Moral church, amoral society

Maybe Christian Realism is the best option we have today.

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For at least a century now, Christians in the United States have been trying to be “realistic” about their relations to the world in which they find themselves. In the Social Gospel era, that meant moving out of the sanctuary to meet the challenges of an urbanizing, industrial society, seeking to transform social relations through the power of Christian love implemented with the aid of the new sciences of economics and sociology.

After a couple of discouraging decades marked by race riots, labor unrest, and World War I, the Social Gospel effort at realism came to be seen as overly idealistic. A new movement arose that called itself Christian Realism. It recalculated Christian expectations of social reform by emphasizing the limits imposed by self-interest and power. Love may be the guiding norm in personal relationships, Reinhold Niebuhr

explained in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, but the work of social justice depends on some form of coercion. That version of realism provided important moral support for making the hard choices and understanding the historical ironies that marked America's global role during the following decades of hot and cold wars—but it proved barely adequate for addressing the conflicts that racial injustice, international commitments, and economic inequality provoked in domestic politics during the last half of the 20th century.

My generation came of age in the 1960s with the slogan "The world sets the agenda." Our Christian ideals were tempered by the sense that we ourselves are deeply implicated in the evils we denounce. Before we can set the captives free, we must confront our own illusions and guilt. Nevertheless, toward the century's end, with the fall of the communist bloc and the apparent triumph of ideas of human rights and liberal democracy, we could believe that that transformation was well under way in ourselves and in the world.

The world's agenda becomes less compelling, however, as ideological polarization and fragmentation make it difficult to locate any clear direction in events outside the church door. In recent years, the long search for the real Christian Realism has produced a reaction that insists that the task of the church is to form a Christian community shaped by virtues that the world cannot grasp. That theology, articulated by Stanley Hauerwas, borne by the traditions of the Radical Reformation, and pursued by adherents of the "Benedict option," caught the attention of both Catholics and Protestants. When the culture seems to be going in all directions at once, keeping a distance may seem like the most faithful response.

This theological retreat is reinforced by the demographics of mainline Protestantism, which increasingly has had to concentrate on solving its internal problems and meeting individual needs in order to get enough people in the pews to keep the lights on. Under these circumstances, the task of maintaining its own identity gives the church just about all that it can do. Any ideas about a Christian society whose preachers articulate the best version of a set of shared values are dispelled once we enter what Richard John Neuhaus called "the naked public square." The voice of the church can no longer be heard there. The task is to be sure that the message is not lost to those who are still trying to understand it.

This approach, too, is a version of Christian Realism as Neuhaus himself understood. He began by reading Niebuhr, and like Niebuhr and Rauschenbusch before him, he

wanted Christians to give up their illusions about the world, including their persistent illusions about the social influence of the church and about the church's own durability.

A realism that turns inward to focus on the integrity of the church may be forced on us by circumstances. But it runs the risk of thinking that the church's problems are unique. Rather than supposing that Christianity has lost its social relevance because secularization has rendered its account of God, grace, and human history unintelligible, a Christian Realist might notice that all ideas about human goods—not just the religious ones—have been driven to the margins of public discourse. This is the larger problem that ties the fragility of the church to the fragmentation of society and brings Christians back into the public square, whether or not they want to take responsibility for what goes on there.

The loss of shared goals and common goods is most apparent in politics, where deep divisions make us suspicious of anyone who tries to bring moral language into public discussion. We are so polarized that any terms we might use to begin a discussion of shared goals are already the property of one side or the other. *Freedom, responsibility, rights, duties, choice*, and even *life* itself have acquired connotations that identify the politics of those who use the words. This makes it easy to tweet about what you already believe, but almost impossible to think together about what the human good is in relation to political choices that we actually face. The only values that remain available for general use are economic efficiency and national security. If it costs less or makes us safer, we may be able to agree on it. Other questions are more difficult to engage. The answers remain elusive and the discussions are interminable.

In the fall of 2013, I worked these political concerns into a lecture for the Library of Congress that I called "The Shrinking Moral Vocabulary of American Public Life." As if on cue, the lecture was canceled because of a government shutdown. When I was finally able to deliver it a few months later, I held out the hope that we could renew our public discourse by paying more attention to the ways that goods and goals are discussed in other contexts. Museums, hospitals, schools, religious organizations, community groups, and even profit-seeking businesses are created by people who have ideas about what the human good is, and they make claims on our shared social resources to bring those goods into being. Of course, the people who do this are also motivated by self-interest—a realist knows it would be foolish to ignore this. My point was that in daily life and work we all use a rich moral vocabulary to engage

each other in common tasks for common goods. What we need to do, I argued, is to make those moral vocabularies available and effective in the wider world of politics and public life.

Five years later, I am not so sure about that possibility. It may be that these institutions, instead of being able to help us restore the moral vocabulary of politics, have themselves been fatally infected by the political and cultural polarization. Furthermore, churches, universities, charities, arts organizations, and businesses are increasingly concerned about survival in a marketplace that is organized to satisfy desires, not to raise aspirations. As a result, all of these social settings lose sight of their distinctive goods and values in a race to adapt the behavioral models that were pioneered by marketing experts and electoral strategists. The task of the teacher, preacher, curator, or fundraiser becomes to give people what they want, without wasting time explaining the value of what you have to offer. Churches are no exception to this trend.

In this environment, the moral vocabulary shrinks in all institutions, not just in public life. People lose sight of the values that first attracted them to the places where they live and work, and they lose the ability to articulate those values when they want to invite new people to join them or to hold those who work with them accountable to the goals that first brought them together. Confusion about purpose makes it difficult to set clear goals, and the loss of shared goals leads to suspicions about motives. If we have no shared idea why we are all here, we start to think that other people’s reasons for being here are misguided or threatening.

The polarization and gridlock that we associate with national politics works its way down to the level of the office meeting, the church committee, and the community organization. We appoint committees to draw up endless strategic plans, each of which is forgotten before the next one is drafted. Lacking a sense of purpose that we are able to articulate, we turn to others and ask them to articulate their “vision” for our organization. Leadership positions go to narcissists who interview well.

Each of us can supply troubling examples of this from our own experience. The Christian Realist will want to look at the problem whole. The realist will see that the dysfunctions evident across the range of different kinds of institutions are reflected in the political unrest now evident in many of the world’s most economically developed and politically experienced democracies. People are losing their connections to the activities and places that gave them a sense of identity and

purpose, the institutions that Robert Putnam calls “social capital.” His best-known example is the bowling league, which has largely disappeared, but his concern extends to a whole range of institutions and organizations that used to be centers of community life but now attract individuals as consumers, rather than participants—if they still exist at all. Pastors of mainline churches will have an uneasy sense of familiarity with what he is talking about.

The result is a society in which many people are adrift, susceptible to addictions and attracted to hate groups, or struggling in social isolation that leaves them troubled in themselves and sometimes dangerous to those around them. There are many more who continue to function satisfactorily, but who have no sense of belonging and no experience of social creativity in which they bring something new into being in collaboration with others. For them, the difficult task of making or remaking something in the social sphere gives way to a life in a world that is ready-made to fit their prejudices on the Internet.

It is difficult to grasp this situation as a whole, and we are tempted to say that our own church, school, or office is an exception to the general decay. But the scope of the deterioration over the three decades since the success of liberal democracy and the “end of history” was proclaimed is hard to deny. We have experienced a devastating loss of social capital in the very places that used to be best at creating it.

The gospel calls us to be changed in a way that changes what we want.

This is the point at which I begin to think that the idea of the church as an alternative community with its own distinctive values and virtues might be the best response to our situation. It is more and more difficult to point to other kinds of community that sustain any moral vocabulary of their own. As it is, many of those who are trying to live the Christian life have never been part of any other community that tried to form their character, and even they may have entered the church by way of a consumer’s understanding of its services and benefits. It will make the way ahead clearer both for them and for those who lead and teach them if we say plainly that this is going to be unlike anything they have experienced elsewhere.

The model which often comes to mind in this context is the Confessing Church, which maintained its independence and identity despite the general destruction of other social institutions and values in Nazi Germany. This was not a church that

could look for allies or build coalitions. It made an effective witness through much of World War II simply by continuing to exist in its own integrity in a society that had no place for it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer summed up that witness by saying that the church of Jesus Christ “takes up space on earth.” The church makes no claims to be understood or to be of use. But it is there.

The situation of the Confessing Church, however, is not quite our situation. Bonhoeffer was trying to sustain his church in a place where the state and the political party sought to determine all of the legitimate social options. The 20th century has offered numerous examples of that sort of state, and in many of them, “taking up space” has required real courage and brought real persecution on those who attempted it. It is less clear what it means to take up space that is morally empty.

At least since the beginnings of modern economic systems late in the Middle Ages, the church has assumed that it exists in the context of other institutions—not just the state, but the workshop, the farm, the family, and the village. Especially for the churches of the Reformation, these institutions are seen as the places where Christians live out their vocations and create the goods they need together. Modern Catholic social thought makes a similar point with its idea of subsidiarity: problems are to be solved at the lowest level where they can be solved, with the larger political order involved as necessary. It is one kind of crisis when a state or an ideology absorbs all of these functions into itself and denies space to churches and other institutions. It is another kind of crisis when the moral life of these institutions is so attenuated that vocation becomes impossible and the only social roles are those of the seller and the consumer.

Under those circumstances, there is a need for the church to exist as an alternative community that cultivates a set of virtues that stand in contrast to the surrounding society. Over the past century, Christian Realism has said a great deal about society and not so much about the church. This has led critics to say that it has no ecclesiology. It would be more accurate to say that Christian Realism’s theology of the church is contextual. The body of Christ is incarnate in the social setting where it takes up space, as Bonhoeffer put it. And when the surrounding space is empty, it may be time to focus on what goes on inside the church.

But that claim is not a final statement about what the church ought to be at all times and in relation to all social contexts. The church as an alternative community is a

holding action: it is preparing people with a genuine sense of vocation to begin rebuilding social capital and moral imagination in the institutions in which they live and work.

Trying to fill a vacuum is not nearly as dangerous as trying to take up space in a totalitarian society, but it is very difficult. It will require people who understand their religious identity and have a realistic assessment of the world around them. They will also need a special kind of commitment to each other that supports them when they venture to raise questions about goods and goals that most people no longer understand.

All institutions have been infected by cultural and political polarization.

This vocation is not likely to be rewarding in terms of career advancement or material security. It will not be as straightforward as explaining self-interest and power to Christian idealists, the way Niebuhr and others did it in the middle of the last century. It will not be as exciting as finding the world's agenda and joining "the movement" as some of us did a generation ago. But it is the task we are given at this point in history.

The work of Christian Realism in our time begins by proclaiming the Good News in worship and teaching, remembering that even those who sing and pray with us may never have heard it except as an answer to problems they already knew they had. The gospel presents a harder truth: it calls us to be changed in a way that changes what we want.

The work of Christian Realism entails forming the church as a community of trust in which people can explore questions about their lives that they cannot yet ask in the places where those questions concretely arise. In many cases, these questions will be about work and its purposes, but they will also include concerns about families, schools, and the neighborhoods where they live.

Churches will also need people who find their vocations as caregivers, volunteers, tutors, and mentors rather than in their employment. A community of Christian Realists will seek ways for people to experience for themselves what it is like to create an organization with a shared purpose and sustain it in a world of consumer choices. Food services, homeless ministries, children's programs, and services for the elderly all offer proven models that transform the lives of participants, both those who are served and those who provide the services.

It would miss the point if all of these activities are seen only as alternative ways of doing and being, with no intention to change things beyond the community of faith. The Saturday morning service project and Tuesday evening Bible study need leaders who raise the larger question, “How do you share what is meaningful to you in this place, and in this work, in the other places where you spend your life?” In a time when the moral space in our public square is largely empty of resources for growth and change, the relevant image of the kingdom of God is not finding the treasure hidden in the field but the work of sowing the mustard seed or providing the leaven.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Church in an amoral time.”