

The State of American Compassion

Why We Can't Go It Alone

Last month Barbara Elliott explored the religious roots of American compassion. This month she looks at how the erosion of faith and rise of materialism in our culture has led to personal isolation and an unraveling of private charity networks.

By Barbara Elliott

Contemporary America is very different from colonial America. The scope of the civic realm has shriveled in the past century. Many who were once connected through voluntary relationships no longer are. We see the "little platoons" overwhelmed by big cities as urbanization has replaced the agrarian culture. Unbridled materialism and politicization have overwhelmed the public philosophy of life.

This trend accelerated over the course of the 20th century, peaking in the 1960s. It unraveled the private sector and its morality, and shifted civic engagement from voluntary associations toward the centralized state and bureaucracy. At the same time, there was a push in the name of efficiency to turn over the care of the poor to the government, shifting responsibility from the civic space, where actions were personal, to the public space, where they are not. What individuals once did became the responsibility of a vast institution. As we have decreased our civic engagement, our expectations of government have risen. The weaker our horizontal ties are in the community, the stronger the dependency on the vertical ties of the state.¹

A ripple effect has resulted, Charles Murray tells us: "When the government takes away a core function, it depletes not only the source of vitality pertaining to that particular function, but also the vitality of a much larger family of responses."²



Barbara Elliott is president of the Center for Renewal in Houston, Texas.

Underlying all of these shifts is the broad secularization of our culture, the post-Enlightenment mentality writ large. We see an overt ejection of faith from the public square. We see that the First Amendment, which was intended to preserve freedom of religion, has now become interpreted as a mandate to protect Americans from religion. And we see the private voluntary sector severed from its religious roots.

The centrifugal forces of modernity have accelerated at a dizzying pace from the 1960s to the present. What happened in just forty years has been the demise of the traditional family, which has been replaced by a culture of "alternative lifestyles." We see skyrocketing rates of illegitimate births and abortion, an explosion of divorce and domestic violence, and the evaporation of multi-generational families in one place together. Quite often those left in poverty are single mothers.

Neighborhood and community have been replaced by "lifestyle enclaves" and gated communities for those who can afford them, where it is never necessary to encounter poverty. Private civic engagement has radically atrophied, with fewer true volunteers. Women, traditionally the backbone of volunteerism, are increasingly in the workforce with less spare time.

Americans now "Bowling Alone"

Civic engagement in America remained relatively strong well into the 20th century. Robert Putnam tells us in *Bowling Alone*³ that from the Moose and Elk Lodges to the Salvation Army, from the Knights of Columbus to Hadassah, Americans historically have deeply engaged themselves in civic organizations. They flourished well into the 20th century, diminishing slightly during the Depression, and then rising smartly after World War II and through the 1950s. But Putnam has discovered that since the late sixties, civic engagement has plummeted. A nation that volunteered together or bowled in leagues has abandoned these activities and is now "bowling alone" – hence Putnam's title.

The Harvard professor has examined patterns of political and religious participation, volunteering, community activity, and philanthropy as indicators of "social capital." In graph after graph, he presents visible evidence of the decline of civic engagement over the past forty years in everything from churches to political organizations and service clubs. He finds that more Americans are living in cities but are relationally alone, severed from their extended families, surrounded by people but living a life in isolation.

There are several contributing factors to this malaise, Putnam concludes:

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· Most markedly, a stark change of mindset between the generations born before the end of World War II and the “Baby Boomers” born 1946-64. The plummet began as the boomers began to reach adulthood, and showed little of the civic engagement of their parents, who were still volunteering actively.

· The entry of women into the workplace and the pressures of two-career families.

· Urban sprawl necessitates longer commutes and thins out the sense of community.

· a correlation between the amount of time spent watching television and slack civic engagement.

The religious community has been hit harder than it would appear. Over the past four decades, 10% fewer Americans claim church membership, but more telling is the fact that “actual attendance and involvement in religious activities has fallen by roughly 25 to 50 percent.”⁴ This one-time pillar of American life has been “hollowed out,” Putnam tells us.

In his words, “Seen from without, the institutional edifice appears virtually intact—little decline in profession of faith, formal membership down just a bit, and so on. When examined more closely, however, it seems clear that decay has consumed the load-bearing beams of our civic infrastructure.”⁵

But the drive toward material consumption is alive and well. Over the same time frame, Putnam finds that 70 percent of young people have decided that making a lot of money is their top priority. Participating in the community is a priority for only one in five.⁶

In an eerily prophetic insight, Tocqueville could already see these conflicting tendencies in the bosom of America. At the same time he admired the thriving voluntary associations and the selfless impulse of Americans, he also saw that a strong streak of individualism and materialism ran through the character of the country.

Don Eberly writes “Tocqueville worried about a ‘separateness’ which has . . . been dubbed in the 20th century ‘bowling alone.’ He detected the early signs of civic stagnation when he observed ‘Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.’”⁷

We see the modern man around us everywhere today. Robert Bellah calls this creature the “radically unencumbered and improvisational self,” cut off from any ties to community, history, tradition, or civic engagement.

The culture of the “self” has grown, as have the publications, spas, therapists and support groups to massage our bodies and egos. What Tom Wolfe described as the “Me Decade” has turned into several decades of self-absorption by the Baby Boomers, and now Generations X and Y.

The “pursuit of happiness” in America is increasingly expressed by material consumption. Tocqueville foresaw this also, warning

that a decrease in religion was likely to “lay the soul open to an inordinate love of material pleasure.”⁸ His words were prophetic. The shopping mall has become the new American temple.

The market economy has created a higher standard of living, materially speaking, and has created many lucrative jobs. But as the nation has become more intensely market driven, it has also exacted a price on civil society. Don Eberly and Alan Wolfe argue in *The Essential Civil Society Reader* that free markets tend to undermine civil society “by reducing all decisions to the calculation of self-interest,” which in turn weakens “the bonds of loyalty, friendship, and trust upon which civil society depends.”⁹

Wolfe continues, “markets are necessary for modernity, but they tend to destroy what makes them work.”¹⁰ This cuts to the heart of the contemporary dilemma in America. At some point, the human conditions that allow markets to flourish are undone by the market’s success.

Dislocation and ruptured families severed from geographic community roots have also weakened the fabric of our nation. People who move every seven years on average, regardless of how much they earn, are relationally impoverished. As small shopkeepers are driven out of business by large chains, the character of our towns is homogenized, depersonalized, and uprooted. It is a delicate order that makes markets sustainable in a free country, and we in America teeter in a precarious balancing act.

Economist Wilhelm Roepke addressed these concerns in *A Humane Economy*,¹¹ concluding that there is a point of diminishing returns with unfettered economic growth. Roepke observed that as economic improvement grows, discontentment rises in proportion to expectations. He contends that a growing economy does not necessarily improve the welfare of individuals, because other costs accompany economic growth. The creation of more goods creates new wants, envy, and the social compulsion to acquire.

This discontent, however, comes from a mind-set that equates our satisfaction with our material goods, and assumes that our possessions define our worth. But the real question is the human heart and our attitude toward wealth, not prosperity itself. From the Biblical perspective, wealth is bestowed as a blessing, but with it comes responsibility to use it both wisely and compassionately. If we do not, the result is an atrophied soul, and materialism.

Mediating institutions are the antidote to this alienation. One of the most powerful mediating institutions was always the church. But over the course of time, this beam of the nation has become hollow. Marginalized in the drive toward secular materialism, which appears to be the new national religion, the transformational power of the church has less influence on the culture. Fewer and fewer people venture outside the pews in any other manifestation of their faith. The voice of self-interest and self-indulgence has become louder to fill the space left in the retreat of virtue.

We have increasingly placed our faith in the power of government to provide solutions for human misery. What was once a strong level of responsibility and autonomy at the city, county, and state level has shifted toward a concentration at the federal level, with only modest attempts since to change the tide. The respon-

sibility for caring for the poor is no longer that of the community, but the federal government, diminishing the need for community. So we see another kind of polarization taking place, where the mediating institutions have shriveled, leaving at one end alienated individuals, and at the other end a vast bureaucracy, which by its nature cannot meet individual, personal needs.

Seeking Secular Salvation

Deep beneath this shift toward the political realm was a philosophical drift that began in an undercurrent several centuries ago. Eric Voegelin, one of the most astute critics of modernity, argued that the modern age has been characterized by the emergence of politics as a secular means of salvation. He traces the unraveling of order back to Joachim of Flora, a medieval mystic who depicted man's history in three ascending ages, which would bring about the final age of perfection. According to Voegelin, "He and his successors replaced faith in God with faith in man's ability to build heaven on earth. The new earthly faith depended upon the fallacious notion that history itself has a purpose: the achievement of human perfection. Salvation was to be sought in this world, through the pursuit of temporal achievements aimed at making material the transcendent world of God."¹² Hobbes and Rousseau took the next steps, claiming that the political order could rescue man from his fallen state.

This train of thought took a cunning twist at the turn of the century in America, through the Social Universalists. Professor Richard Ely urged economists and theologians to converge in support of "coercive philanthropy" which he saw as the "duty of government" to "establish among us true cities of God."¹³ William G. Fremantle expounded this approach, lifting up the "Nation as the Church, its rulers as ministers of Christ, its whole body as a Christian brotherhood, ...material interests as Sacraments, its progressive development, especially in raising the weak, as the fullest service rendered on earth to God, the nearest thing as yet within our reach to the kingdom of heaven."¹⁴

This is a perversion of the natural order. The government can never bring about the kingdom of heaven. The political realm is incapable of inculcating virtue. Law can draw the dividing line between human beings and their actions, and can punish infractions that violate a person or their property. But it is incapable of directly influencing the human heart to desire good or avoid evil.

Government can provide boundaries for human action and can guarantee rights, but it cannot write its laws in the hearts of its citizens. Government can protect the freedom to seek good, but it cannot mandate the appetite to seek the highest good. These are tasks which must remain squarely in the private sector.

It is an odd paradox, but the success of America depends on these private virtues, and the theological truths that shape them, for its very existence.

Thousands of faith-based organizations, schools, and community associations educate, nurture, and care for people, shaping their hearts and souls. It is crucial that they succeed in planting the seeds of virtue.

Renewers in America are now seeking appropriate ways to foster

the "fruits of liberty"—forbearance, love, and charity—in a way that is consistent with the overarching principles of the country. People of faith are capable of instilling the values and convictions that make people responsible individuals. They are charged with loving broken people into wholeness, and are doing so because of their faith.

One thing government cannot do is love. It was never intended to. That is the mission of the church, the only institution that is charged to love above all else.

So we walk in this precarious balancing act, suspended in the tension between church and state, not because we should eradicate all traces of faith, but precisely because our nation depends on the vibrancy of faith for its survival.

A Faustian Bargain?

Jefferson's old metaphor of a wall of separation between church and state had no binding power whatsoever until it appeared in a dissenting opinion of the Supreme Court in 1947. Justice Hugo Black wrote, "The First Amendment has erected a wall between church and state. That wall must be kept high and impregnable. We could not approve the slightest breach."¹⁵ With this dissenting opinion, Jefferson's words in private correspondence assumed a power that the founding generation and Jefferson himself never intended.

In the years since, a spate of court decisions have expanded the concept to roll back manifestations of faith in public life in myriad ways, to the point that Chief Justice Rehnquist has noted that the Court "bristles with hostility to all things religious in public life."¹⁶

If faith-based groups receive federal funding, it is a Faustian bargain: they are muzzled from speaking about the source of their faith. Overt faith is sanitized from programs that receive federal dollars. What remains is the delivery of "social services," decoupled from their spiritual origin. Those who reach out in the name of Caesar have a very different motivation, and it shows.

Faith-based organizations that receive federal funding run the risk of the new application of Lord Acton's famous maxim on the corrupting tendencies of power (let's call it Elliott's law): "federal funding tends to secularize, and absolute federal funding secularizes absolutely." By definition, faith-based organizations work because of faith. But if they are funded fully by the federal government, they may not teach the source of their faith.

If you take the faith out of faith-based organizations, they do not differ from their secular counterparts, and lose the dynamism that sets them apart. The result of moving from faith-based, relational ministry to secular, institutional social service has been impersonal care for the poor, who are neither lifted up nor loved.

What would right relations between church and state look like today? The George W. Bush Administration has set out to create a "level playing field" for faith-based and community organizations in the country to provide social services, and to remove the obstacles for them to apply for federal contracts to do so.

Legislation has been introduced which would make it easier for taxpayers who do not itemize their deductions to earmark a portion

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of their giving to faith-based and community organizations and receive a deduction for it.

· Other proposed initiatives would allow recipients of federally provided services to redeem a voucher with faith-based or secular providers, putting the choice in the hands of the consumer.

· Funding has been allocated through the Compassion Capital Fund to build up the capacity and competence of faith-based organizations through intermediaries, who are strengthening the movement at the grassroots level. All of these are helpful initiatives, and have gone a long way toward re-legitimizing the role of the faith community in providing services.

· But one of the most useful things President George W. Bush has done is to simply focus the national spotlight on faith initiatives, raising their visibility in the country and increasing their legitimacy through his public blessing.

Faith-based organizations are providing results. Whether one understands how or agrees with the methods, the results are being expressed in decreased recidivism of criminal offenders, reduced drug addiction, successful transition from welfare to work, decreased disciplinary infractions of at-risk youth, fewer teen pregnancies, and reunited families. These are the tangible fruits of faith, and they are improving the quality of life for citizens throughout the country. If the government can foster these fruits in a way appropriate to its mission to serve the common good, it should.

What's Needed is a Change of Heart

But the real debate is not about what the government can do. Far more important is the debate about what the people of faith can do. The heavy lifting must be done by individuals who act out of their faith, and can give an account of the source of their hope. For too long Americans have been living lukewarm faith with only tepid ripples of conviction. Only if we can ignite a passion for vibrant personal faith, which produces virtue manifested in action, can we maintain the fragile order which has been bequeathed to us by our forefathers. What we need is a change of heart.

The glue that held this society together for as long as it flourished was found in personal, face-to-face relationships. This is where civil society grows. To the extent that we have lost these relationships, we have lost an important part of what made America personal, warm, even luminescent. We need to nurture this part of the American soul.

The reasons for doing this are compelling but require a change of heart. As Pope John Paul II said in *Centesimus Annus*, "Justice will never be fully attained unless people see in the poor person, who is asking for help to survive, not an annoyance or burden, but

an opportunity for showing kindness and a chance for greater enrichment."¹⁷

"Just look at history," Peter Kreeft warns. "Each civilization has survived and thrived in proportion to its virtue. It has decayed when its virtue decayed. Israel, Greece, Rome and the modern West are examples."¹⁸ Kreeft reminds us that the choice to seek God and reflect his light in virtue is a crucial one we each must make. "The life we must choose is first of all God's life, which theologians call 'grace' which gives life to our spirits. Second it is the life of virtue, which gives life to our souls. Third it is the life of peace and the survival of civilization, which gives life to our bodies."

God has promised He is with us, if we obey. In the words of Isaiah: "And if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; and satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets and Dwellings." (Isaiah 58:10-12)

Notes

1. See Robert Nisbet, *Quest for Community* (San Francisco, CA: ICS Press, 1999).
2. Charles Murray, *In Pursuit of Happiness and Good Government* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 274.
3. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
4. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 72.
5. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 72.
6. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 260.
7. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 506.
8. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 444.
9. Eberly, *The Essential Civil Society Reader*, p. 8.
10. Quoted in Eberly, *The Essential Civil Society Reader*, p. 18.
11. Wilhelm Roepke, *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market*, (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1998 Third Edition).
12. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 110.
13. Richard Ely, *Social Aspects of Christianity* (New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1889), pp. 92, 77; quoted in Olasky, p. 121.
14. William G. Fremantle, *The World as the Subject of Redemption* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1895 second edition) p. 281. Quoted in Olasky p. 122.
15. *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1.
16. *Doe v. Santa Fe Independent School District*, (2000).
17. John Paul II, "Evangelical Letter *Centesimus Annus*", (Rome: May, 1991) VI, "Man is the Way of the Church" (58).
18. Kreeft, *Back to Virtue*, p. 193.

Terrence Scanlon, Publisher

Jill K. Lacey, Editor

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CAPITAL RESEARCH CENTER, 1513 16th St. NW, Washington, DC 20036-1401 (202) 483-6900

Contact us on the world wide web www.capitalresearch.org

Comments to the editor should be sent to jjlacey@erols.com

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