

Lone rangers

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The classic American “don’t tread on me” attitude is exemplified by the flea market vendors studied by Arthur Farnsley II (see [“Flea market capitalists”](#)). They live off the economic grid and they like it that way. Like the dropouts of the 1960s, these Americans reject the institutions that most of us take for granted: not only big government and big business but also community organizations, schools and churches.

Unlike 1960s dropouts, however, these rebels don’t intend to create a counterculture. Many are poor or come from working-class backgrounds. They mainly want, it seems, to be left alone, free from the confinements of modern life. They invoke themes from the American past, when people kept moving westward in search of elbow room. In many ways, they fit Alexis de Tocqueville’s description of an American type in the 19th century: they “owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody.”

Perhaps each of these disaffected persons has a personal story to tell of being rejected, disappointed or wounded by the machinations of modern institutions and bureaucracies. For whatever reason, they don't expect much from social bonds, and they don't see a reason to give much back to society. They don't define themselves in communal terms. They aim to be self-reliant.

And therein lies a theological problem. In the biblical perspective, being created in the image of God means, among other things, being created with the ability and the need to live in relationship with God and with other people. In the Bible, a relationship with God always includes relationship to other people. God does address individuals, but primarily God addresses and shapes a community—the people of Israel, and the church.

Humans can't flourish without institutions, flawed as they are. Holding institutions accountable and increasing their capacities is what enhances human life.

Given their anti-institutional fervor, these radically disaffected Americans are not likely to darken the doors of churches, and when they do, they are likely to remain at the edges of the congregation. But Christians can listen to their stories. They can sympathize with their alienation and their protest against deficient institutions. And then Christians can invite the disaffected to participate, in whatever way they can, in our flawed but vitally important acts of community.