

We Need a Cultural Great Awakening

In response to increasing economic disruption and drastic social shifts in American life, Sen. Mike Lee recently launched the Social Capital Project, a multi-year research project dedicated to investigating “the evolving nature, quality, and importance of our associational life.”

As I recently noted, the project’s first report highlights the connections between “associational life” and the nation’s economic success, stopping short of specific policy solutions. “In an era where many of our conversations seem to revolve around the individual and large institutions, an emphasis on the space between them could bring many benefits,” the report concludes.

In a statement made before the Joint Economic Committee—as part of the launch Lee’s report—AEI’s Charles Murray added a bit more detail, explaining what, exactly, that newfound “emphasis” should like, and where the long-term solutions might reside.

Noting the genuine, systemic struggles that exist across economic and social institutions, Murray argues that the underlying problems ultimately have to do with specific individuals making poor choices. “If I had to pick one theme threaded throughout all of these superbly told stories, it is the many ways in which people behaved impulsively—throwing away real opportunities—and unrealistically, possessing great ambitions but oblivious to the steps required to get from point A to point B to point C to point D in life.”

Thus, the most basic solution will involve helping those same people understand how to (re-)order those priorities, pointing us back to the institutions most central to personal

development and formation. As to which those might be, Murray looks to the data and sees it pointing to two particular institutions: the “traditional family” and the church.

For Murray, the solutions are cultural, and in many ways, spiritual. “We need a cultural Great Awakening akin to past religious Great Awakenings,” he says:

The most common way that the fortunate among us manage to get our priorities straight—or at least not irretrievably screw them up—is by being cocooned in the institutions that are the primary resources for generating social capital: a family consisting of married parents and active membership in a faith tradition.

... With regard to religion, I am making an assertion about a resource that can lead people, adolescents and adults alike, to do the right thing even when the enticements to do the wrong thing are strong: a belief that God commands them to do the right thing. I am also invoking religion as a community of faith—a phrase that I borrow from, guess who, Robert Putnam. For its active members, a church is far more than a place that they go to worship once a week. It is a form of community that socializes the children growing up in it in all sorts of informal ways, just as a family socializes children.

This is not a preface to a set of policy recommendations. I have none. Rather, I would argue that it is not a matter of ideology but empiricism to conclude that unless the traditional family and traditional communities of faith make a comeback, the declines in social capital that are already causing so much deterioration in our civic culture will continue and the problems will worsen. The solutions are unlikely to be political but cultural. We need a cultural Great Awakening akin to past religious Great Awakenings. How to bring about that needed cultural Great Awakening is a task above my pay grade.

Murray touches on those same themes in his book, *Coming Apart* (which is routinely cited in Lee's report), but given his self-proclaimed status as an agnostic, his advocacy of "active membership in a faith tradition" is striking, and seems to be increasing in volume and boldness over the years.

Yet while Murray bases his emphasis on faith and family not in ideology or religion, but in "empiricism," Christian theology affirms the connection as well, noting the formative, transformative power of the Gospel across all of life.

As Jessica Driesenga puts it in *The Church's Social Responsibility: Reflections on Evangelicalism and Social Justice*, the gospel is not just a "pearl of great price" – a "heavenly treasure" and "promise of eternal life in the future." The gospel is also "cultural leaven," holding promises for culture and society in the here and now:

The people of God are given a promise of eternal life in the future, but are also given promises for life in our world today. Godliness, that is, keeping the commandments of God, does not only have eternal rewards. It bears fruit in society, exerting the influence of the gospel as a leavening agent throughout the world. The gospel has a tangible and important impact in our world today, bearing great fruit in society. The gospel, as a leaven, has culture-making, culture-swaying, and culture-transforming power.

This leavening, the influencing power of the gospel throughout the world, does not operate on its own. It comes from the core of the gospel, the pearl of great price. As [Herman] Bavinck notes, "so from this center it influences all earthly relationships in a reforming and renewing way." The leavening power of the gospel does not exist without the regeneration, faith, and conversion of humanity, the heavenly treasure, or pearl, gifted to humanity in Christ. But, in the restoring of one's relationship with God through the work of Christ, the gospel can go on to have a leavening effect in

the world.

Murray is on to something in pointing to the powerful role of the religion in public life. As we join him in pursuing a “cultural Great Awakening,” we’d do well to remember that the underlying restoration begins not with institutions of religion themselves, but with the Gospel from which they spring.

“The pearl has priority over the leaven, but this does not lead Bavinck away from stressing the importance of the gospel as both pearl and leaven,” Driesenga concludes. “The gospel both creates a new community, restoring the relationship between God and his people, and has a robust influence on the present society.” {eoa}

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