ESSAY

Rekindling Democracy, Rekindling the Church

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In *Rekindling Democracy: A Professional's Guide to Working in Citizen Space*, Cormac Russell challenges fundamental assumptions about society and the institutions that shape it, arguing for a disempowerment of institutions and a restoration of citizenship and associational life through the principles of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). His critiques are interdisciplinary and provocative, providing plenty of opportunity for thoughtful engagement across numerous fields. They also provide a basis for analysis of the changing social role of the church[1] through the rise of the welfare state and up to the present day.

Rekindling Democracy

At the core of Russell's argument is a critique of a "scarcity mindset" in contrast to an "abundance mindset." The scarcity mindset is characterized by a sense that resources are scarce and external, belonging to an outside authority upon which individuals and communities depend. Russell attributes this mindset first to consumer capitalism, which endlessly stimulates a felt need for more, and second to institutionalization, in which governments naively offer to help communities by turning them into consumers of services. By contrast, communities with an abundance mindset are highly interdependent. They produce everything they need, including many things that institutions and markets are incapable of delivering, such as real care and relationships. The reduction of local interdependencies and gift-economies[2] into the purchase or provision of services, he holds, not only results in worse outcomes for communities, but it also creates dependency upon systems that are structured in ways that reduce a community's capacity to care for itself, much less to contribute to broader society.

[1] Throughout the piece, the discussions of "the church" include the pronouns "we" and "us," building on the identification that all Christians have with the universal Body of Christ, whether we identify with all church members or not. "The churches" refers to denominations and Christian movements, while "churches" in general refer to hypothetical congregations.

[2] "Gift economy" refers to goods and services being offered or given without any explicit expectation of payment. This contrasts with a market economy, in which all things are reduced to a market value payable in currency, or a barter economy in which goods and services are exchanged for others determined to be of equal value. Gift economies create a sense of positive debt or mutual obligation in which one party always owes something to the other, even though actual value is not calculated and equal exchange is not required. Russell holds that informal exchanges of gifts, particularly of gifts of service, are essential to community interdependency.

> When the working assumption in a given community is that the only way things will get better is when someone from outside comes in to make them better, or that a community can only act when it has permission from outside, it serves to dampen down enthusiasm and creativity. In the same way, professionalization or credentializing of community functions results in a major attrition in citizen-led action. As professionalization increases, citizenship retreats (Russell 2020:161).

A weakness of the book is its tone. Russell shines in the many passages of storytelling about systemic overreach and the "radicals" who challenge it, but he frequently projects those examples of problematic systems into broad generalizations and sharp judgments of the people who participate in those systems. In comparison, similar critiques of dehumanizing systems from Walter Wink (1992) emphasize non-judgment of and solidarity with those who, like us, are part of the systems that dominate us, even if they benefit from those systems. Russell's tone is shaming and alienating, rather than building the solidarity that he needs to challenge the systems of which we are all members.

But aside from Russell's somewhat pejorative choice of words for those who embody systems, his critiques of the systems themselves are generally sound, and well-sourced. He draws from a who's who of intellectual rebels and "radicals" as he challenges various systems and institutions. He cites big names and hidden heroes of de-institutionalization, including city planning theorist Jane Jacobs, journalists George Monbiot and Naomi Klein, dissenting economists E. F. Schumacher, Raj Patel, Dambisa Moyo, and Kate Raworth, activist agrarians Vandana Shiva and Wendell Berry, de-medicalizing doctors (or "medical heretics") Robert S. Mendelsohn (an early supporter of La Leche League) and Atul Gawande, "institutional radicals" like Jerome Miller, who decommissioned the youth detention system in Massachusetts, and philosophers Robert Pirsig, Franz Kafka, Hannah Arendt, and more than any other, Ivan Illich.

When it comes to being critical of systems and institutions, there are many choirs to which someone like Russel might preach. Many sections, if read out of context, seem to support one dissident group or another. Russell's disdain for big government might give the impression that he's a neo-Liberal, except that he devotes an entire chapter to his critique of capitalism, and specifically neo-Liberalism and the manipulative power of advertising; and he writes in support of a universal basic income. At times he sounds almost libertarian, until his vision to correct the scarcity mindset and austerity of capitalism prescribes a deeper interdependency and gift economy. His disdain for professionalization and credentialed "helpers" comes off as anti-intellectual in many places, but in others he prescribes professional and even institutional intervention, provided it is delivered as a support *to citizen-led action*. In every field, from economics and government to medicine and education, he is deeply critical of systems and institutions, but his main thrust is to empower systems at the most local level,

which he calls "associational." The most oft-repeated phrase in the book is "it takes a village…" and his mission is to empower self-directed villages.

The Invisible Church

While Russell himself once trained for vocational ministry, he rarely mentions churches or communities of faith. The almost complete absence of the church from a book about community life and institutions is conspicuous enough to make an unspoken point: Russell's criticisms of institutions and the decline of community life are in some way also about the church, the institution that birthed all the institutions he critiques. Institutions of health, education, social services, and even corrections all grew from the hospitals, schools, charity, and censure of the church, which was the hub of community life in the Christian world for centuries. At the same time, his description of the decline of community interdependence and the disempowerment it causes in communities that become dependent on outsiders should sound very familiar to anyone who has witnessed the almost constant despair of churches concerned with decreasing church attendance and engagement over the last thirty years. While Russell has chosen not to make it explicit, this book addresses one of the foundational reasons why churches are in decline.

I would suggest that as church community functions have been absorbed and institutionalized by the welfare state, the meta-function of the church as the hub of community interdependence has declined, leaving an institution that has little function or purpose in the wider community. The church has become inward-focused, and has grown suspicious of outsiders, particularly governments, a suspicion which at times has taken the form of a persecution complex that causes significant social harm. So how did the church relinquish and even forfeit its social functions to the government?

The Origins of the Welfare State

The welfare state arose in the late 19th century alongside the Social Gospel and secular socialist movements. Whether one interprets the institutionalization of social policy as a success or failure of these movements, it was largely a conservative reaction to socialist ideals and the rise of communism, a series of piecemeal measures enacted to prevent a social revolution. The inward pietism of Protestantism and the rote religion of cultural Catholicism were disrupted by a postmillennial movement that looked for tangible evidence that Jesus was changing the world rather than just consoling those who suffer in it.[3] The Social Gospel,

[3] Postmillennialism is a theological position that holds that Christ will return *at the end* of the "thousand-year reign" described in Revelation 20:4, interpreting that reign as the embodiment of God in the world

perhaps best known by the slogan "What Would Jesus Do?" in Charles Sheldon's classic parable *In His Steps*, asked the Sunday faithful to take responsibility for their neighbor more directly than just paying a tithe that would help fund a hospital or soup kitchen. It questioned why, in a "Christian society," there were so many poor and sick in the first place.

Governments in Europe and North America responded to this pressure by moving toward a welfare state, creating institutions to moderate the excesses, gaps, and evils of the economic and political systems in small, slow increments. Whether incrementalism can be seen as progress is a fair question: should we celebrate only a 5% reduction of systemic exploitation? Things are better now than they were, and we should be happy for that, surely. But can justice be broken down into bite-sized pieces and doled out over centuries? Nonetheless, there was and is a sense of progress, and larger reforms or revolutions have been deferred, over and over again, because of that sense. Nonetheless, the Social Gospel made a difference, at least by inspiring incremental change over time.

The Welfare Gospel

Now the Social Gospel movement is all but gone. So are the church-run institutions such as the Christian hospitals and universities that for so long embodied Christ in at least an arms-length way. Those institutions still exist, but now as expressions of the Welfare State, with all its inadequacies and slow incrementalism. The passive love of neighbor that was once embodied in charity to the poor through church-run institutions has become a function of paying taxes as a citizen.

So on one hand, the Social Gospel has permeated society so thoroughly that it is a general expectation of our governments that they will care for the "least of these" among us. On the other hand, government applies these values reluctantly and incrementally, satiating public hunger for justice with small morsels facilitated by services that, as Russell points out,

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through the church. The view was loosely associated with the Social Gospel movement, but also served as a driving force behind the missionary movement, which took off in the late 19th century. Missionaries from that period often believed that they were not only saving souls, but were spreading the reign of God—and that once the entire world was Christianized, Christ himself would return. The position has now nearly disappeared, largely because it depends on fundamentalist hermeneutics, and the fundamentalist movement rejects the Social Gospel as anti-Christian. Modern liberals have also rejected postmillennialism, due to the association with the colonial mindset of the missionary movement and to its literalist hermeneutic. But the key point here is that a post-millennial worldview was one in which the church was (rightly) seen as a force for good in the world, capable of enacting and embodying the good news of Jesus Christ in all of its dimensions—social, political, and practical as well as spiritual. It expected Jesus to change the world *through Christians,* a position shared by the Pentecostal movement that followed. Sadly, Pentecostal emphasis on Spirit-empowered justice and racial reconciliation quickly gave way to fundamentalist views, including pre-millennialism, which holds that Jesus will come to *conquer* the earth *before* his millennial reign.

need our need more than we need their services (Russell 2020:211). Is this progress? Yes, in the sense that any improvement on injustice is progress, but for those who can see true justice in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, it is underwhelming. And for the church as an institution, it is gutting, as N. J. Demerath demonstrated decades ago (Demerath, 1995).

Even through the most profane eras of Christendom and the pietistic introspection of the early modern period, the church was active in serving the poor through its charitable arms. It was a counterpart to the state, filling the gaps of the system and, if not undermining the state's unjust use of authority as Jesus himself did, providing some buffer from it for the least of these. In eras when the Christian masses could not read let alone articulate a complex or nuanced theology, they knew how to serve the poor, and participated in the work of Christ in doing so. The church was the hub of community life, the association of associations that Russell preaches. Revival movements have always emphasized believing the right things and adhering to the right moral codes, but it is the decline of associational-level engagement that correlates most strongly to the decline of the church.

A Disembodied Church

When that work of serving the community belongs to the state, what then is the point of the church? Theological literacy is still low, and having given up the *work* of the church to the state, churches that are light on theology also look to the state for something to *believe* in: Christian nationalism is surging. Pietism and moralism are still commonplace, but are no longer balanced by the Social Gospel pointing out the injustices of society. The Social Gospel's vision of a better world has been undermined by incremental improvements that fail to address the injustices at the root of our systems, and the vision itself has become a propaganda tool for the systems making those incremental changes. All that's left for us to do is get together on Sundays to sing, drink coffee, and eat little triangular sandwiches with no crusts. The caring work we still do is largely overseas, and it takes significant care on the part of missionaries and Christian international development organizations to decolonize their own practices, much less avoid the institutional trap of creating dependency on aid and services.

Is it any wonder, then, that public interest in the church is waning? Because what is it for? Who is it connected to? It is no accident that Christians have put so much energy into the question of the church's "relevance." Those efforts have largely centered on apologetics, as if Christians can prove theologically the existence of a relevance that few can feel. But as long as the church is disconnected from the associational life of communities, it cannot be relevant to them, and will not be relevant to society more broadly. Theologians can unite with Russell on this point: Christ is present in community, and an essential quality of Christian community is that it serves and welcomes people from the margins of society. In his description of what to look for in a local organization that can serve as a host to the work of community building,

Russell offers seven points that seem like a description of the church, two of which read like descriptions of the church's most common points of failure:

> *Broadly Concerned*: Committed to the overall welfare of the community at large, *not just focused on one theme or target group*. Although they may advocate for a particular group or concern, they work with the neighborhood in all its facets: across age, across health, and across safety, economy, environment, and culture.

and

> *Inclusionists*: They can support a team of residents to loosely organize themselves into an initiating group of citizens who themselves are committed to hosting a new conversation at the local level while *paying particular attention to the genuine inclusion of local people who have been pushed to the margins* and are vulnerable to not having their gifts seen and received. (Russell 2020:158, emphasis added)

Churches that are hyper-focused on a single issue (e.g., preaching eternal salvation while ignoring our current earthly context, or a narrow and moralistic political agenda) and that fail to actively and sustainably welcome people from the margins into genuine community are, by this analysis, poorly suited to fulfilling their role as the host of community associational life. They are therefore unable to have a significant positive impact on the society around them, failing in a goal that has always been a hallmark of both evangelical and post-millennial purpose. They are poorly suited to transforming lives and empowering themselves and others, or receiving and embodying the work of the Spirit to do so. And they are incapable of embodying structural critique—or in theological language, challenging the Powers and Principalities—because they are poorly suited to building an alternative community that inverts hierarchies, and functions on a gift economy and an ethic of service.

Conclusion

While facilitating associational life in the community is not identical to being the church, the church cannot adequately be the church without doing so. The decline of organized religion and church communities over the last several decades seems to be directly related to the rise of institutionalization and professionalization that has corresponded to the disempowerment and dissolution of social bonds and interdependencies in general. Asset-Based Community Development is not a panacea, much less a replacement for the church. But its principles ought to remind Christians of what it means to embody Christ in the world, giving us a fresh glimpse of the post-millennial hope of embodied salvation, and re-emphasizing that the Spirit of Christ is embodied in community much more than in individuals. Russell's critique of well-intentioned "helpers" who inadvertently do harm also provides a helpful framework for decolonizing

Christian witness and practice, allowing us to remove the paternalistic assumptions that have dulled the empowering effect of the gospel for centuries.

References

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