Religion and the Escape from Liberal Individualism

Robert Booth Fowler

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol16/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.
Religion and the Escape From Liberal Individualism

ROBERT BOOTH FOWLER
University of Wisconsin-Madison

There are two areas in particular in which religion, especially organized religion, constitutes a temporary alternative or escape from popularly perceived limitations of our (liberal) culture. It is a refuge from liberal skepticism and from liberal individualism, our peculiar and relentlessly demanding moral ideal for the human person. As a refuge from skepticism (and expansive, expanding tolerance), religion (and churches) remain places where absolute, spiritual truths are still (sometimes) affirmed, places in which there are certainties, no matter how much they may evaporate when one thinks about them in terms of concrete morality or public policy (though for many of the religious they do not evaporate then).

More debatable, perhaps, is my second claim, that religion commonly functions as an alternative to liberal individualism. This is the subject of this essay. My view is that even in America, religion is popularly associated by the larger society with "community" in contrast with the rigors of liberal individualism. In this instance alternative means compensation, not rejection of liberal individualism in all its expressions. The churches' interest in community is as an addition, one might say, to liberalism. It is to function as a kind of socializing of normal liberalism, sought by large numbers of Americans far from ready to repudiate liberal values or institutions, but seeking the community they find so rarely in liberal culture.

1. Liberal Culture and Liberalism: Definition

The basic tenets of modern liberalism I take to be roughly the following: (1) commitment to skeptical reason, affirmation of pragmatic action, and uneasiness over both abstract philosophical thinking and nonrational modes of knowledge; (2) enthusiasm in principle and sometimes in practice for tolerance in political terms and, increasingly, in lifestyle and social norms; (3) affirmation of the individual and individual freedom; (4) commitment to some sort of democratic government. That these values are widely held within our culture is a well-established fact.1

By liberal culture I mean not just the values of modern American liberalism (and, indeed, the ambivalence about them) but also the practices which exist in our political order, our schools, our media and the major institutions (except, to some extent, of course, religious institutions) of our society. Culture is not only ideas but practice, and in those institutions liberal values ordinarily reign, as noted so well by numerous students of culture in our age.2

2. The Endurance of American Religion and the Strength of Liberal Individualism

Not just American, but indeed many European, intellectuals had long predicted that religion would all but disappear, repeating at the
popular level what took place long ago among liberals (among others) in the intellectual world. As Daniel Bell has observed, “From the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, almost every sociological thinker . . . expected religion to disappear by the onset of the twenty-first century . . .” That this has not taken place, especially in the United States, and gives no sign of taking place, is now obvious. This fact does not deny that some of the forms, influences, and expectations of religion have changed and will continue to, but religion persists.

That religion continues to be important in American lives is undeniable—far more important, as Kenneth Wald notes, than politics. More than half of the adult population rates religion as very important to them (56%). Close to 70% claim to be members of organized religious groups and 40% claim to attend services weekly.

Equally alive is religion’s uneasy and unintended partner in American society today, liberal individualism. The pervasiveness of individualism in America needs constant underlining. The evidence is indisputable that individualism and freedom are the values Americans treasure. Often enough “the meaning of one’s life for most Americans is to become one’s own person, almost to give birth to oneself.” Nor is there much doubt of the power of individualism in our culture, of the commitment to “self-actualized” existence with its tension with ideas of duty, obligation, or community.

This is even true to a considerable degree in the world of American religion, a realm where individualism is no stranger. After all, religion, and certainly organized religion, is not isolated from the larger culture. Much of classic American Protestantism had a large element of individualism in it from the start. Emphasis on individual relations with God, individual salvation, individual prayer, and personal spiritual journey have long been a staple of religion in America. These ideas continue their sway today as much as ever. Also, relevant here is the decided pluralism present among American religious groups. So is the continuing strength of the idea in Protestant and Jewish circles that each congregation is sovereign, a pointedly individualistic idea.

3. Community and American Religion

At the same time religion, especially organized religion, is also a locus in the United States for a continuing yearning for community, a condition of closeness among people which may have spiritual, social, or broader participatory dimensions, and in the case of religious community usually has all three. The longing for community in this sense is powerful, perhaps especially in a liberal culture such as ours where human relations are casual and spontaneous, utilitarian and affective, rather than formal, binding, and long term, and where interest groups are second nature but the public good is hard to conceive. No matter how much we think of Americans as speaking only the language(s) of individualism, students of American culture consistently find that Americans retain a “second language,” the language of (reflecting an interest in) community and commitment.

The desire for spiritual community refers particularly to what is often called the search for a “community of believers”, the interest in
finding a group of persons with whom one may share spiritual concerns, feelings, and rituals. This search very frequently leads people to church as they search for something deeper in life than individual lifestyles and “doing one’s thing.” It is not the only alternative available or used, but in America it is the most common. This quest for depth often takes the form of individual spiritual journeys but its usual form involves joining a religious group or church, to seek a community of shared believers and belief.

Closely related is the urge toward social community, the fact that people turn to a church to find a congenial social circle, quite apart from an interest in “spiritual” community. These two cannot easily be separated, since experience in churchly social communities strongly influences attitudes about the reality and appeal of larger communities of believers.

In any case, the data is overwhelming on the linkage of organized religion and community in these senses. Religion attracts those seeking transcendence from skeptical liberalism, but organized religion is much more intimately connected with community. After all, more Americans belong to a church or synagogue (70%) than to any other private association, and by an immense margin, and they often are looking for social and or spiritual community in joining. Consider the evidence, for instance, regarding Catholics. The Notre Dame Study of Parish Life has documented how characteristic active Catholics’ definition of their image of church as “the community of believers” is. Many Catholics look to church in terms of individual spiritual growth, but more think in terms of it as a spiritual community. Indeed, given a range of possible images, 42% of active Catholics describe it in these words, more than any other view (though in tandem with other views).

The social dimension of community is also important for Catholics, symbolized above all perhaps by the classic (and continuing) popularity of bingo at the church hall. No parish activity attracts more participation, except mass itself. Its social function is obvious, but the fact is that social activities in general are important “as a vitalizing force” in churches even as they satisfy individual laity’s social needs.

Systematic interviewing of both Roman Catholic converts and returnees has confirmed the close link between the family community and the church as community. Why do people join the Roman Catholic Church? Why do they return after a period of disinterest or alienation? The answers are overwhelmingly connected with marriage and family. Marriage is crucial, often marriage to a Catholic, for converts. One study established that fully 83% converted for reasons of marriage and/or family. For returnees the act of marriage, a turn from an individualistic lifestyle to a more communal one, brings many to (or back to) church.

All of this applies generally, not just to Roman Catholics where both church doctrine and ethnic loyalties (diminished today, except for the important Hispanic and Asia-American elements of the church) self-consciously promote community. A significant illustration may be found in Jewish circles in the United States. While the current strength of Judaism in a religious sense is under intense debate, we know Jews
who 'return' to Judaism strongly emphasize desire for community as an essential motivation.\(^{18}\) Judaism attracts many Jews in a characteristic American fashion. Desire for community and desire for a more vibrant Judaism in one's life rarely leads to an all or nothing decision. Instead individual Jews in individualistic America pick and choose in a spirit of freedom what and how much Judaism they want in their lives. They are individuals not rejecting liberalism, on the whole, but reaching out for an element of religious community to fill an important space in their lives.\(^{19}\)

No doubt the search for community and the tradition connecting churches and community have their roots largely (if, perhaps, not entirely) outside any given church. But how well religious groups address the need will influence their numbers because a crucial motivating factor leading people to any church, \textit{indeed the most common factor}, is desire for more community—both in the family and in one's life in general.\(^{20}\) Churches and denominations that tap this association of religion and community are likely to grow.\(^{21}\)

Though the connection between children and church involvement is controversial, there is no doubt that the arrival of children in a family is often crucial to forming church ties. Just as for adolescents departure from church is routine on the road to self-reliance and affirmation of one's American individualism, so an interest in church among young couples with children reflects a reborn interest in community. A definite lifecycle rhythm is at work in American organized religion.\(^{22}\) Since church is associated with family, often through an individual's own past, it is part of a package of family-community values. It is also assumed to be a family-promoting institution. Parents are commonly in favor of church as a place for their kids. In our terms, they see it as an alternative, not to life in liberal America, but to the unchecked dominance of liberal individualism and relativism.\(^{23}\)

There is no evidence that how well a church satisfies the interest in community has the slightest thing to do with grand declarations on the subject by the church's denominational leaders or headquarters staff. The relevant testing ground is as always concrete experience, in this case the actual life of local churches, not abstract moral or political declarations. This is one important reason why religious denominations not noted for their strong foundation beliefs, vigorous evangelism, or firm morality continue to retain large memberships. Wherever one goes in religious precincts in America, people belong to their local church, parish, or synagogue, often as much, usually more, than they do to their particular denomination or, in some cases, even their specific religion. Whatever the image of a denomination, a local church of that denomination which has a reputation for addressing community needs will attract members. There are numerous such churches in every denomination.\(^{24}\)

Conflict at church or synagogue is very unpopular. And the perception of intrachurch conflict leads directly to membership declines.\(^{25}\) People do not go to church for the excitement of conflict. They go in good part for community defined as harmony with the universe and fellowship with others. People commonly perceive conflict at church as a statement that the institution has failed in a basic way, that it cannot
fulfill a need which led them there in the first place.

We can also draw on data from intermarriage (marriage to a spouse of another religion or another major branch of a religion) and its affect on one’s connections with organized religion. Greeley notes that intermarriage is a leading explanation for religious/church “disaffection.” What this data says in our terms is that in the interest of community (family oneness), people will leave a given church or religion. Indeed, they are more likely to disaffiliate for this reason than for any other.26 This is what we would expect as it underlines that people are community-seekers, who assess the organized religion they encounter in good part on its ability to speak to this need.

People who experienced a turbulent family life as children and/or experience considerable tension with their family today frequently view their family’s church (if any) and, indeed, any type of organized religion with either ambivalence or hostility. From another side, this repeats what we already know, the close association between church and family among Americans and documents again that “communities” associated with family will pay a price when family does not model the community people expect from it.27

Mostly, though, organized religion benefits from the popular perception that it is a place where community is affirmed (if not fully practiced). People look for community in religious activity. Often, very often, they find enough of it to satisfy them. Of course, we have to be careful not to exaggerate the part religion, especially organized religion, occupies as a source for the alternative value of community in liberal America. Community can be, and is, pursued in many places in America.28

Many “lifestyle enclaves” may not fulfill the type of community that some intellectuals define (yearn for?).29 But for many people their neighborhood bar, soccer club, PTA, bridge club, or what have you—even if temporary and built around fluid circles of friends—are the outlets for their need for community, outlets they like.30

4. Community and Participation

The extensive data reported here supports the idea that people think about organized religion as a place of community and in many cases go there to experience community, or at least a respite from the individualism of the larger liberal society. So much of this association of religion and community is perceptual. It refers to feelings. What community means as a result can and does vary enormously from person to person, including in terms of behavior.

The degree of participation in organized religion, beyond the three-quarters or so of the population who claim membership in a religious group, is hard to document. There is evidence on the most obvious measure, attendance at services. The data here, while self-reported, is extensive and the patterns are plausible. Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians are much the most active in this sense. While Catholic attendance at mass has fallen since Vatican II, still in a given month most Catholics appear at mass and a sizable minority attend every week. Lowest attendance comes among liberal or mainstream Protestants. The majority do not attend in a given month.
Attendance at services is not emphasized among non-Orthodox Jews, so that the rare appearance of Jews at synagogue except at special holidays means little.31

Of course, participating in one way or another guarantees nothing, including a sense of community. Indeed, participation can damage a strong sense of spiritual community by bringing one in conflict with other church members. But participation does often lead to an increased sense of community for an individual and for a religious body. That is why success in generating a sense of community in a local church or parish correlates importantly with opportunities for participation. Only open, active churches allow community to grow. Opportunities for participation will not necessarily breed community unless participants find among themselves people who care about others. But where caring and opportunity abound the ideal of community people seek in religion will actually exist in specific local churches.32

Formal religious services are hardly the sole outlet for participation for any religious group, of course. There are numerous other opportunities, one might say numerous opportunities for creating or participating in community at church. Indeed, the chances for going beyond community as a spiritual ideal have long been extensive at churches and synagogues. Organizations abound. Women's groups, men's groups, scripture study, social action, charity, church governance, music, youth and education; the list is long.

But the fact is that, given the opportunities, actual participation is modest. It appears closely correlated with overall attitudes toward one's religion and churches' general cohesiveness, as one might expect. Thus in evangelical and fundamentalist churches most members are involved beyond merely attending. Among Catholics about half claim to be. Among liberal Protestants, far less than half are.

The most extensive data on any one group we have comes from the Study of Catholic Parish Life. This contemporary study found that of the half or so of Roman Catholics active beyond attending mass, the largest group (26%) participate in church social/recreational groups and activities. Almost as many are active in the church liturgies, as readers, choir members, and the like. More than 10% work in church educational programs (including evangelism efforts, helping to run the parish, etc.).33

If we do not use religious measures of participation, which are low, Jewish patterns of involvement are impressive. To be sure, 25% of American Jews have no connection with organized Judaism. Yet the vast majority are at least occasionally involved in the considerable range of Jewish organizations, 10% or so intensely, another third actively, the rest more infrequently.34

The amount of activity or participation—of real or potential community—inside religious groups is large in comparison with the degree of participation in outreach to the larger world. Community with the outside world continues—even in this day of supposedly politicized religion—to be low on people's agendas, as indicated by practice. To be sure, most organized religious groups have one or more forms of outreach. They make some effort to build paths of community beyond their walls. A great proportion of these efforts concentrate on the
larger community of the religious denomination to which they belong. A typical Catholic church, for example, makes many efforts in a year to connect with local, national and even international communities. But it does so mostly in terms of help in local Catholic schools or the apostolate to the handicapped or the Sisters or Brothers of Something or Other in Africa or Guatemala. Moreover, even including the sometimes remarkable (but very Catholic) outreach programs of the Knights of Columbus, the numbers of laity active are very small. This pattern is repeated by many Jewish synagogues insofar as a great deal of their outreach is directed toward Israel and certainly by many conservative Christian groups whose tension toward the outside world beyond the "born again" is evident. 35

Moreover, lay opposition to community outreach, if that means involvement in social/political causes or groups, has been and continues common. 36 It is simply the case that few people join an organized religion or go to church to get involved in social/political action. This is not the kind or community involvement they are after. Some people do become busy in charitable activities—in community meal programs, community pantries, and the like—though in proportional terms not many. Community in this broader sense of a relationship between the faithful and the larger community is a regular if quite small part of almost all organized religious groups’ activities.

The fact that only modest numbers of people reach out from their religious community to the larger community underlines my point. These numbers are predictably small given my hypothesis that people go to church in large part to escape (for a time) the larger liberal culture. That participation inside religious “communities” is higher is equally predictable.

5. Concluding Reflections

One must concede that we do not yet have a set of evidence which establishes directly that religion serves as an escape hatch from excessive cultural liberal individualism, a place where one can find the idea of community, if not always its practice. But I think the pieces of evidence I have put together, the studies of joining and leaving organized religions, the evidence about participation, the conception of religion in terms of community, and the like should be read in an interpretive fashion to mean just that. The point is that religion, organized religion especially, is viewed as an alternative to the liberal individualism which is basic to our culture. That contrast does not work out to religion’s disadvantage on the whole. Nor, it is my thesis, to liberal society’s, though showing the connection of religion and community is not quite the same thing as establishing that the consequence is unintended support for liberal culture. 37

Interest in community could be interpreted as a statement of non-support for liberal culture. It could, for instance, reflect nonsupport through the growth of a religious subculture which is intensely sympathetic to “community” and hostile to the larger American culture, and trying to change it in radical ways.

The major case against this type of possibility is simply that most Americans (including religious Americans) do not reject liberal in-
dividualism, as we have noted. They do not ordinarily see religion and liberal culture as mortal enemies at war in society or in their own, so to say, souls. That they rarely see such a war means it does not exist for them. Church and culture, though about different values, fit together.

There may be a case for arguing that those who seek to escape liberal culture by entering separatist religious settings are growing, such as the substantial numbers involved in the Christian school movement among fundamentalists. Still, every evidence we have suggests that for the average churchgoer there is no yearning to have community replace individualism. Apparently Americans do believe they can (or should) have it all. As long as this holds true, then organized religion will continue to serve, as I suggest it does, as a backhanded supporter of a liberal culture it must necessarily view ambivalently. This is the irony of organized religion in American life today.

FOOTNOTES


7 Ibid., p. 13.

8 Ibid., pp. 82 and vii-viii.

9 Ibid., pp. 97-107.

10 In developing the overall theory, I have been influenced by: Herve Varenne Americans Together: Structured Diversity in a Midwestern Town, New York: Columbia University, 1977.


12 Ibid., p. 154.


18 Silberman. A Certain People, p. 250 and chs. 6 and 7.

19 Ibid., p. 270.

20 For a vigorous challenge to the neo-determinists who dismiss internal church factors, see: Dean M. Kelly, "Commentary: Is Religion a Dependent Variable?" Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, Understanding Church Growth and Decline 1950-1978, New York: Pilgrim, 1979, pp. 338-339.

21 See for example; Edmund A. Rauff, Why People Join the Church, New York: Pilgrim, 1979; George Gallup, Jr. and David Poling, The Search For America's Faith,


26 See, for example, the argument of: Hoge, *Converts, Dropouts, Returnees*.


29 Varenne, *Americans Together*, explores the kind of prevalent "community" in chs. 4 and 7.

30 This view of fluid, multiple social interest groups as Americans' life is partly based on Varenne's *Americans Together*, a very stimulating essay, and on Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, pp. 71–75, from which the central term "lifestyle enclave" comes.


32 Lege, "The Parish as Community."


35 Lege and Trozzolo, "Religious Values and Parish Participation," p. 5, presents the Catholic data, the best we have on any branch of American religion.


37 As Kenneth Wald has pointed out to me.


39 Even if Christianity were somehow to push forward the idea of community into the larger American society, would it come in a form which necessarily stressed individualism? This is the query and suspicion of Bellah in *Habits of the Heart*, pp. 232 and 236.