
A MIGHTY FORTRESS: RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT AND LEADING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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Abstract: The last three decades have witnessed the resurgence of religion's influence within the corridors of power. Using in-depth interviews with 360 national leaders from one religious community, American evangelicalism, the author concludes that the rhetorical trope of evangelicalism's marginality is empirically incorrect and strategically unwise. Notions of individual identity and the ideal of cosmopolitanism legitimate the incorporation of religious voices into the center of American power, but these parvenus lack a theological framework for their influence or what they ought to do with it. Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr provide useful principles for the cultivation and stewardship of cultural power, but we must be careful that emerging leaders not lose their distinctive attributes—their cultural dialects, idiosyncrasies, and mores—as they join higher circles. These emerging leaders must learn how to speak in multiple registers, and this article proposes signaling behavior as one strategy worth pursuing.

Salient religious identity is a formative influence in people's lives, and social observers since the time of Tocqueville have noted how religious commitment often anchors Americans' moral obligation to the nation's common good. In a pluralistic democracy like the United States, we know that religion can precipitate good and bad results, that faith can generate a shared regard for others but also provide ammunition for the so-called "culture wars." In light of this, how should personal faith

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intersect with public life? Should deep religious commitment be banished or at home within the corridors of power, and to what extent is this already occurring? This article endeavors to explore such themes by arguing that *cosmopolitanism* and *convivencia* should characterize the leadership styles of devout people in public life. By examining one of the most significant religious communities in contemporary society, American evangelicalism, I explore the tensions that arise when people of faith exercise worldly power. I demonstrate empirically that evangelical Christians now populate the halls of power, but most of them have no theological framework for managing the privileges that accompany the mantle of public leadership. I conclude by calling for a theology of power and by offering a few possible touchstones from the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr. In essence, we need a new way of thinking that draws upon the resources religion provides while cultivating among public leaders a deeper commitment to the common good.¹

Leadership for the Common Good

Leaders in a diverse society are expected to help people get along. Often, they do this by embodying shared norms of the community and by bridging divides among people. Princeton philosopher Anthony Appiah helpfully frames this task as *cosmopolitanism*. For Appiah, cosmopolitanism involves intentional interaction with the other, or civil engagement with people different from ourselves.² Through cosmopolitanism, people living in a pluralistic society are able to retain their allegiances to various identities (such as those based on religion and ethnicity) while also learning from and finding ways to

¹ *Public leader* in this article refers to a position of institutional authority of societal significance in a host of fields. These include not only leadership in government, but also leadership in business, nonprofit life, the arts, higher education, entertainment, and media.

² Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

agree with those who hold very different identities. Instead of minimizing our differences to the lowest common denominator as a basis for interaction, cosmopolitanism entails that we retain—even boast of—our unique identities and engage our differences in deliberative, civil interaction. That, I argue, is an ideal framework to be used by people of faith in positions of public leadership. Instead of minimizing their religious identities, they ought to draw upon them as a way of building bridges with others and as a way of remaining true to themselves. In the process, they will encourage others to retain their unique identities and bring them into the ongoing public conversation. Yet cosmopolitanism by itself fails to attend to the communal issues associated with leadership. Although shaped by engaging others, cosmopolitanism remains, in the end, an individual attribute. And public leadership requires not just the negotiation of individual interactions; it requires community-building. Just as politicians must establish constituency groups and business leaders must build consumer bases of support, so must every public leader create and maintain communities of people. As Max Weber has shown, these may develop around charismatic personalities or around bureaucratic institutions, but leadership is fundamentally constituted by groups of followers.³ Maintaining community can be especially difficult when religious differences exist within and across these groups. Douglas A. Hicks, however, shows a helpful way forward. In his recent book, *With God on All Sides*, Hicks argues that American culture needs a more inclusive model for public leadership, one that not only *tolerates* the religious other but actively *appreciates* those differences. Borrowing a term that characterized the Moorish rule of Al-Andalus in medieval Spain, Hicks advocates for *convivencia*, a paradigm that taps the moral resources of different religious traditions as a way of

³ Max Weber, *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, [1946] 1991).

building connections across cultural divides.⁴ I propose that Hicks' notion of *convivencia* and Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism offer essential frameworks for religiously-committed public leaders to draw upon their religious identities in working for the common good.

Identity and Faith

In large part, Americans are encouraged to bring their convictions to bear in public life, and this is good and right for deliberative democracy. We celebrate the contributions of African-Americans, Latinos, and other identity-based groups in the democratic process. Although social science demonstrates the prevalence of multiple personal identities within a single individual, there remains a significant degree of coherence within what Anthony Giddens has called the "reflexive project of the self."⁵ For American evangelicals, religious identity is often the source of coherence for their personal identities. Indeed, woven into the fabric of evangelicalism is a conviction that a person's faith is not simply a religious affiliation; it must become part of the individual's identity. Evangelicalism is a religious identity that, by definition, is totalizing in scope. Compared to Roman Catholicism or Judaism, religious identity for evangelicals is sociologically more salient because it is an identity chosen by the adherent ("accepting" Jesus, in the evangelical vernacular), not one principally shaped through upbringing.⁶ And because it is an identity chosen,

⁴ Douglas A. Hicks, *With God on All Sides: Leadership in a Devout and Diverse America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 5. See also Scott Thumma, "Negotiating a Religious Identity," *Sociological Analysis* 52 (1991): 333-47, and John P. Hewitt, *Dilemmas of the American Self* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

⁶ Of course, this is not to say that evangelicals do not raise their children in this religious faith; obviously, that occurs a great deal of the time. What is unique is that each child, at an age when he or she can demonstrate individual agency, must choose for himself or herself the faith; it is not an ascribed identity.

the rhetoric surrounding this decision stresses individual agency. Within many evangelical congregations, when a person converts to the faith, the adherent is asked to make a profession of faith that refers to Jesus as “Lord of my life.” Often, evangelical ministers respond by challenging the new believer to dedicate every part of his or her life to God. This dedication includes work, family, and all other commitments. In other words, evangelicalism is a religious identity, but also much more. That is why notions of “calling” and “integrating one’s faith” are part of the narratives of evangelicals in public leadership; they are fundamental to being a faithful evangelical.

However constructing and maintaining individual identity is not always a straightforward process. Modern life is complex and fragmented; this complexity generates a multitude of intersecting points among different identities. People are then forced to create hierarchies in their identity-construction.⁷ People seek coherence in trying to maintain the fragile stability of their selves, and for the devout, identity tends to cohere in religious commitment.⁸ Because of this religious identity, it is very difficult for evangelicals and others for whom religion is woven into the core of their identity to follow the demand that John Rawls and others have made that requires the exclusion of religious sensibilities from public life.⁹ Not only is this separation practically impossible for many evangelical public leaders, but I

⁷ Martha Minow, *Not Only for Myself* (New York: The Free Press, 1997).

⁸ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966). See also Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967).

⁹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Rawls advocates for public reason, a way of arranging “our common political life on terms that others cannot reasonably reject” (124) and is, therefore, free of religious or metaphysical arguments not shared by all citizens. He later introduces what he terms “the proviso” to this secular reasoning argument that permits the expression of religious arguments in public moral discourse, but only if they can be translated into the language of public reason. See John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited.” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64 (1997): 765-807.

would argue it is not even desirable. Salient forms of identity have empowered groups such as women and people of color to join elite ranks and achieve legitimacy for their respective movements¹⁰—which society recognizes as a collective good since it has occurred—so why would we feel any differently about religious identity? Just as Jane Addams advocated that women’s lives and experiences were unique and valuable for civic leadership in Chicago’s municipal government at the turn of the last century, so also should we acknowledge that the lives and experiences of religious people can uniquely shape their leadership. Naturally, there are right and wrong ways to draw upon one’s religious identity in public leadership, and that is where cosmopolitanism and *convivencia* can be helpful. But before moving on to specific strategies of action that I discovered in my research, we turn to discuss the unique case of American evangelicalism.

American Evangelicals: Contemporary *Parvenus*

Perhaps no other religious group in the United States has been as adamant as evangelicals in declaring their marginalized status within broader society. Christian Smith’s extensive study of American evangelicals showed that ninety-two percent of them say “Christian values are under serious attack,” and ninety-five percent say “We are seeing the breakdown of American society today.” These figures are statistically significantly higher than corresponding responses provided by mainline Protestants, Catholics, and nonreligious Americans.¹¹ Prominent evangelical figures such as Carl F. H. Henry have written along similar themes: “We live in a darkening civilization in which worldlings seek to divide Christ’s garments among them...Evangelicals

¹⁰ Richard Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff, *Diversity in the Power Elite: How It Happened, Why It Matters* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

¹¹ Christian Smith with Michael Emerson, Sally Gallagher, Paul Kennedy, and David Sikkink, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Table 5.3, 139.

are...beleaguered in China, prohibited from building churches in Saudi Arabia, arrested for distributing literature in Turkey, and no less tragic, are often vilified in the United States.”¹² Even rhetorical tropes from within the evangelical movement—such as referring to themselves as the “moral majority”—have served as reminders to evangelicals that they do not set the nation’s cultural agenda. Never mind the fact that virtually no single group can do that in today’s diverse, complex social milieu.¹³ But the present context does represent a change of sorts. At the turn of the twentieth century, evangelicalism was so influential that, in the words of one historian, “it was virtually a religious establishment.”¹⁴ Today, many evangelicals feel embattled for their faith, not necessarily by individual coworkers or neighbors, but by larger institutions such as Hollywood or university faculties.

I conducted in-depth interviews with 360 national leaders (in fields such as government and business) who are also evangelicals. Dozens talked about their perceived marginality and the sense of loss they have experienced. As one CEO who graduated from Georgetown put it, [Evangelicals are] not in the belief-shaping sectors...entertainment and arts and music and law, advertising and politics and the academy....We’ve allowed ourselves to become compartmentalized. ...We lost the universities. We lost the cities and thought centers. We lost the media. We lost certain belief-shaping forces over the last century and that’s cost people of faith a lot in terms of the kind of world we now live in.¹⁵

¹² Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Countermeasures in a Decadent Culture* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1986), 121-2.

¹³ Thomas R. Dye, *Who Is Running America: The Bush Restoration?* 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002). See also Suzanne Keller, *Beyond the Ruling Class: Strategic Elites in Modern Society* (New York: Random House, 1963).

¹⁴ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

¹⁵ Interview with Paul Klaassen, July 15, 2005 (McLean, VA).

At the same time, evangelicals constitute—depending on how you measure it—somewhere between one-quarter and one-half of the U.S. adult population.¹⁶ And when I asked these elite evangelicals about how their secular colleagues respond to their faith, many answered in a way similar to one informant who said, “They are not antagonistic toward Christianity. They’re apathetic toward Christianity...they just don’t want to deal with it...They don’t care.”¹⁷ In fact, one leader referred to this notion of feeling embattled as a “manufactured thing” that is felt more often by evangelicals in “middle America” than by evangelicals working directly in centers of elite power.¹⁸

Unfortunately, we do not have trend data to compare the number of evangelicals in powerful positions fifty years ago with today. So we cannot conclusively determine whether evangelicals’ feeling marginalized results from an empirical loss of cultural power or whether they—like others—simply feel pressured because they have to vie for societal influence. I should also note that not every evangelical feels disempowered. Donald Holt, a journalist who once edited *Fortune* and *Newsweek*, describes the difference that has taken place over his lifetime: “When I graduated from college [in 1957], my folks gave me a little book called *Ten Famous Christian Athletes* and...it had Reverend Bob Richards who was a pole vaulter in the Olympics and...another guy from Baylor....Today, [if you wrote the book] you could cite a thousand!”¹⁹ Professional athletes like Kurt Warner, Larry Norman, and Betsy King, along with Olympians Paul Wylie and John Naber share stories of meeting dozens, sometimes hundreds, of committed evangelicals who are top athletes. Similar developments have taken place in

¹⁶ For detailed analysis of the various ways of measuring evangelicals and their corresponding percentages, see Conrad Hackett and D. Michael Lindsay, “Measuring Evangelicalism: Consequences of Different Operationalization Strategies,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47 (2008): 499-514.

¹⁷ Interview with David McFadzean, September 27, 2004 (Pasadena, CA).

¹⁸ Interview with Donald Holt, October 25, 2004 (Wheaton, IL).

¹⁹ Interview with Donald Holt, October 25, 2004 (Wheaton, IL).

Hollywood, according to long-time insiders Pat Boone and Art Linkletter.

Over the course of three years conducting research, I heard the names of hundreds of celebrities and mainstream journalists, artists, and entertainment icons who are evangelical. Even more names were mentioned when I inquired about evangelicals in elite political and business positions. Those leaders who have held long tenure in their fields concurred when I asked them whether there are more evangelicals in positions of influence today than a generation ago: “Absolutely. No question.”²⁰

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu writes about those who rise in cultural power, examining the ways that they negotiate the challenges of their new social contexts. These *parvenus* seek stability in their lives even as they first encounter the privileges and responsibilities that accompany the higher circles.²¹ One of the greatest threats to the *convivencia* that Hicks seeks is the tendency for emerging leaders to lose their distinctive attributes—their cultural (if not linguistic) dialects, idiosyncrasies, and mores. I noticed a tendency among many leaders I interviewed to distance themselves from the religious community out of which they emerged. In many ways, they resembled the *parvenus* that Bourdieu writes about. Seeking to “blend in,” these newcomers would minimize parts of their identity and background that were divergent from their new social settings. Dozens of the leaders I interviewed referred to the evangelical subculture as “baggage” weighing them down on their way up the social ladder. And yet, upon closer investigation, I found that many of them depended upon that “baggage” as they rose in prominence and prestige. Perhaps the evangelical subculture did keep them from climbing faster, but many would not have climbed as far without it. Not a single artist or entertainer I interviewed referred to the

²⁰ Interview with Ralph Winter, April 25, 2004 (Glendale, CA).

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

evangelical subculture in positive terms. Derision was more likely. They used terms like “gross” and “cheesy” to describe it. They seemed to forget how much the subculture helped them by providing professional training and the chance to produce works on a smaller scale, outside mainstream media outlets. Many of these leaders feigned a form of cultural amnesia, trying to forget their past. This works against Hicks’ vision for *convivencia*, because we have to retain our unique voices in order to make a meaningful contribution to public discourse.

Notwithstanding this cultural amnesia, American evangelicals represent a group on the rise. For my research, I interviewed two former Presidents of the United States, approximately fifty Cabinet secretaries and senior White House officials from the last eight administrations, one hundred one CEOs and senior executives at large firms (both public and private), three dozen accomplished Hollywood professionals, twelve leaders from the world of professional athletics, and over one hundred fifty leaders from the artistic, nonprofit, educational, and philanthropic arenas.²² As these evangelical public leaders have brought faith convictions to bear on their respective spheres of influence, they have founded organizations, formed networks, and drawn upon formal and informal positions of authority, the sum of which has facilitated evangelicalism’s advance. Without a doubt, these leaders have brought evangelical faith—once confined to the lower ranks of society—into the very corridors of power.

Powerful Faith?

Is this re-incorporation of religiously-devout citizens into society’s higher circles a positive development, or not? Does it hold the possibility of rolling back the liberal reforms of the twentieth century, and should we be concerned about what this means for religious minorities

²² D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

and underrepresented groups? First, we acknowledge that modern liberal reform has not been received, developed, or expressed uniformly across societies, or as Christian Smith suggests, not even among different communities living in the same society.²³ More important, much of our society's liberal reforms have been *spurred* by deep religious commitment, not advanced *in spite of* it.²⁴ Given this phenomenon, what theological resources might help elite evangelicals better understand the salience of their faith to public leadership?

The Hebrew Scriptures relate several stories about worldly power. We read of Joseph who rose from obscurity to become the equivalent of Egypt's prime minister, despite his brothers' schemes. Esther, uniquely positioned, saved her people from the destructive plots of Haman. Nehemiah rebuilt the Jerusalem wall, and Solomon ruled Israel for forty years, during which time he constructed the Jerusalem Temple. There are a few other examples of the faithful being given dominion or authority, but for most of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, people of faith did not have much worldly power. They were often ruled by foreign leaders—Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and Caesar—who shared neither their faith nor their vision for how the world ought to be.

In the interviews I conducted, leaders mentioned one passage of the Bible more than any other when asked what most shapes their thinking about power and influence. The selection is in Jeremiah 29 where the prophet writes to the Israelites living in Babylon after being taken into captivity. His audience were debating

²³ For an overview of the “multiple modernities” paradigm and related arguments, see Christian Smith, “On Multiple Modernities: Shifting the Modernity Paradigm,” unpublished manuscript, University of Notre Dame, 2006. Accessed via

<http://www.nd.edu/~csmith22/documents/MultipleModernities.pdf> on April 9, 2009.

²⁴ Michael P. Young, “Confessional Protest: The Religious Birth of U.S. National Social Movements,” *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002): 660-88.

among themselves how they should conduct themselves while in exile; the prophet writes:

4 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, told me, “This is an admonition for the faithful to see themselves as a counter-culture for the common good.”²⁵ In essence, it is an exhortation to work for the collective benefit of the culture around you, even if society’s norms and mores are as different from those of the faith community as they were for the Israelites living in Babylon.

This counter-cultural framework has animated many theological treatises that deal with the relationship between Christ and culture. From *Resident Aliens* by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon to several works by Jacques Ellul, a number of theologians argue that Christians ought not become enmeshed in the webs of domination that exist in secular society. Parts of American evangelicalism—especially those segments that arise out of Anabaptism—affirm this general orientation. However, according to just about every measure, evangelicals in this country *resemble* the dominant culture; they do not contradict it.

Christians in public leadership would be wise to pursue their lives in ways different from the dominant culture, especially in terms of their consumption practices and workplace politics. Anecdotal evidence I collected while interviewing evangelical public leaders suggests that

²⁵ Interview with Tim Keller, May 12, 2005 (New York, NY).

whatever suspicions non-religious colleagues may have of these Christians emerge not from hostility toward the teachings of Jesus but from the lifestyles of those who claim to be his followers. Although we can applaud the contributions of evangelical public leaders such as Eric Pillmore—who was hired as Tyco’s senior vice president of corporate governance when the firm needed to renew its commitment to ethics—we also recognize that some of the nation’s largest corporate frauds occurred at firms headed by evangelicals. Bernard Ebbers taught Sunday school while leading WorldCom, and Enron CEO Kenneth Lay was an active member of Houston’s First United Methodist Church.

Towards a Theology of Power

Yet worldly influence is not something to be eschewed entirely by the faithful. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus is ambivalent about the subject of worldly power. From his interactions with Pontius Pilate, we see that he is not overly impressed by it. And yet not once in his teachings does Jesus condemn the secular authorities, despite the goading of his disciples. Perhaps his clearest admonition on the faithful’s response to secular authority comes in Matt. 22:21 when he states, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” Power emerges elsewhere in the New Testament. Romans 13:1 states, “There is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.” Over the centuries, political elites have used this passage to justify everything from the divine right of kings to constitutional republicanism. Various New Testament epistles make mention of “power” or “leadership,” but in almost all contexts, it refers to spiritual authority or qualifications for church office. This does not mean, however, that the Christian tradition has nothing to say about power and public leadership. Two works are worth considering.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* argues that humans are only real in sociality. For him, Christian living

depends upon active interaction with the world around us: “It is in relation to persons and personal community that the concept of God is formed.”²⁶ God’s image is eminently social (as opposed to atomistic), and therefore, Bonhoeffer argues that God’s nature is revealed in extending goodwill toward others and in building relationships with those like and unlike us. Authority and power, according to Bonhoeffer, cannot be divorced from community. Building upon the distinction between Ferdinand Tönnies’s *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, Bonhoeffer writes that “in an *association* of power, there can be no *community*, whereas in one of genuine authority, community is not only present, but for the most part, realized.”²⁷ For him, authority is not something to be shunned from the Christian community; quite the opposite, he argues that sociologists cannot understand authority properly without understanding the glue that unites a community around that authority. He argues that the communion of the faithful provides the ideal context in which such authority can be observed and practiced.

Bonhoeffer is careful, however, not to collapse the communion of saints into the empirical church. The communion of saints is far more ecumenical and “worldly” than the faithful gathered in houses of worship. Because he believes Christian living demands ongoing relationship with the other—which includes not just fellow believers, but all of humanity—Bonhoeffer articulates a theology that demands engagement with society. Indeed, in his formulation, Christ-followers should take the initiative in extending the hand of cooperation with those outside the faith community. Why? Because in so doing, they reflect God’s image and in the process develop brotherly love and orient humanity’s relationship with the ultimate Other, God.

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 22.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 59 (emphasis mine).

Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* is a manifesto for engagement with the world. As he writes elsewhere, "One is denying the revelation of God in Jesus Christ if one tries to be 'Christian' without seeing and recognizing the world in Christ."²⁸ Hence, Bonhoeffer lays the groundwork for a cosmopolitan Christianity, one that is at home in the world of secular power and authority. Bonhoeffer not only legitimates the work of public leadership, but he exhorts all Christians to move beyond their enclaves of Christian fellowship. He urges Christians to create community in ways that transcend the sacred-secular divide that exists between those inside and outside the church. Responding to Bonhoeffer's call for a worldly Christianity is the first step to legitimating greater Christian engagement within the halls of power.

Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* provides further foundation for a theology of power. Like Max Weber, Niebuhr holds a tragic sense of history, running counter to the optimism that characterized American Christianity in the early decades of the twentieth century. In community, Niebuhr argues, individuals can transcend the tendency toward sinfulness and act as "moral man" on occasion whereas supra-individual entities such as companies or nation-states lack the capacity for self-transcendence, thereby constituting "immoral society." Written in 1932, the work decries the divide between rich and poor, between powerful and powerless—issues that captured the attention of many social thinkers, most notably Karl Marx. Yet Niebuhr cannot agree with Marx's utopian vision of a classless society. Instead, Niebuhr advocates for a "Christian realism," one that recognizes the persistence of human failings (sin and self-interest) and the social physics of power relations, but he also holds forth the possibility of social change. Like Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr refuses to narrow his scope to the action of individuals; he seeks to bridge the micro-macro divide by attending to the

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: Collins, 1964), 198.

interplay between the poles of individual agency and structures of society.

The title of the work is a bit of a misnomer, for one of Niebuhr's main points is to stress the folly of assuming that moral individuals can build a moral society. It is practically impossible, says Niebuhr, to disentangle human agency from the agency of collective entities. As a result, he writes against the idea of transferring notions of human sinfulness to political institutions or economic organizations. That is wrong-headed. But at the same time, he disapproves of the naiveté of those Christians—especially proponents of the Social Gospel—who think their activities can lead to the perfection of society's structures. Society exists *sui generis* of the individuals who comprise it. And although Niebuhr believes that people of faith must take responsibility for the world around them, he also admits that their actions can generate unintended consequences, many of which have moral implications. Niebuhr later remarked that a better title for the book would have been "*The Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities*."²⁹

In light of Niebuhr's thought, public leadership demands a degree of liminality, a state of existing in and dealing with the realities of both the sacred and the secular domains. It requires remaining attentive to the various ways we make moral deliberations, informed by our own sense of individual agency and the wider social structures in which we exist.³⁰ Niebuhr advances justice—which can ameliorate social divisions—as the collective ideal. Power then becomes the principal tool by which justice is meted. The moral imperative of those endowed with power is that they must use their influence to adjudicate among the competing claims of different

²⁹ See this reflection cited in Larry L. Rasmussen, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 34.

³⁰ For the most extensive elaboration of liminality, see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969). The idea of liminality was first articulated by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizendorn and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1909).

groups. According to him, it is the ideal of justice—even though often provisional and incomplete—that people of faith must work toward in their roles of public responsibility. At the same time, even well-intended public leaders are susceptible to self-deception, which is why the collective structures of society must provide moral ballast: “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”³¹ Taking seriously the doctrine of original sin, Niebuhr’s realism admonishes men and women in power to exercise charity and prudence (following the legacy of leaders such as Abraham Lincoln). He also favors accountability and checks on human power and acknowledges that sometimes justice requires destructive force.

Integrating these theological ideas with the earlier sociological concepts of cosmopolitanism and *convivencia*, what lessons can we glean about the exercise of power and public responsibility? First, it is not simply good that people of faith bring their religious convictions to bear in their roles of public leadership. It is also right and fitting; in a pluralistic democracy such as the United States, we want leaders who can draw upon the resources and experiences that have been formative influences for shaping their identity. Just as previous generations could not expunge racial or gender influences from the lives of those who led the push for women’s suffrage or the civil rights movement, so also must people of faith be allowed to bring their religious convictions to the public square. And the same is true from the opposite perspective: People of faith need to seek out the perspectives of those of different or no particular faith. Public leadership entails bringing different voices into the public conversation. Indeed, without those voices, the cosmopolitanism we seek for tolerant, enlightened democracy is incomplete. Recognizing the goodness of

³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1944), xi.

the world around us, faithful public leaders must work for the “peace and prosperity” of their neighbors, not just their co-religionists. This regard for the common good resonates with Bonhoeffer’s thinking. One must be in the world in order to be in Christ; in this way, worldly engagement becomes a means to discipleship.

I argue for a cosmopolitan faith, but such faith requires ongoing relationships with others, with those both inside and outside the faith community. According to Bonhoeffer, such communion not only generates love for one another, it also becomes a reflection of divine communion. Invariably, however, conflicts and challenges will arise as human actors and social institutions vie for power. The powerful rarely relinquish their privileges without significant pressure from countervailing forces. Justice then becomes the arbiter for these competing claims, and Niebuhr’s Christian realism advocates for a justice oriented toward Christian love. We now turn to practical steps that might help develop the right kind of public leadership, one where people of faith draw upon their spiritual resources in working for the common good. This, I suggest, is the best way to steward public influence and cultural authority.

Leadership Requires Developing a Voice

Leaders of deep religious conviction must learn how to speak in multiple registers, much as professional singers must master the ability to sing a wide range of notes in what is described as “low,” “middle,” and “high register.”³² Like successful politicians, they have to learn how to speak to diverse audiences, sometimes at the same moment. One strategy is to use *signaling behavior*.³³

³² William Vennard, *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technique*, 5th ed. (New York: Carl Fischer, 1967). For a discussion about range and the theory of multiple registers, see endnote 269 on page 77.

³³ Marshall W. Meyer, “Organizational Structure as Signaling,” *The Pacific Sociological Review* 22 (1979): 481-500. See also Jonathan H. Turner, “The Mechanics of Social Interaction: Toward a Composite Model of Signaling and Interpreting,” *Sociological Theory* 4 (1986): 95-105.

Signaling entails communication to a select audience that is encoded in a message for a broader audience. It depends upon implicit and subtle messages without full disclosure in instances when explicit declaration would be unacceptable. In my study of evangelical public leaders, signaling took place when public figures alluded to the writings of C.S. Lewis or John Stott at gatherings such as Renaissance Weekend. For audience members who did not recognize those names, the references passed them by. But among those who knew Stott and Lewis as prominent figures within evangelicalism, such references signaled that the speaker is likely an evangelical. Also, the message may be subtle, but I found that it is consistently discernable for those sensitive to the signal. Signaling is, however, a crude means of communicating, so the messages can sometimes get mixed. A reference to Charles Colson may indicate evangelical identity, but it can also reflect familiarity with the Nixon administration. Nevertheless, signaling is part of the larger task of impression management that all people undertake in social life.³⁴ And for people of faith in positions of public leadership, I think it is the best way to draw upon their religious repertoires without alienating those outside their religious communities.

So how can leading people of faith learn how to speak in multiple registers, to signal their faith commitments without threatening the *convivencia* that we all desire? First, we need to develop some exemplary parvenus, people of faith who maintain their unique voices while also leading for the common good. There

³⁴ Likening the social world to a performance stage, Erving Goffman suggested that people engage in “front stage” and “back stage” behavior. The premise is that, in social interaction, people put on a “show” for each other, stage-managing the identities that others see. This, in turn, suggests the presence of at least two selves: one publicly available and one enacted in non-public settings. The “props” at both the front stage and back stage direct the individual’s action. Also, the actor is being watched by an audience even as he is a member of that audience. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959) and *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

are a number of networks that could be tapped, including recent alumni of top graduate and professional schools. Within those networks, we should identify people of faith who have cosmopolitan backgrounds. They are the most likely to be comfortable with the ambiguity required of leaders who must maintain a degree of liminality between explicit faith expression and accommodation to diverse public audiences. These leaders then need mentoring and professional development, perhaps provided by faith communities or related organizations. As part of this process, they should learn how to provide public commentary on a select range of contemporary issues—topics of current relevance where their faith perspective could add fresh interpretation.

To take one example, a faithful Catholic who recently graduated from Stanford Business School might be able to offer a unique, faith-informed perspective on the growing inequality in China. By talking about the importance of social enterprise and venture philanthropy, she could comment on how the quality of life is growing in China's coastal metropolises but the life chances of residents in the country's rural interior languish. Commentary on the economic development of China has been dominated by economists and political theorists. At the same time, various faith communities have spoken out about human rights abuses in China, but almost all of these have revolved around issues of religious freedom. With the right coaching, these emerging leaders could draw upon their theological perspectives to help reframe the discussion about events in China by integrating economic and religious concerns. They could then practice their public commentary in venues that are "safe"—that is, before audiences that are generally affirming and outside the media glare. Churches and faith-based conferences could provide ideal contexts for this leadership development. As Hollywood producer Ralph Winter told me, "The church provides a perfect opportunity [for this type of thing] because we're so

forgiving. We'll take anything you put up there, and...pat you on the back, no matter what."³⁵ The challenge will be to develop a voice that appeals to the non-religious world without forfeiting the speaker's religious dialect. Toward this end signaling could be an effective strategy.

Once these emerging leaders have mastered the art of speaking in multiple registers, they will need to pursue strategic opportunities to comment in mainstream media outlets. Fortunately, the growing popularity of blogs and online video websites provides opportunities for parvenus to enter the public conversation relatively cheaply and easily. Producers from network and cable television frequently find new commentators for their programs through web-based outlets. In the end, this exposure will create opportunities for these parvenus, and, one hopes, the public conversation will be different, thanks to their unique voices. The challenge for these emerging leaders, of course, will be for them to maintain their faith-informed dialects and intonation while accommodating themselves somewhat to the prevailing tone of public dialogue. Such conformity is required in order for new entrants to gain a hearing in a crowded and noisy public square. But, giving up their unique, faith-informed perspectives—which may have been shaped in the cultural margins, not the mainstream—would be equivalent to losing one's voice on stage at the very moment the hushed audience has readied themselves.

The Onus and Limits of Power

The faithful must not only wield power with care; they must steward it with generosity. If the resurgence of faith within the corridors of power represents just another triumph of an interest group, then their influence will be wasted and short-lived. However, it is entirely possible that this development could benefit wider society. In order for that to happen, people of faith endowed with institutional authority will have to speak for those whose voices have been silenced—the poor,

³⁵ Interview with Ralph Winter, April 25, 2004 (Glendale, CA).

uneducated, and disabled. Power is put to the noblest use when it serves those who have none themselves.

At the same time, the quest for power seems antithetical to the posture Jesus took in his own context. Perhaps that is because he knew the transitory nature of societal influence—a point Secretary James Baker made when I interviewed him. Baker, who has held more senior leadership positions in government than practically anyone else alive, has served as Secretary of Treasury, Secretary of State, White House Chief of Staff (under two presidents), and has led five presidential campaigns over the last three decades. He related an experience he had one morning while on his way to the White House in the 1980s. In the foggy haze of that winter morning, his car passed a former White House Chief of Staff who was walking along Pennsylvania Avenue. “I instantly recognized him,” Baker said to me, “and then I realized that will be me in a few years. All of the pomp and all of the titles will be gone in just a little while. Soon I’ll be walking along the street, a solitary man alone with his thoughts.”³⁶ Power, no matter how great, is fleeting.

³⁶ Interview with James Baker, November 12, 2004 (Houston, TX).