the means.” His preferred strategy for forcing elites to share power was to expose his targets in dramatically staged public confrontations and subject them to ridicule.<sup>81</sup> These tactics were controversial among middle-class churchgoers, but Alinsky's approach resonated with Reinhold Niebuhr's insistence that power is an inescapable factor in every social transaction and inherent in every movement seeking social justice,<sup>82</sup> so many churches adopted his method.<sup>83</sup>

To fund his activities, Alinsky created the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940, and established a training center in 1969. His brilliant, audacious public maneuvers

made him a legendary figure, and he is still revered as the father of community organizing.<sup>84</sup> Alinsky died in 1972. Today, the IAF is staffed by a team of 110 highly trained organizers who contract with community groups — almost exclusively congregations — to help build their organizations. Frequently cited examples include Baltimoreans United for Leadership Development (BUILD), Communities Organized for Public Service in San Antonio, East Brooklyn Congregations in New York, and United Neighborhood Organizations in Los Angeles. In 1990, it was estimated that the combined membership base of IAF affiliates exceeded one million people.<sup>85</sup>

In the 1960s, interreligious community organizing was stimulated first by the civil rights movement and then by the war in Vietnam and the urban disorders of that decade. In the mid-1970s, the context for community organizing started to change. The loss of jobs from the cities and the flight of the middle class to the suburbs meant that unions, ethnic associations, political clubs, and small business associations, the other neighborhood organizations on which Alinsky's movement was built, have weakened significantly over the last three decades.<sup>86</sup> Although many churches migrated to the suburbs in the wake of urban economic restructuring, others remained as "survival institutions" in inner-city neighborhoods.<sup>87</sup> They are now in the vanguard of community organization.<sup>88</sup>

As the churches' involvement in community activism broadened and deepened, the number of community-organizing networks multiplied. There are five networks of ecumenical, faith-based coalitions: Direct Action Research Training, in Florida and the Midwest, has 12 affiliates; the Gamaliel Foundation in Chicago has 35 affiliates; the Industrial Areas Foundation has 65 affiliates in the United States; the Organization and Leadership Training Center, in New England, has 6 affiliates; and the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing in California has 29 affiliates. These five networks combined include 147 congregation-based coalitions. When unaffiliated coalitions are included, the total is about 175 and growing rapidly.

The church has had a major influence on the philosophy and practice of community organizing.<sup>89</sup> Under Alinsky's leadership, the Industrial Areas Foundation's single goal was to teach poor people how to gain political power for its own sake. But when congregations questioned the ends and uses of power in the light of their religious values and cultural traditions, organizer Ernie Cortes and the IAF's director, Ed Chambers, listened and learned. The IAF then incorporated into its method the new understanding that individuals who are only weakly responsive to secular appeals based on narrow self-interest can frequently be motivated to sustain long-term commitments to act on particular issues when those issues are related to a larger purpose that fuses with their religious values and faith.<sup>90</sup> This partly explains why faith-based nonprofits, whose members are motivated less by transitory issues than by enduring values, can serve as viable, long-lasting platforms for a broad public agenda.<sup>91</sup>

Hula, Jackson, and Orr capture this potential with their concept of "governing nonprofits," for which they take BUILD as the prototype.

They take on roles and responsibilities traditionally reserved for the government, and they forge coalitions among and across groups, organizations, and sectors to address societal problems. These organizations require broad community support, embrace flexible policy agendas, and operate in the public domain. The success of governing nonprofits also lies in their ability to foster positive linkages with the local leadership without becoming completely identified with local authorities.<sup>92</sup>

Baltimore's experience with community activism illustrates most of these trends. In the aftermath of the urban riots in the late 1960s, a Lutheran alliance joined Roman

Catholic and Presbyterian groups and the Greater Baltimore Association to promote the formation of five neighborhood organizations in that city. "These organizations moved from confrontational activities to development of twenty-three community sponsored housing programs very different from urban renewal. They became forerunners of BUILD," which was established in 1977 with assistance from IAF organizers.<sup>93</sup> Today, forty-five to fifty predominantly black churches and one labor union constitute the core of BUILD's membership. Its prophetic mandate to be a voice for the poor is explicit in its mission statement, which is based on the teachings of the prophet Isaiah. BUILD's influence has increased over the past two decades. It advances an agenda for the transformation of the whole city with issues ranging from arson control and rat eradication to housing, health care, municipal finance, and widely watched work in school reform.<sup>94</sup>

In 1967, the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizing (IFCO) was created by Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum of New York, the Reverend Edgar Chandler of the Chicago Church Federation, Monsignor John Egan, director of the archdiocesan Office of Urban Affairs in Chicago, and Rabbi Irving Rosenbaum of the Chicago Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The IFCO's mission was to promote and encourage community organizing by recruiting personnel and channeling funding.<sup>95</sup> Intermediary organizations of this kind have sprung up all over the country, some under the auspices of religious organizations and some not. The largest intermediaries are the Ford Foundation's Local Initiatives Support Corporation, with field offices in thirty-seven cities, and the Enterprise Foundation, founded by James Rouse.

Interreligious community organizing continued to accelerate during the 1970s, but in 1981 the Reagan administration's cuts in government funding for social programs increased the pressure on existing church organizations. The Reagan administration also brought diminishing financial and political support from government and foundations for community organizing and development. A second stage of faith-based community organizing has since emerged. Ecumenical coalitions of neighborhood churches are attempting to reduce their reliance on outside organizations because, in the earlier period, they found that they were frequently co-opted.<sup>96</sup> There is a new stress on independence from government, foundation, and corporate funding and a new policy in many religious organizations to finance most of their activities through fund-raising campaigns and dues.<sup>97</sup> Just as important is the innovative approach to community development that these coalitions are taking. It represents a significant break with the past.<sup>98</sup>

### ***Community Development***

Faith-based community development is comprehensive, asset based, and driven from the bottom up by congregations that remain firmly in charge. Whereas earlier, more traditional partnerships were based on the idea of citizen participation in government initiatives, the second stage of community development reverses these roles so that government supports citizen initiatives.<sup>99</sup> One of the reasons for the poor performance of many neighborhood revitalization efforts in the 1980s was the lack of coordination among the services offered by different providers.

Second-stage community development is comprehensive in that congregations engage in a range of coordinated activities. Typically, they begin with one project, usually housing development. As they gain experience, they expand into other areas, such as health services, crime prevention, education, job creation, economic development, and access to credit. Support from outside organizations is needed and welcomed, but instead of ceding control as they did in the past, these faith-based community development

corporations (CDC) devise and implement their own novel approaches according to their priorities, opportunities, and resources.<sup>100</sup>

Bethel New Life illustrates the comprehensive approach to community building.<sup>101</sup> In 1965, two Lutheran pastors, a brother and sister, went to Chicago to minister to thirty-five white families at Bethel Church, located in a part of the city where the population had changed from 35,000 whites to 60,000 blacks in five years. Bethel New Life, the CDC the congregation created, began with \$9,500. By 1995 it had grown to a coalition of thirteen churches with a budget of more than \$10 million, employing nearly 500 people.<sup>102</sup> Green summarizes this remarkable growth.

The “circle of things” at Bethel were a vibrant worshipping congregation that initiated the neighborhood redemption; a volunteer and sweat equity housing program; control of the rebuilding by local residents; increasing financial strength, enabling deals to be made with city government and banks; the joining of over twenty neighborhood congregations in an Isaiah plan for new housing; converting a failing hospital to a community center with programs for the elderly, day care for children, and art programs; cooperative efforts in sewing, home care, and recycling; and a creative experiment using welfare funds for a Self-Sufficiency Program.<sup>103</sup>

Contrary to the evidence presented here, modern liberalism posits an individual who consumes only public goods but does not produce them. Hence modern secular organizations tend to treat individuals as consumers and clients. In low-income communities, however, where material incentives may be lacking, individuals frequently make substantial commitments of their time and resources when provided with opportunities to acquire the knowledge and self-confidence that enable them to become producers, instead of merely consumers, of public goods.<sup>104</sup> Since second-stage community development is asset based and driven from the bottom up, residents are no longer cast in the role of agency clients. They are treated as citizens with personal assets that are potentially valuable to the commonwealth.<sup>105</sup> The recognition that self-reliance and independence are necessary for self-respect is the basis for Alinsky’s “iron rule of organizing” — “Never do anything for people that they can do for themselves.”<sup>106</sup>

The Nehemiah Project of the East Brooklyn Congregations illustrates asset-based housing development initiated by religious organizations.

By 1990, twenty-three-hundred units had been produced by the working poor, 40 percent of whom came from public housing. First organizing dollars were provided by the LCMS [Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod]. A development loan came from the Roman Catholic Bishop in Brooklyn. The city was shamed into a tardy grant of \$10,000 per unit, repayable if a house were sold for profit.<sup>107</sup>

Comprehensive, asset-based, bottom-up approaches are widely emulated by organizations in the secular sphere. The Boston Persistent Poverty Project of the Boston Foundation was explicitly designed to conform to these themes. It makes its support conditional on communities developing their own asset-based strategies.<sup>108</sup> Boston’s famous Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative is an example.<sup>109</sup> The National Community Building Network, a twenty-two-city network of community-driven intermediaries, which disseminates information about strategies for community building and serves as an advocate for community development in national policy forums, was founded in 1993 on these principles.

The church’s activities are shaping the way policymakers think about cities. From 1973, former Housing and Urban Development (HUD) secretary Henry Cisneros had

witnessed the evolution of Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) from a single Roman Catholic parish in San Antonio to a network that was able to defeat a tax-limitation initiative with statewide door-to-door campaigning in 1987. COPS also passed landmark statewide legislation around issues of school district financing, health care, and farm safety.<sup>110</sup> Cisneros, who had extensive contact with COPS before and during his San Antonio mayoralty, announced that HUD endorsed the comprehensive approach developed by COPS and other faith-based nonprofits and was revising its procedures accordingly.<sup>111</sup> Vice President Al Gore made it the basis of his Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community approach to community building.<sup>112</sup>

### ***Third-Party Government***

Liberal policies of the past with their modernist thrust, based on rights and universal criteria, tended not to respect community, partly because of the liberal state's equation of community with group parochialism, authoritarianism, and intolerance. Instead of building civic commitments, liberal policies undermined them. The church's involvement in the kinds of activities discussed here offers the potential to build civic commitments with public policies that nurture such church involvement. It is important, then, to consider some of the reasons why church-based third-party government tends to evoke skepticism among liberals.

First, some observers fear that increasing government reliance on the voluntary sector could further reduce its social welfare role, which is already minimal by the standard of other industrialized Western democracies. This concern stems from conservative and libertarian claims that religious missions of charity and social service provision have the capacity somehow to release the federal government from its responsibilities and commitments in the social domain.<sup>113</sup> The consequences of acting on this misguided notion are suggested by Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll's report that in Hartford, Connecticut, after the Reagan administration reduced federal funding for social programs, a flood of referrals from financially strapped city agencies completely overwhelmed the staff and resources of Central City Churches, an established coalition of eight congregations whose creative realization of the ecumenical possibilities of urban ministry had made it a model for interreligious urban missions and ministries nationwide.<sup>114</sup> Far from being an alternative to government, nonprofits typically depend on government for more than half their funding for the provision of social services.<sup>115</sup>

Second, community development by churches has legal and political ramifications, partly because of the symbiotic relationship that characterizes church and state in the provision of many community services. Using public dollars to fund religiously based nonprofit organizations has not, so far, significantly compromised religious freedoms, according to Monsma.<sup>116</sup> But he cautions that religious organizations which provide social services are vulnerable to co-optation because of the arbitrary and ad hoc nature of legal doctrine and government practice in this area and the large sums of money involved.

Third, the particularism of many religious institutions and other nonprofits has raised concerns about the possibility of discrimination in the provision of services.<sup>117</sup> Professional organizers typically emphasize the public character of church-based activism, and they thoroughly inculcate norms of openness, accountability, and acceptance of difference in the organizations with which they work for precisely that reason. An important government contribution to these partnerships is in ensuring that priorities are set more democratically than they might otherwise be and to guarantee universality of access to their services.<sup>118</sup>

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## **Why Does the Church Lead?**

It is important to reflect on what is unique about religious traditions and why congregations, instead of progressive, secular organizations, are taking the lead in community organizing. The church must be seen as more than a set of organizations if its singular role in the city is to be made comprehensible. The church is a worldview, a conservator of sacred traditions, the sum of innumerable communities of like-minded believers, a vast complex of powerful institutions with local-global connections, and an independent base of transcendent moral authority. Following Wald, I submit that religion has three faces — creed, institution, and subculture — each of which contributes to its potential to influence political action.<sup>119</sup> In addition, I want to posit two contextual factors that help to explain the church's success in mobilizing communities where secular efforts have failed. The first is the problem of nihilism, which, in the judgment of some close observers, only the church has the resources to dispel effectively.<sup>120</sup> The second relates to the decline of other mediating institutions produced by global economic restructuring. Consider these five factors in greater detail.

### ***Creed***

Wald's first face of religion is what he calls creed, meaning bodies of religious beliefs, values, teachings, and symbols that inhere to particular faiths and have the potential to inspire political action.<sup>121</sup> Community organizers report that narrow electoral politics and appeals to self-interest are no longer sufficient to motivate the working class and the poor to participate in local politics in large numbers. However, religion entails a values imperative that calls people to act on their faith.<sup>122</sup>

Like the monks who preserved learning in Christian monasteries throughout the Dark Ages, today's church preserves an institutional awareness that human beings are not only driven by egoistic self-interest and self-preservation, as modernism would have it; they are also driven by profound moral and spiritual aspirations. This insight is confirmed by the fact that when people are facilitated in their desire to contribute to a larger, more dignified, and nobler purpose than the egoistic pursuit of material gain, they can frequently be motivated to make significant sacrifices and commitments to the organization or community that thus endows them with dignity, self-respect, respect of others, and a strong sense of agency.<sup>123</sup>

Richard Wood's research shows that symbolic systems of meaning which are embedded in particular religious traditions undergird the capacity of some congregations and church-based coalitions to sustain major initiatives in the public sphere and carry them through to completion.<sup>124</sup> But how are we to understand more concretely how creed inspires sustained, collective, community activism? Religion teleologically structures past, present, and future in morally purposeful ways. By drawing on ritual and other symbolic resources, churches, mosques, and synagogues integrate the lives of their members into the community of saints and fellowship with other believers. Prophetic, biblical religion is rich in stories, symbols, and metaphors which convey God's intention that his people act as coworkers in establishing justice, relieving suffering, and healing the world. Numerous lessons and parables inspire congregations to take principled political action.

The motivating potential of creed is rendered more intellectually accessible by the work of narrative theorists.<sup>125</sup> David Novitz explains that, through stories, we construct our self-image, which determines how we treat others, what challenges we embrace or

shrink from, what rights or considerations we expect, and how we and others like us are treated by others, including the state; so narrative has a political dimension.<sup>126</sup> Consider, for example, the massive affordable housing program of the East Brooklyn Congregations. Its name, Nehemiah Homes, was selected after Johnny Ray Youngblood, an EBC pastor, preached a sermon about Nehemiah, the Old Testament leader to whom the king of Persia gave permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the ancient city that had lain in ruins for one hundred years. By pointing out the many parallels to their own situation, this pastor encouraged his largely black congregation to identify with Jews of the fifth century B.C., who undertook the work of rebuilding their city in the face of enormous political and practical obstacles. Youngblood motivated his and other congregations to join in rebuilding large parts of East Brooklyn.<sup>127</sup> For Boyte, this Old Testament imagery is “far removed from the nonideological vocabulary of raw power and self-interest most often associated with [secular] community organizations.”<sup>128</sup> It is also far more persuasive.

### ***Institution***

The second face of religion is institutional.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, the church is an institution of almost unlimited scope and complexity. Among the institutional advantages it brings to bear on community revitalization, public esteem is an important political resource, particularly when religious leaders negotiate with public officials or attempt to form coalitions across institutional boundaries. Another resource is the wealth of talented, highly trained, professional leadership in the clergy.<sup>130</sup> The church also has organizational advantages in its large formal memberships, regular meetings, professional staffs, publications, and ties to denominational and interdenominational movements and hierarchies that are local, national, and global in reach. Wald reports that “several of the largest churches have become the hubs for worldwide operations, complete with the organizational complexity of a major corporation.”<sup>131</sup> Although the church, at every level of organization, is fraught with internal conflicts and divisions, the fact remains that few if any secular organizations can even begin to match its institutional potential.<sup>132</sup>

### ***Subculture***

The third face of religion is its character as subculture. Wald explains:

By virtue of participating in a social network, the church member may encounter messages about political issues and interact with fellow members who adhere to the church’s line. A person surrounded by church members who participate actively in a campaign is likely to learn about the issues from a religious point of view, to receive encouragement about joining in the activity, and to observe and acquire social skills that may promote political success. Though not intended for that purpose, congregational organizations may serve as leadership-training institutes for people who lack other means of exposure to organizational skills.<sup>133</sup>

In 1973, when Ernie Cortes went to San Antonio to organize the Mexican-American community on the city’s west side, his place of origin, this Industrial Areas Foundation coordinator demonstrated a keen awareness of the political significance of the church as a subculture. Roman Catholicism was by far the strongest, most vital belief system for that community. Cortes could not imagine successful civic activity that would not draw on the rituals and traditions of the church and its institutional strength.<sup>134</sup> On the basis of that strength and tradition, Cortes went on to build Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) into the largest civic organization in the country by 1987. By 1990,



COPS and its affiliated church-based organizations in Texas were estimated to represent at least 400,000 people. No longer limiting itself to neighborhood and local government issues, this network became a major political force in the state.<sup>135</sup>

### ***Nihilism***

Philosopher Cornell West further elucidates the central role of the church in urban revitalization when he defines the fundamental problem as nihilism, by which he means “the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America.”<sup>136</sup> West argues that liberal social-scientific discomfort with moral and cultural concepts and inhibitions about acknowledging underclass social pathologies has led scholars to overlook this most fundamental of threats: “To talk about the distressing statistics of unemployment, infant mortality, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, and violent crime is one thing. But to face up to the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially Black) life and property in much of Black America is something else.”<sup>137</sup> West contends that by emphasizing human agency, the prophetic church instills hope and keeps alive the notion that “history is incomplete, and the world is unfinished, and the future is open-ended and that what we think and what we do can make a difference.”<sup>138</sup>

West indicts U.S. society for failing to nurture children morally and spiritually, failing to equip them with the inner resources they need to make it through life’s unavoidable difficulties and disappointments without succumbing to nihilism. He laments “the deracinated state of their souls” that leaves them “easy prey to the culture of consumption.” He views the prophetic church, not market religion, as the single most important institution for addressing that spiritual emptiness.<sup>139</sup> “I do believe that prophetic churches, prophetic mosques, prophetic synagogues, can all play a fundamental role in nurturing children by transmitting non-market values . . . love, care, service to others, sacrifice, risk, community, struggles for justice, solidarity, all of these are non-market values against a market culture.”<sup>140</sup> Contrary to popular perceptions, nihilism does not affect black Americans only.<sup>141</sup> Surveys indicate that young people of all races and social classes have become objects of mounting concern because of their cynicism, hedonism, and lack of ethics and morals.<sup>142</sup> The Center for Juvenile Justice documents their growing propensity for violent crime.<sup>143</sup>

To define the urban crisis in cultural terms, as West has done, is not to deny structural causes because structure and culture are closely linked, reciprocal processes that create and reinforce each other.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, to identify nihilism as a fundamental problem in distressed urban communities is not to negate the need for structural change. It is rather to say that if the urban crisis were addressed in structural terms only, such efforts would be likely to fail.<sup>145</sup> Every secular program, whether conservative or progressive, which attempts solutions based on economic assumptions that human beings are motivated solely by self-interest and self-preservation, is likely to fail because “degraded and oppressed people are also hungry for identity, meaning, and self-worth.”<sup>146</sup>

Who is addressing the meaninglessness, hopelessness, and most of all, lovelessness that West views as the core problem for black America and may well be the core problem for the rest of America? “Where do ordinary people, steeped in lifelong experiences of humiliation, barred from acquisition of basic skills of citizenship — from running meetings to speaking in public — gain the courage, the self-confidence, and above all the hope to take action in their own behalf?” ask scholars and community activists Sarah Evans and Harry Boyte. “What are the structures of support, the resources, and the expe-

riences that generate the capacity and the inspiration to challenge ‘the way things are’ and imagine a different world?”<sup>147</sup> For these authors, the answer is that individuals find this kind of experience in what they have called free space, which occurs in various forms of open, autonomous, voluntary association with a strong public dimension that is independent from dominant power.<sup>148</sup> For Americans, particularly black and Hispanic Americans, that free space is most often found in the church.

If the church conveys a positive identity and gives meaning to suffering and hope of ultimate victory over adversity, it also gives meaning and direction to anger. “Anger that is focused and deep and rooted in grief is a key element in the organizing of black churches in the 1980s.”<sup>149</sup> Organizers who have worked with the black church have learned how to channel this anger into a healing, constructive, redemptive kind of engine for change because untransformed anger turns into either rage or depression and apathy. In either case, it fuels the nihilism of which West has written.<sup>150</sup>

The Nation of Islam, a proto-Islamic movement often in tension with the teachings of traditional Islam, provides an instructive and sobering illustration of the power of religion to motivate individuals and communities with appeals to their history and heritage.<sup>151</sup> Does any secular organization compare with the record of this black nationalist movement in redeeming the lives of black men who are most at risk and establishing black-owned enterprises? Students of religious history attribute most of the Nation of Islam’s appeal to Elijah Muhammad’s inspirational leadership between 1934 and 1975 and Malcolm X’s calls for black pride, black power, and black consciousness during the 1960s and early 1970s. Both men became culture heroes.<sup>152</sup> It is difficult to evaluate whether the movement’s current success in recruiting black men is because of or in spite of its present leader, Louis Farrakhan. His Million Man March was a spiritual experience of historic dimensions for many who participated in it, but his reputation for pandering to racism, sexism, and black anti-Semitism has sharply diminished his moral and spiritual stature. Traditional Islam attracts large numbers of black men without appealing to black xenophobia.<sup>153</sup>

### ***Endurance***

The church is the most stable institution in low-income neighborhoods. Most of the neighborhood organizations that existed twenty-five years ago have either moved to the suburbs in the wake of capital disinvestment and middle-class flight or withered away.<sup>154</sup> Economic restructuring and the fragmentation of social class consciousness have meant that few large Left organizations with political power and monetary resources are still in the cities. In urban areas such as South Central Los Angeles, churches and liquor stores are virtually the only neighborhood institutions that remain.<sup>155</sup> With the Left in ideological disarray following the collapse of East European communism,<sup>156</sup> and with political parties and labor unions severely weakened by global restructuring and other factors,<sup>157</sup> a new politics of identity, which inhibits the development of broad secular coalitions with progressive agendas, has emerged.<sup>158</sup> As the twentieth-first century commences, the church is virtually the only neighborhood institution remaining in cities that is stable enough and commands sufficient resources to serve as a building block for large-scale organizing.<sup>159</sup>

### ***Back to the Formative Project***

I have argued that a convergence of forces has so weakened traditional mediating institutions that the church, which is virtually the only stable neighborhood institution remain-

ing in cities, takes the lead in community activism. Faith communities bring exceptional resources to the task of community organizing, including strong institutions, outside denominational support, and unusual leadership skills in the clergy.<sup>160</sup> Their political potential is enhanced by creeds and narratives that bind and motivate communities of fellow believers.

Trust in representative forms of democracy has declined so precipitously that individuals no longer respond in large numbers to narrow appeals based on electoral politics. Voter turnout at all levels of government is exceedingly low. However, individuals still respond to the moral authority of the church. There is evidence of a worldwide resurgence of religion, especially among women, minorities, and the poor, for whom an existence based on the Darwinian principle “every man for himself” offers slight security and cold comfort. In a world in which moral claims and social attachments are no longer universally acknowledged or treated as binding, the prophetic church asserts human connection. It holds individuals responsible to and for one another and holds the nations accountable for their treatment of society’s most vulnerable members — outsiders, the sick, the elderly, the young, the despised, and the poor. The prophetic church has a solution to the problem of nihilism, grounding its members in a supportive, moral community regardless of how far away they have fallen and providing them with personal mentoring and citizenship and leadership training.<sup>161</sup> For all these reasons, community activism in the United States is now led by the church.

A survey of the development of Western thought shows that forces of modernity gradually divested public discourse and scholarship of their earlier religious and moral dimensions, leaving policy science ill equipped to deal with intangible values and cultural forces of the type discussed here. By about 1960, scientific positivism had relegated questions concerning morality and faith to a status far from the mainstream. Although the positivist orthodoxy is being challenged, and there is evidence of a worldwide resurgence of religion as a political force in the world, students of urban politics have continued to focus on political and economic institutions from a top-down perspective while underestimating the importance of community, culture, and neighborhood organizations, especially the church. There is evidence in recent literature, however, that this is starting to change.

It is significant that community organizing has evolved from a confrontational leftist radicalism to become deeply identified with the church. The church writ large moves beyond traditional religious divisions to form coalitions across faiths, denominations, subdivisions, and sects. Following Marston and Towers, I would like to suggest that what we are witnessing may be part of a much larger trend. These scholars conclude that “Americans across the country are disillusioned and frustrated with their representatives and are increasingly discounting the ballot box as an effective mechanism for voicing their views. These same Americans are becoming politically active at the local level, where they feel their efforts can most tangibly be realized.”<sup>162</sup> Marston and Towers view this development as a “quiet revolution” of sorts — a return to more direct, participatory forms of local democracy.<sup>163</sup> To these broad observations I would add one further claim: Just as urban restructuring has emptied the inner cities of almost all viable neighborhood institutions save the church, forces of modernity have so emptied the public sphere of its normative and transcendent dimensions that the church alone is left with enough moral standing to rise to the demand for a return to the formative project. ❁

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