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Conservatism and the Quest for Community

William Schambra

The age of Obama has been an age of revival for the Progressive ideal of a "national community." It is a vision rooted in two core beliefs: that direct, local associations and channels of action are too often overwhelmed by the differences among communities and the fractious character of American public life; and that rather than strengthening the sources of these differences, modern government should seek to overcome them in the service of a coherent national ambition. By distributing the same benefits, protections, and services to all Americans, fellow feeling and neighborliness can be fostered among the public; combined with the power of the national government and professional expertise, this communal sentiment can then become a valuable weapon for attacking America's most pressing social problems.

A century ago, this ideal was a central tenet of the Progressive agenda—which sought, as Progressive icon Herbert Croly put it in 1909, the "subordination of the individual to the demand of a dominant and constructive national purpose." It was an important goal of the New Deal, which President Franklin Roosevelt described in 1933 as "extending to our national life the old principle of the local community." It was the essence of the liberal agenda of the 1960s, which President Lyndon Johnson called an effort to "turn unity of interest into unity of purpose, and unity of goals into unity in the Great Society." And it was at the core of Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency in 2008, which promised to overcome petty differences and, as Obama put it in one campaign speech, to

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"unite this nation around a common purpose, a higher purpose.... To reaffirm that fundamental belief—I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper—that makes us one people, and one nation."

This plank of the Progressive platform has always held some attraction for Americans. It speaks to our desire for community—a desire that has forever motivated human hearts, and that our individualistic age in particular too often fails to satisfy. In practice, however, the appeal to national community has meant undermining local connections and initiatives—the essence of *real* community—in the name of one-size-fits-all solutions that, in the end, fit no one very well.

Resistance to the Progressives' assault on community has spurred powerful reactions against liberal programs for nearly a century. Given the current direction of public policy, we are likely to see more such reactions in the coming years. But to be effective, both politically and practically, this resistance must be informed by its own compelling vision of community—something conservatives have too often failed to provide.

When conservatives talk of community, they tend to call upon revered intellectual figures: Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Russell Kirk, or Robert Nisbet. To be sure, these are all important sources of instruction. But as our challenge now is to first harness opposition to a Progressive vision of community, conservatives must pay careful attention to those who, in our present day, are disaffected by this vision. We must meet them where they live and work; we must appeal to them in terms that speak to their concerns and their priorities; and we must appreciate the contributions they can make to conservative thought and social policy—even, and especially, in ways we might not expect.

THE RELIGION OF HUMAN BROTHERHOOD

Conservatives in search of wisdom on the question of community would therefore be wise to study the life of Freddie Garcia. Hardly a social scientist or policy wonk, Garcia developed his vision of community solutions far from the hushed halls of academia or government, on the grim and dangerous backstreets of San Antonio, Texas.

Pastor Freddie, as Garcia would come to be known, was a heroin addict who was liberated from his addiction through transformation by the Holy Spirit. As a young man in the 1960s, he was stung by Anglo society's racial prejudice; he had joined the Austin Street Gang because (as he would later write) they, like him, were "proud of [their] Mexican heritage, not

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ashamed of [their] language and culture." Garcia thus became a fierce champion of what would later be described as "Chicano Power," a posture that should have made him a prime recruit for liberalism. Furthermore, as an aggrieved Mexican-American who had fallen into drug addiction, he was a perfect candidate for the left's approach to social dysfunction.

Garcia gave this approach a try when, desperate to conquer his addiction, he signed himself in to what was then called the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital for Narcotic Addicts in Fort Worth, Texas. For six months, as he put it, he "took every therapy they offered, determined not to leave 'til [he] was cured." But before Garcia had even returned home after his discharge, he had sought out a pusher and gotten high again.

Garcia tried to tackle his addiction once again by entering a local chapter of Teen Challenge, the national drug-addiction program founded by pastor David Wilkerson, author of *The Cross and the Switchblade*. There, Garcia was told that if he asked Jesus to forgive him for his sins, he would "be a drug addict no more, because Jesus want[ed him] to change [his] life right now." And yet Garcia was reluctant to abandon liberalism's social science. As he put it, "I argued with myself, I've tried the best hospitals, psychiatrists, psychologists, [and] group therapists.... How can Jesus, whom I can't see, feel, or touch, change me?"

But prayer did change him. Garcia shed not only his heroin addiction but also his animus against Anglos. He went on to found Victory Fellowship, which would spawn scores of community ministries for the addicted, homeless, and lost across the United States and Latin America. Tens of thousands of copies of *Outcry in the Barrio* — the autobiography he wrote with his wife, Ninfa — have been distributed in churches and prisons and on street corners around the world. And not long before Pastor Freddie's passing last year, his ministry opened a $3.6 million center in San Antonio for the application of faith to the problems of alcoholism and drug abuse.

Most conservatives have not heard Freddie Garcia's name. And yet in his life and his ministry, he embodied conservative social policy at its best. His work did not rely on massive government expenditures for the purchase of costly professional expertise. Rather, in the best tradition of Tocqueville's science of association, Garcia worked to construct small, tightly knit, nurturing faith communities for people whose addictions and incarcerations had long since driven them from the arms of family and friends. Summing up the changes that faith had made in the lives of those touched by Victory

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Fellowship, Pastor Freddie said: "The miracle in our lives didn't happen when we called upon the name of Socrates, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, or Sigmund Freud. This transformation took place in our lives when we called upon the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Naturally, the social-service establishment is not amused by such challenges to its hegemony. (Indeed, in 1995, the Texas Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse went after Teen Challenge of South Texas, threatening to put it out of business because its counselors lacked formal professional credentials.) After all, Pastor Freddie's reliance on personal supplications to Jesus, and the healing power of prayer, could hardly be more opposed to the progressive establishment's most cherished assumptions. Its credentialed professionals regard problems like addiction not as personal afflictions—to suggest as much is to "blame the victim"—but rather as the product of larger social forces like racism and poverty.

And the conviction that such forces could at last be understood and mastered by new sciences of society—such as psychology and sociology—was at the heart of the 20th-century American Progressive project. In the Progressives' view, it would no longer be necessary simply to put band-aids on problems, as did old and discredited charity. Through their systematic, rational, scientific approach, it would be possible to get to the root causes of problems and solve them once and for all. This, of course, meant dismantling Tocqueville's world of local, voluntary, faith-based agencies, given their distinctly unsystematic, irrational, unscientific character. The professional expert, trained in social science, would displace the local charitable and religious leader; a streamlined, unified, bureaucratic service-delivery system would displace the hodgepodge of partial and parochial local voluntary programs.

As for the sense of community, belonging, and purpose that had once been supplied at the local level by Tocqueville's townships and voluntary associations, that too would now be centralized and nationalized. The federal government, and above all the American presidency, would summon citizens out of their self-interested, parochial concerns, demanding that Americans instead commit their lives to the service of a larger national ideal: a noble, comprehensive national oneness. As Croly put it in his century-old classic *The Promise of American Life*, now a citizen would begin to "think first of the State and next of himself," and "individuals of all kinds will find their most edifying individual opportunities in serving their country."

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Indeed, a great American *national* community would emerge, vastly superior to the cacophony of petty *local* communities hitherto created by churches and voluntary associations. This national community would be bound together, in Croly's words, by a "religion of human brotherhood," which "can be realized only through the loving-kindness which individuals feel... particularly toward their fellow-countrymen."

As if taking direct aim at the Pastor Freddies of the world, Progressive sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross insisted in 1920 that America needed to transcend its fragmentation into "thousands of local groups sewed up in separatist dogmas and dead to most of the feelings which thrill the rest of society." This would be accomplished by the "widest possible diffusion of secular knowledge" among the masses, which would "[narrow] the power of the fanatic or the false prophet to gain a following." Meanwhile, university training for the elite would "[rear] up a type of leader who will draw men together with unifying thoughts, instead of dividing them, as does the sect-founder, with his private imaginings and personal notions."

Freddie Garcia may never have studied Croly, Ross, or American Progressivism. But he was nonetheless an expert on their teachings, because they had been put into practice directly in his life—and their failure had driven him to seek alternatives. Groups like Teen Challenge and Victory Fellowship—small, intense faith communities, healing addictions through love and mutual obligation, rather than dispassionate science—are precisely what Tocqueville had observed and admired in America. They are also precisely what Progressivism's service state had vowed to extinguish.

Pastor Freddie, then, was a living testament to the truth of Tocqueville and the failure of social-science liberalism. He was a leader of deep faith and traditional social values, who had learned to overcome the wounds of racism in order to become an American patriot. So why was he not routinely sought out by conservative policymakers for advice, counsel, and support?

AWKWARD ALLIANCES

Part of the answer is that Pastor Freddie's beliefs do not fit well with either of the two primary strands of conservative social thought—namely, traditionalism and libertarianism.

Pastor Freddie was a man of faith, to be sure, but it wasn't the sort of faith with which most traditionalists are comfortable. For those of

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the Russell Kirk persuasion, religion tends to be a sober, staid, institutional affair; its value is not so much personal salvation as social stability. Religion is what ensures allegiance to permanent truths and established, quasi-aristocratic forms, thereby fortifying society against the onslaughts of radical innovation and democratic excess. In *Conservatism: Dream and Reality*, Robert Nisbet described the traditionalist posture toward faith this way: "Religion...was preeminently public and institutional, something to which loyalty and a decent regard for form were owing, a valuable pillar to both state and society, but not a profound and permeating doctrine, least of all a total experience."

This would have been a bit lukewarm for Pastor Freddie. Though the church he founded is non-denominational, it could best be described as Pentecostal, and so is very much a "total experience." His autobiography brims with ecstatic gatherings of recovering addicts speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing through the laying on of hands. This is nothing unusual for America: After all, several "great awakenings" filled our frontier forests with boisterous camp meetings featuring, as one historian noted, "falling to the ground, jerking, barking, and dancing." But this exuberant, populist evangelism is a far cry from traditionalism's iconic Anglican vicar, chatting amiably with his aristocratic patron, patiently counseling his dwindling congregation in its dank, crumbling chapel to keep a stiff upper lip.

Pastor Freddie's passionate, communal faith presents an even more serious challenge for libertarian conservatives. After all, when Nisbet (in his classic book *The Quest for Community*) reminded Americans of the importance of local community several decades ago, libertarian Frank Meyer described it as a "vicious" attempt to impose on Americans the "subtler, quieter tyranny" of small community life. To such a libertarian, Pastor Freddie's ministry could only appear to be highly irrational and oppressively cult-like. In the tightly knit community of believers demanded by the battle to overcome addiction, there is little room for libertarianism's proud and fiercely independent individual.

And yet, if only for the sake of political survival, conservatism *must* find a way to welcome the likes of Freddie Garcia into its camp. Otherwise, liberalism's boast that demographic trends are on its side will soon be validated. The left is counting on ever-growing numbers of Hispanic voters to join its ranks, adding to African-Americans, wealthy professionals, and other groups to ensure—as the *New Republic*'s

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John Judis and political scientist Ruy Teixeira argue — an emerging Democratic majority.

But we also know that, especially among Hispanics and African-Americans, robust expressions of faith like Pentecostalism are spreading like wildfire. Starting with a handful of worshippers at the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles just over a century ago, Pentecostalism today counts as many as 500 million adherents around the world. A Pew Research Center study in 2006 found that renewalism — understood as Pentecostalism plus associated charismatic movements within established churches — commands the allegiance of some 23% of the American population.

If there is a single great uncertainty in liberalism's sunny demographic forecast, it is the faith factor. Surveys tell us that renewalists are far more likely than secular and other religious voters to entertain conservative political and social values. And as Pastor Freddie's experience makes clear, there is a vast gulf between the worldviews of renewalism's faith communities and Progressivism's social-service professionals.

But no matter how great that tension, if neither of the two major schools of conservative thought — traditionalism or libertarianism — is able to accommodate Pastor Freddie and the millions like him, conservatism risks ceding these Americans to the left by default. The challenge for conservatives now is to figure out how to broaden their own community to make the Pastor Freddies feel at home.

MEDIATING STRUCTURES

The good news is that conservatives have managed to overcome such problems before. Three decades ago, in the wake of Watergate and the defeat of President Gerald Ford by Jimmy Carter, conservatives found themselves (as they do today) in political eclipse. But they found consolation — indeed, some hope — in certain tensions developing among what had been, since the New Deal, solid Democratic constituencies.

Throughout the 1960s and early '70s, a great rift had opened within liberalism — pitting the centralized social-service state constructed by the Great Society against neighborhoods, local communities, and ethnic groups whose ways of life had been targeted by the state's social-engineering schemes. In his best Crolyan language, Lyndon Johnson had gamely summoned Americans to a broader sense of national community. As he put it, "I see a day ahead with a united nation, divided neither by

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class nor by section nor by color, knowing no South or North, no East or West, but just one great America, free of malice and free of hate, and loving thy neighbor as thyself."

Americans, however, began to see that the effort to build a utopian *national* community meant the destruction of their own tangible and immediate *neighborhood* communities. Whether the issue was crime, pornography, housing, abortion, prayer in school, textbooks, or busing, local customs and mores were being overturned by federal edict in the name of a single national standard. As a result, groups that had been the bedrock of the New Deal coalition—Southern evangelicals and ethnic, Catholic blue-collar workers—erupted into populist revolt, and suddenly came into political play.

But as with Pentecostals today, these groups were not persuaded by the established conservative intellectual schools. Blue-collar ethnics did not share traditionalist yearnings for the bygone days of status, class, and hierarchy, which had consigned their ancestors to the bottommost ranks. Nor were these often unionized workers particularly moved by libertarian paeans to the free market, which had always seemed to serve only the interests of the plutocratic owning class. William Gavin, writing in the '70s as a proud Irish Catholic and self-described "street corner" conservative, put it this way: "There is something in the conservative intellectual movement that loves a wall, a wall that keeps the uncleansed, the unshriven, and unwanted from staining the pure, unsullied dogmas handed down to conservative intellectual chieftains from the days of old."

In the mid-1970s, under the leadership of William Baroody, Sr., and William Baroody, Jr., the American Enterprise Institute tackled this problem head-on. They gathered a stellar group of scholars associated with the traditionalist and libertarian schools of thought, but also brought under the AEI wing some writers and thinkers who would by no stretch of the imagination fit into either category. These figures instead reflected the populist, ethnic rejection of Progressive social engineering.

There was, for instance, Michael Novak—who had been a speechwriter in the 1972 presidential campaign of George McGovern, and who had authored *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (published just a few years before he came to AEI). In that volume, Novak repudiated Progressive liberalism's effort to eradicate particularist ethnic allegiances on behalf of one vast homogenized, rationalized national community. For Novak, however, the alternative was not traditional conservatism's social

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hierarchy, which had never treated his Slavic ancestors well; nor was it the unfettered free market, which had killed and maimed too many of his ethnic kindred in molten steel spills and methane-filled coal shafts. Rather, he called for a public policy that "[turned] toward the organic networks of communal life...family, ethnic groups, and voluntary associations in primary groups."

Similarly, social entrepreneur Robert Woodson—who had been recruited directly from the Urban League—rejected the professionalized therapeutic state's approach to working with youth gangs. At the same time, however, he rejected conservatism's preference for throw-away-the-key law enforcement. Rather, in his AEI volume *A Summons to Life*, he held up the model of Falaka Fattah and her House of Umoja in Philadelphia. Like Pastor Freddie, Fattah had created a small, intense community to keep neighborhood teens out of gang life, drawing on the example of the extended African family—hardly the typical conservative point of reference.

Novak and Woodson both proposed as an alternative to the progressive state—as well as to libertarianism and traditionalism—a return to what became known at AEI as "mediating structures." As sociologist Peter Berger and theologian Richard John Neuhaus would describe them, mediating structures were "those institutions standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life." They were precisely the small, immediate, voluntary Tocquevillian social institutions whose parochialism and localism had been so thoroughly scorned by the Progressives.

Soon, Berger and Neuhaus were gathering all of this work under AEI's mediating structures project. And in their monograph *To Empower People*, published in 1977, Berger and Neuhaus brought the strands of populist, ethnic, localist rebellion against the central government into a coherent program for policymakers. At the core of their argument was the notion that social services delivered through locally rooted, authoritative institutions—like families, neighborhoods, churches, and voluntary associations—would have a great deal more legitimacy and success than those that came from distant, alienating bureaucracies.

This mediating-structures approach reflected the work of another prominent sociologist who joined AEI in the late '70s: Robert Nisbet. Nisbet argued, especially in *The Quest for Community*, that family, neighborhood, and local associations were important not only for the humane

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delivery of services, but also for providing the otherwise isolated individual a sense of belonging or community. As he put it, "The quest for community will not be denied, for it springs from some of the powerful needs of human nature—needs for a clear sense of cultural purpose, membership, status, and continuity." If not met by mediating structures, Nisbet maintained, these needs would be met instead by the state, through a vision of an all-encompassing national community. It was a clarifying insight into the project of American Progressivism.

The neoconservative intellectuals who had begun to gather at AEI around Irving Kristol—themselves ill at ease with traditionalism and libertarianism—also resonated to the notion of mediating structures. Their growing skepticism about federal social policy was fueled in part by the damage it had inflicted on the urban neighborhoods that had been *their* youthful sources of community. As Nathan Glazer pointed out, when government social policy was applied to the cities in order to deal with the "breakdown of traditional ways of dealing with distress," it only "encouraged their further weakening" by displacing these traditional remedies with professional service providers—in the end actually making problems worse.

AEI's mediating-structures concept helped conservatives think about public policy in a new way. It not only suggested practical solutions to problems—like vouchers for education and child care, neighborhood crime watches, and home-like settings for the rehabilitation of the addicted—but did so in a way that tapped into the populist yearning for the preservation (or restoration) of community-mindedness within families and neighborhoods. It thereby appealed to typically non-conservative voters, and became an important element in the elections of presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush. The notion of mediating structures was in fact explicitly echoed in Reagan's Private Sector Initiatives Task Force and New Federalism, in the elder Bush's Points of Light initiative, and especially in George W. Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

Indeed, in its efforts to engage local grassroots leaders, Bush's faith-based initiative was aimed precisely at people like Pastor Freddie—and not by coincidence. For when Pastor Freddie took on the Texas social-service bureaucracy in 1995, the new governor at the time was none other than George W. Bush. After Garcia and Robert Woodson staged a demonstration at the Alamo, Bush called Woodson into his office in Austin

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to learn more about this notion of mediating structures; he also named Garcia to a faith-based task force to explore ways social services could be provided through grassroots groups. When Bush ran for president five years later, his advisors—especially speechwriter Michael Gerson and domestic-policy chief Stephen Goldsmith—were thoroughly steeped in the doctrine of mediating structures (Goldsmith had actually used the concept to frame his own work with grassroots groups during his time as mayor of Indianapolis). It is surely no accident that in Bush's two presidential races, he received, for a Republican, impressive levels of support from Hispanic and African-American voters.

Clearly, the mediating-structures concept has a long pedigree, and has proved its usefulness over the past few decades in combating some of the most egregious examples of social decay. But while many of the problems to which the mediating-structures approach was applied still persist, 2010 is not 1970. America has changed, for better and for worse. In today's context, does the mediating-structures concept have a future? In our age of online social networking and big-government rule from Washington, are Americans still looking for ways to satisfy a yearning for community?

BIG-TENT REVIVAL

Barack Obama's election suggests that they are. Well before candidate Obama made clear his determination to launch a major new expansion of the social-service state, he laid the groundwork for it in the manner of past Progressive-minded presidents, making the case for overcoming petty differences and pursuing a national purpose and a national community.

To be sure, this president is much savvier than most about the importance of mediating structures, given his background as a community organizer. Arguing that he still believes "it's a good idea to have a partnership between the White House and grassroots groups, both faith-based and secular," Obama announced early on that among the few Bush programs he intended to preserve was the faith-based initiative. And it is striking that he immediately placed it in the hands of Joshua DuBois, a young African-American Pentecostal preacher.

Even so, the relentless secularization and rationalization of the social-service state—now once again unleashed by a friendly president—will sooner or later collide head-on with the prerogatives of mediating structures, just as they did in the 1960s and '70s. It is almost inconceivable that serious tremors will not soon be detected along the fault line that

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runs through the Democratic Party, separating a passionately religious populism from an equally dispassionate professional elitism, each now with major claims upon a revivified service-delivery state. Consider, for instance, the tension within Obama's own base, made up largely of the highly religious African-American community and the highly secularized professional community. The latter believe ardently in the separation of church and state; and yet Obama's faith-based office, in the hands of an enthusiastic pastor, will surely test these limits more than the secular left would like—inevitably sowing some discord.

In preparation for this moment, we must consider again the lessons of AEI's mediating structures project—particularly what it taught us about renewal through the development of a more inclusive conservatism. To be sure, the world of conservative think tanks, donors, and publications is considerably larger than it was during the Baroody era at AEI; this is a welcome development. The downside of this abundance, however, is that it may tempt us to believe that conservatism can renew itself entirely from within, simply by putting extra shifts on the production lines of the established conservative idea factories.

But conservatism cannot begin to address its demographic problems by generating ever more elaborate policy analyses, or by writing ever more prominently placed op-eds in their defense. A true conservative recovery will instead require recruiting and promoting the modern-day equivalents of Novak and Woodson: those who speak—often in a boisterous, populist language—for constituencies that are leaving liberalism, but have not yet arrived at conservatism. Just as in the 1970s, it will be necessary to tap into the populist energies triggered by the aggressions of an expanding social-service state by seeking out and supporting the voices of dissent—even if those voices speak in tones not readily identifiable as conservative.

Such an approach will mean incorporating more vigorous discussion and dissent within conservatism. This accommodation may not sit well at foundations and think tanks, increasingly managed according to the latest business techniques for ensuring smoothly humming, efficient output of product. And yet it is nevertheless the way tomorrow's enlarged conservatism will be constructed. But the lessons from how this approach has worked in the past should help to assuage conservatives' fears: Ronald Reagan, after all, brought into conservatism a populist impulse that may not have met the standards of Russell Kirk or Friedrich Hayek. A future conservatism must be shaped by liberalism's populist

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critics in ways that we cannot now fully anticipate, but which we should welcome all the same.

Beyond the recruitment of dissident intellectuals, how else can conservatives capitalize on the moment, and help reclaim a more traditional concept of community? To begin with, conservative think tanks, foundations, and public officials should seek out, support, and become fully acquainted with the Freddie Garcias in their own backyards. For too long, conservatives have argued that our problems can best be solved by civil society, but then have walked away—as if such high expectations of civil society didn't impose particular obligations on those who raised them in the first place. Conservatives have too readily argued for civic renewal in the abstract, without making an effort to find out what civic renewal looks like in the flesh.

It is crucial that this pattern begin to change. Every conservative philanthropist who utters the phrase "that's a job for civil society" should be able to name—and demonstrate immediate acquaintance with—at least a dozen examples of civil society doing the job, in the form of grassroots groups personally visited and funded. Though many of these will be faith-based groups, as Robert Woodson has noted, it is not necessary to fund the ritual—just the results.

It is also likely that the more conservatives familiarize themselves with local grassroots groups, the more efficiently—and more advantageously—civil society will be funded. As a number of recent studies have noted, conservatives tend to be more generous in their charitable giving than liberals; without a practical and immediate acquaintance with civic groups, however, conservative generosity flows to non-profits that are nothing like Freddie Garcia's Victory Fellowship. Indeed, conservative donors too often give by default to the largest and most popular charities today—those that are the most professional and adept at fundraising. Yet these organizations are frequently nothing more than miniature replicas of government programs, providing expensive social services manned by well-paid, credentialed professionals. They are also the most vigorous proponents of the view that only government can provide the massive funding needed for such services, and that conservatism's faith in private charity is a cruel hoax. In other words, wealthy conservatives often cancel out their political contributions with their charitable contributions.

Conservatives need to spend more face time with civil society not only to make wiser donations, but also to make wiser policy. They

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should formulate the next round of mediating-structures proposals by seeking out and tapping the wisdom of inner-city grassroots leaders. As Pastor Freddie's life demonstrated, no one can tell us more than they about the manifest failures of the social-service state, because they have seen and experienced these failures first-hand. They can also tell us precisely what changes — often amounting to minor, low-cost adjustments — could be made in existing laws and regulations to simplify life for people who are truly solving social problems. Unlike large, bureaucratic non-profits, about the last thing grassroots groups are likely to suggest is a new, complex, expensive, government-run social program. They already know how that story turns out.

Of course, one of the most important questions to think through in any attempt at revival is how all of this attention to grassroots community groups will help conservatism speak to the rest of America — the non-urban, the non-poor, the non-minority. Would renewed interest in mediating structures resonate there as well?

First, it should be noted that even the wealthiest suburban voters form their opinions about conservatism based to some degree on its attitude toward the poor and marginalized. If conservatism's only idea of a civil-rights program is opposition to affirmative action, and if its only idea of a poverty program is opposition to welfare spending, then inevitably Americans will conclude that conservatives simply don't care about minorities or the poor. And if one critique of conservatism since the New Deal has proven to be particularly damaging, it is the proposition that conservatism is exclusively identified with the interests of the wealthy. The embrace of grassroots civil society is one way to dispel this notion, and to prove that conservative convictions are not only for the hard of heart.

Moreover, neither the desire to reconstitute civil society nor the utility of mediating structures is confined to the inner city. In his volume *The Great Disruption*, Francis Fukuyama brings powerful evidence to bear substantiating Nisbet's view that the quest for community will not be denied because it is rooted in human nature itself. Modern evolutionary biology, Fukuyama notes, suggests that we are naturally led to reconstitute social order on a small and immediate scale, no matter the magnitude of otherwise disruptive social or economic forces. Indeed, as he puts it, "the study of how order arises, not as a result of a top-down mandate by hierarchical authority... but as a result of self-organization

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on the part of decentralized individuals, is one of the most interesting and important intellectual developments of our time."

The drive to re-establish and institutionalize face-to-face community is perhaps most energetically displayed in the growth of evangelical megachurches in suburbs across the country—a manifestation of the same impulse that is fueling the growth of Pentecostalism in the inner city. Although the most striking symbol of this growth may be the soaring, several-thousand-seat cathedral, the first thing megachurches do is break down their thousands into the smallest of groups bonded by strong mutual interests. As a reporter from *Mother Jones* put it, "By taking on roles as various as those of the neighborhood welcome committee, the Rotary, the corner diner, the country club mixer, the support group—and, of course, family and school—megachurches have become the tightly knit villages that many Americans think they grew up in."

The effort to reconstitute local community has economic manifestations as well. For all we hear about the new, post-industrial globalized marketplace, its particular reliance on entrepreneurial creativity may put a premium on the restoration of more intense and immediate human ties. As Fukuyama suggests, "it would appear that the impersonal sharing of data over electronic networks is not enough to create the kind of mutual trust and respect evident in places like Silicon Valley; for that, face-to-face contact and reciprocal engagement that comes about as a result of repeated social interaction is necessary."

The mediating-structures framework even holds lessons for American foreign policy. In the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, success has not been achieved solely through the top-down application of professional expertise in the form of superior American military technology. Also needed has been the cultivation and recruitment of tribal leaders and ethnic groups to defend their own local communities against an oppressive Islamist theocracy—an approach that calls to mind Robert Woodson's work to end gang violence.

Conservatives, then, must learn to address the yearning for community not only for the sake of the inner-city poor, but also to meet a wide range of spiritual, economic, and even foreign-policy goals important to all Americans. As we do, we should seek wisdom not only from the well-known theorists of community, but also from the Pastor Freddies of the world. For they have managed to reconstruct civil society under the most difficult and demanding circumstances imaginable—battling

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not only the problems of poverty and social dysfunction, but at the same time costly and intrusive social-service programs that often only make the problems worse.

FAITH, HOPE, AND COMMUNITY

There is a final reason to seek out the Freddie Garcias, and it speaks directly to religious conservatives. For many years, it was an indisputable tenet of social science that the march of progressive rationalism would inexorably secularize the modern world. Conservatives all too often seemed to buy into that notion as well; describing the "Sea of Faith," 19th-century English poet Matthew Arnold lamented: "But now I only hear/Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." As important as faith and its forms were to the stability and order of society, the best we could hope to do, apparently, was to husband and protect this dwindling resource. There seemed to be no way to replenish its supply.

Freddie Garcia and his fellow renewalists have proven, to the contrary, that modernity need not mean the end of faith. Indeed, its looseness and uncertainty have driven millions into the arms of many robust faiths, which have accommodated modernity while taming its most vertiginous features. Faith, and along with it civil society, have been able to tap into new and unanticipated springs of energy and growth. They have validated Tocqueville's assessment that we Americans possess a means of reconstructing community among ourselves, no matter how unpromisingly alien we initially are to one another.

The dynamic of faith, civil society, and community, then, is perhaps not steady decline, but rather death and resurrection. It is precisely this hopeful dynamic that is on display in Pastor Freddie's Victory Chapel — where former gang members, once locked in deadly street warfare, belt out hymns of praise for their now clean and sober lives. And it is a dynamic that should offer hope to conservatives — who, in a moment that sometimes appears to call for despair, may find instead their best opportunity to renew the sense of community that has long been America's great strength.

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