

Religious Belief, Political Culture, and Community

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There is a widely-shared view in many Western countries that religious faith should have no place in debates on matters of public policy. And it is a view often defended by philosophical liberals who—whether libertarian or quasi-social democratic—hold that appeals to principles based explicitly on religious faith, ideology, or some other kind of fundamental commitment, are inconsistent with fruitful discussions in a culturally pluralistic environment. And religion, more than ideologies or other commitments, is often singled out.

Such a view, however, is not universal. We find thinkers, such as Jacques Maritain, who hold that religion has an important role in building a democratic and liberal state. On this account, Christianly-inspired religious principles are necessary for a political society that is personalist, pluralist, and just. (Maritain outlines this view in such works as *Integral Humanism*, *Principles of a Political Humanism*, and *Man and the State*, although he does not discuss in any detail how his model “Christian” polity might be realized.)

In this paper I want to argue that at a time in which society is marked by not only diversity, but increasing divisiveness and antagonism, religious belief—particularly Christian religious belief—and religious believers have an important role in the building of community. Believers note that they are called by their faith to act to build community—“the kingdom of God”—which is not just a community of believers, but one which is both open to, and proposed to, others. To show how religious belief has such a role, I want to touch on some of the values and principles that underlie the idea of community, and note that, while they are recognized and supported by Christianity, they should not be considered as simply *private* religious values. Indeed, it is because of this that a number of Christians,

such as Maritain, hold that such principles and values can serve as a basis for a broad national, or even international, community. Religious belief, therefore, has a role in building community and in contributing to political culture, even in a pluralistic world.

I

A canon of Enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought—and one that comes to us almost intact today—is that religion must not go beyond the private sphere. More specifically, liberals such as John Rawls¹ and Richard Rorty insist that in a world that is increasingly culturally diverse a viable political culture and the building of community require the “privatization” of religious faith. As Rorty puts it in his 1994 paper, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,”² we cannot “keep a democratic political community going unless religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty.”³ He concludes that “dropping reference to the source of the premises of . . . arguments”—i.e., that they are one’s *religious* convictions—“seems a reasonable price to pay for religious liberty.”⁴

What are the arguments here? There seem to be two kinds. First, many contemporary liberals hold that arguments concerning matters of public policy that employ principles or premises derived from religious faith work from assumptions that are not shared by all, and that any such “foundationalist” view in a pluralist world is doomed to failure. Thus, religion and religious faith are “non-starters.” But there is a second, more critical, point made. Many liberals argue that reference to religious faith or religious belief, in the public forum, is divisive—that religions are intolerant of difference, demand a unity or similarity in belief that shows little respect for the equally legitimate basic commitments of others—or are, at the very least “conversation stoppers”; they bring discussion and the possibility of dialogue and cooperation to a halt.

I should add that some religious believers are sympathetic to the separation of religion and politics, though for different reasons. For some, religious faith should not be brought to bear on public policy because public policy deals with the corrupt “City of Man” which is entirely separate from the

¹ See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

² Richard Rorty, “Religion as a Conversation-Stopper,” *Common Knowledge* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994), pp. 1–6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

“City of God.” Others argue that drawing on faith in discussing public policy can only endanger or bring disrepute to faith, in the same way in which attempts to defend certain religious beliefs by appeal to scientific “evidence” has enabled some to challenge these beliefs, because of what this move presupposes concerning the epistemic character of religious belief.

But if we say that religious belief and religious believers as such have no place in the public sphere, then what would Rawls, Rorty, and others have believers do? Presumably the answer here is that they should focus on being good citizens, engage in dialogue, seek consensus and social well-being and harmony, and promote a community based on these principles and particularly the principle of toleration. So, even though there can be no appeal to a common good (transcendent or otherwise), or to a universal standard of truth and falsity, and no way of *demonstrating* that one view or commitment is better than any other, many of those who are influential in contemporary liberal political culture hold that we can build community—a community that is both tolerant and consistent with the demands of many people’s faith or ideological or religious commitments.

It is difficult to see how this option would appeal to many religious believers, and particularly to Christians, however. To begin with, it proposes a view of social life and of moral action that has met with a good deal of criticism: one where the private is to be separated from the public. As some have argued, our beliefs and actions are not easily compartmentalized into “public” and “private”—nor should they be. Moreover, for the believer to try to “compartmentalize” her or his beliefs in such a way, would do violence to the content of those beliefs themselves. Again, some would note that believers have an obligation to promote the kingdom of God, and that this cannot be accomplished except by entering into the public sphere. But there are other reasons to reject the “liberal” approach as well. Some would argue that this post-Enlightenment liberal ideal has excluded some of the potential that might be used to address the conflicts in modern society. In insisting that religion and other deep commitments are just part of the “private sphere” so that individuals are reluctant to (or simply cannot) draw on their personal “commitments” in engaging in action in the public sphere, resources for building community are left unused. And, finally, one might object that we have the example of thinkers like Maritain, who hold that Christian religious principles are in fact necessary if we are to defend human freedom and democracy. On this view, the result of introducing religion into conversation need not be one of stopping conversation, or of insulting individuals or groups who do not share it, but offering options and alternatives that discussion might otherwise overlook.

So what, then, *could* the role of religious belief be in contemporary political culture? What I want to do now is to sketch out a response to the concerns of those, like Rorty and Rawls, about the place of religious belief—and of religious believers—in maintaining or building community. To do so I will draw on some features of Maritain’s “traditional” view—an account of human nature, of human ends, and the identification of a common good—but approach the issue in a way very different from that of Maritain.

II

First, what do I mean by “community” when I refer to maintaining or building community? A community is (in a broad sense) a group of individuals whose members show certain affinities with one another, who may share history, language, and culture (and perhaps religious faith) and, hence, who have common interests and a common good. These individuals are, then, socially interdependent, “share certain practices . . . that both define the community and are nurtured by it,”⁵ and are, as a group “capable of establishing and legitimizing institutions.”⁶ These institutions are sets of human practices (e.g., they may be legal, religious, political, and/or economic institutions), and it is through them that the members of that group express themselves, both as individuals and as a collectivity.⁷ But there is at least one other feature that should be added; community importantly involves loyalty—which suggests an allegiance of its members to these institutions that goes *beyond* casual choice.⁸

Now, how might Christian religious believers participate in the building and development of a political community? A detailed answer to this latter question is not possible here because a precise response would depend on a number of *empirical* issues, particular to the situation believers might find themselves in. Nevertheless, it is possible to sketch out a proposal that is consistent with a pluralistic account of community, and which is compatible with Christian belief. It is, I would argue, a model in keeping with the way in which many Christians see their religious commitment.

First, let me say something about religious belief or faith. I would claim that although faith or religious belief involves assent to a series of beliefs,

⁵ See Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985), p. 333.

⁶ See Leslie Armour, *The Idea of Canada and the Crisis of Community* (Ottawa: Steel Rail, 1981), p. 150.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁸ Thus, I would distinguish “communities” from “associations.”

these beliefs are both descriptive (i.e., have a relation to *this* world and not just to a reality which is beyond the empirical, observable, and material), *and* have an expressive role or function in a person's life. Specifically, they indicate one's disposition (or intention) to act in a way that is consistent with, or is a part of, a certain set of social practices. Moreover, religious belief itself is a practice (or set of practices) through which one makes sense of, or understands, and acts *in the world*. And so the "dominant ideas" and beliefs that are part of religious belief involve not only the transcendental, but the temporal commitments, needs and interests of human beings. For the Christian, these "dominant ideas" include "God," "Christ and Christ's mission," "faith," the "divine," and "spirit," but also "health," "knowledge," "love" and "justice" (which include friendship, cooperation, forgiveness, compassion, the promotion of peace), "moderation in one's life," "joy," and so on. And these dominant ideas, and the related beliefs to which the believer appeals, are reflected in institutions—both distinctive ecclesiastical institutions and various other social institutions that are part of the environment in which believers live.

The above-mentioned ideas of the Christian believer are principles fundamental to the Christian community, but many of them are also fundamental to life in *any* community. They are ideas which respond to (and reciprocally determine) human needs, reflect interests and goods that are shared with others, and include among them a conception of a certain general or common good. And, further, at least some of them are principles that are basic to the believer's noetic structure itself. A believer's religious belief is a fundamental part of his or her identity, and it is no surprise that the object of that belief (since religious beliefs are not just dispositions of "trust" but "trust-in" something or someone) inspires—but also requires—a certain loyalty. It indicates a willingness to go beyond what has been justified by demonstrative proof and argument—"through thick and thin." It has such a hold over believers that, if one gave it up, one would no longer be who he or she was. One's religious belief is not, then, just a choice, an "option," or an "attitude."

For individual believers, and for believing communities as well, belief involves *acting on* one's belief and *acting out of* that belief; this has consequences for building and extending community. If we see religious belief as a practice that involves a disposition to act, and if we recognize that the "dominant ideas," which are present in religious beliefs, involve commitment and must be instantiated in practice, religious belief clearly involves acting towards the building of a community. This is explicitly reflected in the Gospel message in Christianity, which calls on believers, individually and collectively, to "go

out to all nations,"⁹ to act in solidarity with others, and to work towards the realization of "the kingdom of God."¹⁰ To *fail* to act on one's belief is at the very least inconsistent with one's belief, if not to show that one does not actually believe what one says one believes at all. The dominant ideas that are part of religious belief serve as guidelines or principles in order to make such activity possible and to ensure it lasts. Thus, religious belief epistemically "underpins" believers and the believing community, but it also indicates where an individual or the community is (or should be) going, and what is necessary to sustain it. (In fact, some, such as Robert Bellah, have argued that religion—both in the institutional sense and in the sense of providing a way of understanding the world and a "second language" for grounding basic commitments—is *necessary* in order to build community.¹¹)

Now, it is a fundamental feature of Christian religious belief that not only are believers called on to build community, but that this community is one that is both open to, and proposed to, others. It is, moreover, a community that is not necessarily just a community of Christians. Nor does it require that those who are to be part of it must become Christian (though, admittedly, this seems to be preferred), for believers hold that many of the values, principles, and dominant ideas that underlie this community, while recognized by Christianity, are not uniquely Christian values. These dominant ideas and principles reflect generally the needs and ends of human beings, and the values essential to leading a fully human life. It is for this reason that a number of Christians (e.g., Jacques Maritain) hold that such ideas and values could serve as a basis for a broad national, or even international, community.

The dominant ideas present in this Christian conception of community, then, by no means make it a *closed* system. Besides, the Christian call to building community involves a set of practices that are bound up with other (e.g., ethical and empirical) discourses and practices that themselves change or develop over time, and so the conception of community must to some ex-

⁹ See, for example, Matthew 28:19: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (*New International Version*).

¹⁰ See Colossians 4:11: "[T]hese are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me." The notion of the "kingdom of God on earth" has been understood in Catholicism as the "Church of Christ." See *Dei Verbum*, no. 17; "St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*; see James V. Schall, "From Catholic 'Social Doctrine' to the 'Kingdom of God on Earth,'" *Communio* 3 (Winter, 1976), pp. 284–300; reprinted in *Readings in Moral Theology*, no. 5: *Official Catholic Social Teaching*, eds. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 313–30.

¹¹ See Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, e.g., pp. 247–48.

tent reflect them. (We might think here of the discourse or language of human rights that has come to be an integral part of Christian social teaching.) Moreover, the ideas and the interests found within Christian institutions are themselves not all absolute and unchanging. In fact, in living in the world and with others who do not share the same religious views, believers may find themselves being called out of their present views to reflect on (and, as appropriate, “invent” new) “structures of meaning” so that they can better take account of, and more fully grasp, both the changing environment in which they live and the infinite reality that is God. Finally, given the “infinity” that is part of the Christian conception of the divine, and given the physical, environmental, and social diversity in the world, it is clear that no finite community can instantiate all possible legitimate social and cultural practices. Thus, there is no problem in imagining a Christian model of community that can be open to diversity. And this openness is consistent with the recognition that community and solidarity do not just follow from belief; they must be built in cooperation with others.

The view of life and of the community that a Christian believer might propose does not, then, entail uniformity; it not only allows but expects diversity.¹² Indeed, this model of community, more than many non-religious models of common life, is broad. It allows for dominant ideas and a conception of the good that include *spiritual* values. Still, the openness that is characteristic of this community does not entail that, to build it, one must “give up” or move away from one’s faith. Building community, like believing itself, is not done in a vacuum. The religious believer engages in the building of community “out” of his or her dominant ideas or, broadly speaking, out of the system that constitutes his or her belief. At the same time, this community is not a mere extrapolation from one’s beliefs. Like all practices, building community and promoting solidarity take place in a world that is *external* to one’s own beliefs and practices.

Of course, as noted above, for the Christian there are certain dominant ideas and fundamental principles, which recognize human character and human needs and wants, that allow for and give rise to a *unified* community. But this need not lead to conflict with non-Christians. It is attaining such an equilibrium of unity and diversity that, no doubt, Jacques Maritain had in mind in describing his vision of a pluralistic yet Christian political community (see his *Man and the State* (1951) and *Integral Humanism* (1936))—a community where a leadership role would be played by a multiplicity of “civic fraternities,” founded on freedom and inspired by the virtues of Christianity, but

¹² See Armour, *The Idea of Canada*, pp. 141–42.

where such groups would not necessarily exercise political power and where there would be a recognition of, for example, cultural diversity and difference of religious conscience. Thus, although pluralistic, this account of the place of Christian religious belief in building community remains compatible with Christian orthodoxy. And one model of how those having a religious commitment can cooperate and build community with others who do not share the same "final vocabulary" is, I would suggest, reflected in the dialogue that has taken place, particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century, under the name of "ecumenism," and in the reflection on religious truth that has taken place in the process called "inculturation."

The ecumenical movement—and those who more generally promote inter-Christian, inter-religious (e.g., Christian-Buddhist, Hindu-Christian, and, to a lesser degree, Muslim-Christian, and religious-atheist, e.g., Christian-Marxist) dialogue—aims at "promoting cooperation and better understanding among different religious denominations." But the aim is not (as some instances of ecumenism may seem to propose) *simply* to understand one another or even just to find a way for individuals to come to a consensus about what is important and what is not. It is to promote cooperation—and for this to be effective, individuals must, at least in principle, be able to come to recognize, despite the diversity of expressions and elaboration of belief in different cultures and communities, that their respective elaboration of belief reflect shared insights and concerns about what is fundamental to the human condition. This is particularly evident in the process of "inculturation" in which those outside of a tradition or set of practices recognize its positive values—those that enrich human life and culture—as objective values which are open to further articulation, which "lay bare the seeds of the Word,"¹³ but which also provide an occasion for one to rethink and to come to better understand one's own faith and values. It is in becoming aware of what they share and in cooperating, ecumenism holds, that they will be able to live more fully.¹⁴ The aim of ecumenism, then, is ultimately unity, though a unity that is consistent with diversity and difference. And, to date, people of sometimes quite diverse backgrounds and traditions have met and have, in varying degrees, found common ground on which they have been able to build. Still, it is important to note, this does not imply or entail relativism or subjectivism, or taking one's

¹³ *Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (Ad Gentes)*, (promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965), no. 11; see also *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II, December 7, 1990, nos. 28, 56.

¹⁴ I develop these ideas in more detail in my *Philosophy, Community, and the Model of Ecumenism* (forthcoming).

religious (or non-religious) commitments any less seriously. Thus, the way in which many Christians see their faith and what is expected of them is quite compatible with the existence of, and with an obligation to build, a pluralist community.

Therefore, on this “ecumenical” model of discourse, the Christian believer can envisage—and can have an obligation to participate in the building of—a community that is both pluralistic and reflects Christian values. What precise form such a community would take depends largely on the concrete circumstances in which individuals find themselves and from which they would begin. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the obligation to build a pluralist community is not only a feature of post-Enlightenment liberalism, but also a consequence of Christian religious belief.

III

What beliefs and ideas can or could Christian believers appeal to in order to build community with other believers and with non-believers?

It has been claimed above that, when religious believers are called on to build community—to help in the construction of “the kingdom of God on earth”—they draw on the dominant ideas and notion of a common good that are part of their faith. And these are, as noted earlier, such principles as love, compassion, justice, and peace, but also ideals of “a truly human life,” “flourishing,” “fairness,” “justice,” “cooperation,” and so on. Moreover, to build community, the believer is called on, where necessary, to find or to construct a discourse through which people can communicate with one another. This too entails finding the principles or dominant ideas shared by the interlocutors.

What might this discourse and these principles be? At the most elementary level, certain objective and material conditions must be assured, e.g., the presence of resources for subsistence, shelter and security, as well as the possibility of satisfying not only other physical, but certain intellectual, moral and spiritual, needs. At an equally elementary level, the people present have to share or be capable of sharing a discourse and sets of practices, and they must recognize that they have at least some interests, needs and goals in common with, and that require or involve the participation of, others. They must also recognize individually the superiority of some values to others, though they can (at least, to begin with) disagree with other persons about which things are needs, about the importance of certain interests and goals, and about *which* values are superior to others.

But there are other material or quasi-material sets of conditions that must exist, and that are necessary for many of these elementary conditions to exist.

First, the individuals concerned must “recognize” one another as beings with whom they can live and act and, second (though this is not actually independent of the first), they must—or must be able to—share a number of beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about the character of physical reality (nature), what constitutes a basic human need, how one might or must satisfy these needs, and so on. This is what I have meant when I have referred to “dominant ideas.”¹⁵

It is important to note that the “dominant ideas” and the kinds of beliefs that are necessary for the existence of a community are not *casual* beliefs. These ideas are about the world (e.g., how it operates, its regularities and irregularities) and about what human persons require as persons (e.g., how to live in the world, how to acquire certain material and non-material goods, and so on). Though conditioned by context and history, they are not purely contingent or arbitrary, and they are not the kinds of things that people can lightly, or perhaps even explicitly, choose to adopt, or not adopt, or abandon. They are the kinds of ideas which not only allow conscious and purposeful action, but which also constitute part of one’s sense of identity and which, if we gave them up, we would (as one might in conversation say) no longer be who we were before. These ideas also include, then, ideas of value, of right and wrong, of how one can expect reality to function, and so on, and their dominance is shown in how one (regularly) responds in new situations.

As I have suggested above, these “dominant ideas” make community possible, i.e., they provide a set of background ideas or context through which collective action and a life in common can occur; they also provide, as it were, guidelines or principles in order for action to be possible and persist. Indeed, it is also only through sharing (at least some of) them, that there can be conversation or discussion among individuals. Unless there were some such ideas, unless there is the recognition of others as other persons, and unless one knows or has assurance that these ideas are shared, community cannot exist. Still, it is obvious that all the ideas that are dominant in a culture are not given *ab initio*, and at no time is the set of dominant ideas exhaustive. Certain ideas come to be dominant over time—think of the “ideas” of human rights and human dignity which, even if not always respected, are characteristic of most

¹⁵ For a more complete discussion of the “psychological” character of this view, see Bernard Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State* (1923), eds. Gerald F. Gaus and William Sweet (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2000), pp. xxvii, 164, 166–67, 249ff, 301–02 and *Bosanquet’s Psychology of the Moral Self* (1897), in *The Collected Works of Bernard Bosanquet*, ed. William Sweet (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Press, 1999), vol. 8, pp. 34–46. See also *Essays on Aspects of the Social Problem and Essays on Social Policy* in *The Collected Works of Bernard Bosanquet*, vol. 14, pp. 58–59, 121ff.

contemporary ethical and political discourse. But from the fact that certain ideas come to be dominant and recognized to be so, it does not follow that these are arbitrary, or are simply to be arrived at or settled by consensus. For some of these ideas and beliefs hinge on certain facts about reality (e.g., material conditions necessary for life and growth, the nature and value of various characteristics of the human mind, the human desire for knowledge and understanding, and more), about rationality, and about the nature and value of others. In short, then, these ideas reflect “objective” (or, at least, “inter-subjective”) conditions about society, political and economic reality, the level of technology, etc., and show that they are rooted in a reality that is external to one’s beliefs, ideas, and practices.

Of course, given that any person’s dominant ideas and beliefs are not exclusively religious, there may be other “points of access” to building community that one may share with others, e.g., moral ideas and beliefs. And the believer could look here, too, to find shared ground. Finally, since believers hold that the basis for their actions and their commitment is something right and objectively true—that they are based on certain fundamental truths and objective principles which cannot be compromised—they can assure themselves and others that the model of community that they propose is not just the product of consensus or of determining what to do in light of a Rawlsian “wide reflective equilibrium.” The community is *not*, in other words, simply based on agreement or consensus, because this would leave the door open to all sorts of things—including shared vicious principles.

The preceding remarks provide an outline of how individual believers can participate in the building of community. It involves constructing opportunities or occasions for dialogue and finding (or making possible) shared ideas—but it also involves the development of a measure of humility and a willingness to learn.

More concretely, though, and as Jacques Maritain would argue, the preceding accounts of religious belief and community involve acting in solidarity, for economic justice, and for the acknowledgment and respect of basic human rights—by which I mean something like the set of rights elaborated in the United Nations Declaration of 1948, and in the subsequent covenants arising out of it.¹⁶ Human rights at least are necessary not only for community, but also for discourse and discussion of basic values to be possible.

¹⁶ Maritain’s own list of rights, which antedate and are reflected in those of the UN Declaration, are to be found in *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943); see chap. 4 of *Natural Law: Reflections on Theory and Practice by Jacques Maritain*, ed. William Sweet (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2000).

This view is compatible with the existence of cultural diversity, i.e., with the fact that different groups of people can have different attitudes, values, and views of the world, and that many of the attitudes and views that now exist have changed (and will continue to change) over time. It is also compatible with respect for diversity so far as it recognizes that we build community out of our dominant ideas, basic commitments, and beliefs about ourselves *and* about the world. (This is, perhaps, obvious, since we *always* act out of our beliefs, and cannot help but do so.) Furthermore, it is consistent with pluralism, since any group reflecting different cultural, ethnic, or religious traditions would be able to maintain much of this diversity within a single political community. Finally, since it is clear that no single set of ideas, beliefs, commitments, and practices can exhaust all human possibilities, and taking account of the fact that individuals do live and develop in different geographical, economic, social, and political circumstances, it would be inconceivable that there is exactly one ultimate and universal set of practices that ideally constitute community. Each person, then, must be open to the possibility—or even likelihood—that there is a, or some, “truth” in the views of those having other basic commitments. My point here is not simply that it is possible that one can see “one’s” truth in “another’s” view. It is, rather, that there are truths that appear in a number of discourses.

Nevertheless, while the account I propose suggests that each person must be open to this diversity and to the possibility that there is a “truth” in the views of others, this does not mean that one cannot reasonably prefer one view to another, or that there is no objective truth. Nor is being open to others simply a way of saying that what one believes is not true, or need not be taken seriously. There can be, then, certain core ideas or beliefs which are true or authoritative. For example, given the features and conditions noted above, the extent to which these material and non-material needs can be satisfied is a criterion for having a rational preference for one community over another. This is not, of course, to say that one may be able to “prove” the preferability of one kind of community over others, starting with an abstract set of first principles, as implied by a classical foundationalism, but one could plausibly do so in a way, where the standard for rational belief is that which would suffice in a courtroom, following the principles of the common law. Claims to the superiority of some beliefs over others need not appeal to a “neutral” ground of justification, but they do suppose that there are some fundamental principles or common ground which individuals from diverse backgrounds share which can justify such claims.

Again, this account could appropriately be said to be an “objectivist” (i.e., non-subjectivist) view, as it provides, in general outline, features necessary to

life in society that are not determined merely by the will of the subject. To begin with, it starts from what would seem to be scarcely disputable claims about the world, supposing that communities are composed of human persons, and that communities must respond to certain objective features about persons, such as their material needs (e.g., for food and shelter), emotional needs (e.g., for friendship and other kinds of affection) and intellectual and spiritual needs, and their desires for personal growth and self-development. Moreover, it also claims that such things as environment, the kind of political association and the kind of economic and technological development that exist, influence how one understands oneself and others, and that lead to and color the kind of community one can build. (The level of technology in a society, for example, can influence basic attitudes and beliefs and, in turn, the extent to which one can be "in community" with even those with whom one is not in daily contact.) And even though the recognition of others as members, or potential members, of a community is something that, again, takes place over time, this account suggests that this is not an arbitrary or random activity (even if it is something that is not explicit and of which we may not be fully conscious). And, finally, it is important to note that the dominant ideas and beliefs from which individuals start are not just an individual's or a group of individuals' ideas or beliefs, but a community's beliefs, and that our communities of origin provide the epistemological and moral environment in which our basic beliefs and our dominant ideas exist. One can say, then, that in some measure, this account of the conditions for community reflects a theory of "human nature," i.e., it recognizes that there are others "like us," who have the needs and desires that we have, and who have the capacity for flourishing and developing as we do, and with whom we can be called into action. And so the traditional view of the basis of solidarity and of building community may in some measure be sustainable. Thus, individuals can be "called out" of themselves by their own tradition to construct a more comprehensive community, and can come to have a commitment or loyalty to that.

There is, no doubt, more to community, and to what must exist for a believer to respond to a call to build community, than is covered in the preceding remarks. Still, I would claim that the above account is at least largely descriptive *and* that it has, for those with certain basic commitments and trusts, a normative force. The believer, then, is called to build a community that would be an "open society," built around certain principles and values based on what it is to be human and on the character of the world in which we live. It is a community that is related to not just narrowly sectarian, but also to general religious, ethical, and empirical concerns. And even though the preceding comments do not require believers to support a particular kind of political structure, these principles and

values would suggest that the community to be built be a democratic one that recognizes human rights and human dignity.

IV

I have argued in this paper that it is possible (and, arguably, obligatory) for the Christian religious believer to work towards the realization of a moderately pluralistic community together with other believers and with non-believers. In saying this, I take issue with those believers who hold that their faith requires them to stay “above” matters of public policy, and I also disagree with those who claim that religion should have no place in the public sphere because it is divisive or a “conversation stopper.”

One’s basic commitments, beliefs, and dominant ideas cannot be separated from praxis—for the believer, faith cannot be separated from works. Moreover, the “dominant ideas” and the common good which generally (and, in the case of Christianity, typically) constitute part of religious belief and to which the religious believer must respond are, in large part, features that involve an openness to others and to diversity within the political community. A model of this way of building community is ecumenism. Here, one can see how individuals and groups of people might come to work with others in a way that recognizes the values in other perspectives and is open to change, but is not arbitrary, and is also consistent with Christian religious belief.

Those who favor a political society that is respectful of human dignity and open to the moral, social, intellectual, and spiritual life of individuals—that is, a society that is just, pluralistic, and democratic, without being subjectivistic—have no good reason to object, then, to the presence of religious faith in debates concerning public policy. One need not resort to the claim of liberals like Rawls and Rorty who insist that religion and religious belief be excluded from discussion of matters of public interest.

Obviously, building community is not an easy task, and it is all the more difficult in a world where the beliefs concerning principles and values, and even concerning empirical matters, are frequently considered to be simply matters of interpretation. And strategies concerning the ways in which one might go about building community may legitimately vary. Sometimes “sentimental education,” sometimes appeals to self-interest or consistency, and sometimes argument may be fruitful. Yet, despite the “divided state of humanity, the alienation across ideological abysses, and the bitterness between moral or political camps,”¹⁷ there need be no cause for despair. For believers

¹⁷ See Hendrik Hart and Kai Nielsen, *Search for Community in a Withering Tradition*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1990), p. xi.

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and non-believers alike do or can share ideas, commitments, and beliefs that will serve to bridge these divisions. And to deny religious faith a place in building such a bridge, is to exclude a force that can make a truly human community a possibility.