

**Building Communities of Trust:
The Church and Moral Formation in Civil Society**

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The fragmentation of institutional life in modern society has produced a number of besetting problems. Where once persons understood themselves to be embedded within communities that gave their lives form and purpose, today the default condition for many in Western society is a form of atomistic individualism from the perspective of which institutions are not merely optional, but perhaps even detrimental to the pursuit of our own self-determined ends. As institutional affiliation has declined on many fronts (including church membership), the bonds that tie us to one another, and the communal virtues that institutional life instills, have begun to fray.

In his essay, Joshua Daniel demonstrates both the importance of trust and vulnerability to the creation of selves who are willing and able to take moral risks, and the difficulty of creating contexts of trust in contemporary society. Building on Martin Marty's call for the creation of "communities of trust," he helpfully points to the contributions of Annette Baier and George Herbert Mead in aiding our understanding of the connection between trust and vulnerability in the "world at risk" in which we live.

The connection between risk, vulnerability, and trust is, as Daniel notes, important to the development of moral agency and creativity inasmuch as the capacity to respond with moral courage under conditions of risk depends upon our trust that the communities to which we belong will continue to embrace us in the

midst of our own risk taking. At the same time, as selves, we only develop those capacities for trust and moral imagination in the context of communities that not only allow us to risk, but also protect us from harm. This is of course most evident in the basic trust that exists between parent and child – through which the child becomes a self by learning to venture beyond the safety of parental protection, but also trusts that this protection is available when it is needed – but it is a requirement of all the relationships through which we inhere in community with one another. To a significant degree, the social good provided by institutions within civil society is to provide contexts of moral formation through which individuals may engage in a process of moral development that allows them to venture risk, act creatively, and stand courageously while knowing that the institutional settings to which they belong will continue to accept them and, at the same time, allow them both the resources to integrate a set of moral norms. through which they may act responsibly, and the independence to become an individuated self with an identity apart from their institutional settings.

What happens, however, when we are no longer strongly attached to communities of moral formation through which we can come to understand ourselves both as responsible selves and as independent moral actors? To the degree that modernity encourages us to relate to one another not as actors embedded within moral communities but as atomized individuals, it undermines our capacities to draw those connections between risk, trust, and vulnerability, because we are deprived (or perhaps better, deprive ourselves) of the relational contexts through which we may be formed morally to respond creatively within the

conditions of risk in which we find ourselves. The erosion of civil society thus creates a significant problem for the process of moral education in the United States today.

Insofar as the family remains the foundational context through which our initial relationships of trust and vulnerability are formed, the important skills of responsibility, creativity, and moral courage will still continue to be taught and learned. But the family cannot serve as the only conduit of moral formation. It cannot even serve as the *primary* conduit of moral formation. It is first, but not necessarily foremost. The development of the self requires a differentiation from our family units. If it becomes the only relational context through which we can risk vulnerability, then the ambit of possible constructive civic action will become severely limited. Through affiliation with a variety of social institutions, and through experimentation with different identities within those groups (some to be abandoned, others embraced and integrated), we come to see ourselves reflected via myriad social lenses in a way that is not really possible if it is only or primarily the family that sets the context for our selfhood.

Thus the continuing capacity for society to produce morally responsible and creatively courageous individuals depends on encouraging the reinvigoration of institutional life within civil society. In other words, it requires us to strive to build communities of trust, through which we may become integrated and embedded in larger social contexts that are capable of pressing us to become more than we might otherwise be. By providing a setting through which individuals may practice the

skills of participation and association, developing a sense of communal responsibility that can enable them to acquire meaning and purpose beyond that which is absorbed through the acquisition of goods in a consumer society, individuals within the sphere of civil society learn to become moral actors, capable of both belonging within a communal context and acting as individuals. These communities of trust within civil society can provide shelter from social atomization and from absorption within an overweening social whole – whether understood as the market or as the state.

From the perspective of the Christian tradition, the church represents the quintessential community of trust, existing as it does both as a civic institution among others within the broader range of voluntary associations within society, and, understood theologically, as the body of Christ through which we participate as Christians within a larger spiritual community. The decline in church attendance across a wide variety of denominations and the loss of trust in the institutional forms of the church are thus a problem both for the moral development of Christians as citizens within the public sphere and for the church as a community called to witness to God's presence in the world. If Christians are to exercise moral responsibility and creative courage in public, they need to be formed within a community that is capable both of telling them who they are as members of the body of Christ, and of allowing them to risk their identity in the midst of a multivalent and morally fraught world. Whether the church has the capacity to do this is a question that may be asked of its members. But it may not be for them to answer. If the church is truly the body of Christ, then its capacity to form morally

sensitive and courageous participants in public life depends not solely on the capacity of its members, but on a power beyond them, on which they too depend.