

# Wilson Carey McWilliams's Conservative Communitarianism

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**W**ilson Carey McWilliams was active in his church, political party, and government—all on the local level. He lived community and lived up to the ideas and ideals he strongly advocated in his writings. The following pages provide very selected, limited, and preliminary notes on the communitarian elements in McWilliams's political theory and social philosophy. This article focuses on balance between autonomy and the common good, the role of community in fostering virtue, the historical and current role of religious values in providing the moral culture of community, and the important fault line between persuasion and coercion.

To proceed, I will draw distinctions between communitarians and other schools of thought—and among communitarians themselves. I will do this not out of a scholastic pursuit of classifications, but because these distinctions help illuminate those parts of McWilliams's work here under review.

## MCWILLIAMS: PRIVILEGING COMMUNITY

Social and public philosophies can be arranged on various dimensions. One such dimension that I find especially productive is the relative place accorded to personal autonomy and the common good. The distinction parallels

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that which runs between individual rights and social responsibilities. Thus, libertarianism falls at one end of the continuum, and various collectivist positions occupy the other extreme. McWilliams's work cannot easily be placed on this continuum for reasons that soon will become clear.

There is a large number of positions on the collectivist side of the continuum, and thus they should be further distinguished. They can be classified according to the scope of responsibilities they seek to foster (narrowly or widely cast) and, above all, according to whether they seek to uphold the responsibilities involved largely with persuasion (including education and informal social controls, as in the case of Japan) or with extensive coercion (as in the case of totalitarian and theocratic regimes). Many fundamentalist positions, for example, often are marked not only by an emphatic prioritization of the common good over autonomy and by a wide range of behaviors they encompass, but also by a willingness to enforce that prioritization with coercion. East Asian communitarians have similar positions. Thus, I refer to them as authoritarian communitarians to distinguish them from democratic or responsive communitarians. Responsive communitarians, as I have spelled out in *The New Golden Rule*,<sup>1</sup> hold that a good, communitarian society is one based on a carefully crafted balance between autonomy and the common good and in which the common good is largely promoted through persuasion rather than coercion. Responsive communitarians<sup>2</sup> presume, further, that societies cannot be designed by drawing on one principle but are doomed to be subject to two or more conflicting ones; thus, they seek ways to reduce the tensions between them. It follows that societies cannot be designed to adhere to either a strong liberal or social conservative position. Rather, they must rely on various combinations of select principles of both—on various combinations of autonomy and the common good.

Rather than emphasizing the need for such a combination, McWilliams's position tilts toward favoring the com-

mon good. In several of his writings, of which the following quotation is typical, he argues that the common good is prior to the individual.

Before there can be fully human beings—and hence, any truly human individual—there must be political societies. Outside these societies, there are no real human beings at all; there are only gods and beasts, and there are not many gods in this world. Hence, the traditional teaching asserted that the common good takes precedence over the good of individuals. It is logical to prefer that good—the common good—which is the precondition of any individuality at all. And the appeal to individual freedom against the claims of the common good is a dangerous sort of nonsense, which threatens personal liberty itself.<sup>3</sup>

The position that the common good is prior to the good of an individual is highlighted in several aspects of McWilliams's work, including his conception of freedom, his admiration of sacrifice, and his preference for small communities. His conception of freedom is unorthodox, given the modern understanding of the term. Contrary to what McWilliams calls the modern or dominant tradition, he argues that liberty is the "condition not in which we seek to 'do as we like,' but in which what I like is conditioned by my recognition of our common existence and destiny."<sup>4</sup> Freedom, like much else in McWilliams's work, is not based on "me and what I want"; it is based on "us and what is good for us." Autonomy, for McWilliams, is secondary to an understanding of the common good.

Along the same lines, McWilliams argues that America, particularly in its third century, needs more than self-seeking individuals; it needs citizens who are willing to sacrifice their lives, their financial property, and some of their private liberties.<sup>5</sup> Sacrifice, for McWilliams, is the ultimate expression of freedom. "Human beings are free only to the extent that they can sacrifice—their illusions, their property, their self-conceit, and, ultimately, their lives."<sup>6</sup> Sacrifice, McWilliams notes, is not man's first instinct. The ability to sacrifice must be nurtured through an education in virtue. This education is meant to "lead human beings out of self-centeredness into a broader sense of self as part of a whole."<sup>7</sup> If the self is focused on the whole rather than contained within its own walls—"in Tocqueville's prison of the self"<sup>8</sup>—it is free and therefore willing to sacrifice.

The primacy of the common good over the individual in McWilliams's thought is further reflected in his preference for small over large communities. "We have to live in a world in which we matter, in which we are known by others and in which we know them, in which people care about us and in which our actions can affect decisions."<sup>9</sup> In a small community, the primacy of the common good is maintained more easily. People can see themselves as parts of a community in which they have an active voice and in which their fellow members care about them. However, McWilliams was fond of reminding us that in the United States, a large community, participation is waning and the president does not know and does not care if you are sick. "You are far less likely to have an electric garbage disposal or a nuclear reactor if you live in Andorra than if you live in the United States, but . . . the small state encourages shared

associations, feelings and memories, lessening the tension between private feelings and the public good."<sup>10</sup> Nurturing commitment to the public good is primary to satisfying an individual's desires.

McWilliams's position, as reflected in his views of freedom, sacrifice, and community size, is clearly short on the modern concept of autonomy and long on the common good. One may argue that, in the context of the 1970s and 1980s America described by Robert Bellah and his associates in *The Habits of the Heart*—an America of excessive individualism that gave rise to a communitarian movement and corrective,<sup>11</sup>—McWilliams was tilting to correct the imbalance by pulling for the collective element. However, as a general theory for society, he leans heavily toward the collectivist side of the communitarian spectrum—or beyond it.

At this point, one might question whether the spectrum we have presented is useful in the context of McWilliams's work. As previously discussed, the spectrum relies on a distinction between autonomy and the common good. One might argue that this distinction presumes that individual autonomy is an independent condition that can be made separate from the common good. But McWilliams holds, alongside Aristotle, that the realization of individuation relies on a flourishing common good. "Man is a social animal," and, as such, there is a firm and inseparable connection between autonomy for the individual man and the common good for society. Given this point of view, it may not make sense to conclude that McWilliams privileges community in favor of autonomy.

As I see it, it is possible to draw a distinction between autonomy and the common good for analytical purposes without denying that there is indeed a deep connection between the two. One can talk about a flower as distinct from the roots of a plant without denying that the two are interrelated and, in fact, dependent on one another. Similarly, we can hold that autonomy and the common good make distinct moral claims, and we can seek to reconcile those claims without a priori privileging one or the other. If autonomy entirely presumed community (and hence treating it as a distinct value would ignore its root in the other value), we would be mistaken to treat the two as distinct values. But just as autonomy cannot flourish without community, community cannot flourish without autonomy.<sup>12</sup> If anything, communities with little autonomy for their members are even more morally troubling than those with excessive autonomy and deficient community. The implication that such a comparative statement would make no sense if autonomy and the common good were inseparable is one that McWilliams surely did not mean to imply.

In effect, autonomy and the common good nurture one another—up to a point. Indeed, there are conditions in which both can be enhanced (for example, if law and order were to be introduced in places such as Baghdad). However, although autonomy and community are symbiotic up to a point, if either is over-enhanced, the other will suffer as a result. At that point, their relationship inverts, and they become antagonistic. For example, the United States has had a period of excessive individualism; Japan, of communality. We can see, therefore, that although autonomy and community are inter-

related as McWilliams argues, they are also capable of being distinguished.

### COMMUNITIES AS SEEDBEDS OF VIRTUE

McWilliams's work reveals a profound understanding of community—the concept at the heart of communitarianism. McWilliams fully understands that one must move beyond the narrow, indeed superficial, definition of community merely based on bonds of affection and recognize that community is also based on core shared values, on a moral culture. Community is not merely a place in which members who greet one another with a “How do you do?” truly care to hear the answer. It is also a social entity that commands an elaborate set of norms, of dos and don'ts, that are enforced through informal social controls. It is not merely a form of social capital but also a place in which values are stocked, drawn down, and resupplied.

Community, it has been argued, is such an ill-defined concept and has so many conflicting definitions that it is best to abandon the term altogether.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that the following definition is in line with our educated intuition and the common usage of the term.

Community has two characteristics: first, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (as opposed to one-on-one or chain-like individual relationship); and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity—in short, a particular culture.<sup>14</sup>

This definition of community opens a major door to the understanding of McWilliams's communitarian position.

McWilliams is fully attentive to the affective element of community as evidenced by his focus on fraternity, which he defines as “a bond based on intense interpersonal affection.”<sup>15</sup> But he was also very much concerned with the content and source of the second key element in the definition of community: moral culture. Much of his writing on this subject, which has been labeled Straussian,<sup>16</sup> is pessimistic if not fatalistic. McWilliams expressed grave doubt about modern society's ability to sustain the moral foundations that a good society requires: “it is possible, of course, that America is doomed,” he wrote in 1984.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on Aristotle, he holds that a good society cannot rest merely on institutions designed to protect private liberty, the way modern democratic theory often implies. Rather, the virtue of the citizen must be actively fostered in strong communities—communities that McWilliams fears are increasingly rare in modern society.

### VALUE ENFORCEMENT: THE NORMATIVE RUBICON

The themes and positions in McWilliams's work highlighted thus far can be readily claimed by communitarians of all kinds and even by some fundamentalists. However, when one turns to the question of how values are enforced, McWilliams's responsive communitarian tendencies come into focus. Critical here is the profound line that divides those who hold that values surface through persuasion and

moral dialogues and those who hold that values must be drummed into us and enforced through coercion. This dividing line is key for an understanding of McWilliams's work, and it places him on the responsive communitarianism side rather than on the authoritarian side of communitarianism. Above all, it distances him from fundamentalism.<sup>18</sup>

McWilliams's view of the Puritans sheds light on how he thinks values ought to develop in communities. He saw in the Puritans a major source of values that lay the foundation for the American community. McWilliams held that the new American community could not have drawn on tradition, shared memories, and history, which had been the major source for communal moral cultures in the Old World. Instead, the new American community grew out of the Puritan precept of covenant, the conception that a moral culture can be based on mutuality of commitments before God and to God rather than on established tradition.

Covenant is not a social or any other kind of contract. Covenant is not consensus driven, nor is it based on the results of reasoned deliberations of free agents. Rather, it reflects commitments to profound values held by the people who join one another in subscribing to it; values that are a constitutive part of their inner nature, which the act of joining merely brings to the surface.<sup>19</sup> In McWilliams's words, “a covenant is based on a perceived likeness of spirit, a common idea of justice, and a deeply felt sense of being one despite the differences of private interest. The good city depends on the psychological willingness and ability to covenant.”<sup>20</sup>

Mac McCorkle and David Price, in a masterful essay,<sup>21</sup> highlight this aspect of McWilliams's work and compare it with that of Michael Sandel, William Galston, and myself. McCorkle and Price stress that I explicitly and repeatedly rejected Puritanism as a source for contemporary values and for responsive communitarianism. However, the Puritanism I rejected (writing in the early 1990s) is one that not only prescribes a very encompassing sets of values that cover most aspects of life and is very ascetic (banning Christmas, for instance); it also legitimates the enforcement of its norms through harsh coercive disciplinary measures, including branding and exile. Women found guilty of immodest dress could be stripped to the waist and whipped. These forms of religious expression would be referred to today as fundamentalism, although this term may not be the most felicitous one. Coercive religion—in contrast to a persuasive one—would be a much more precise term.

McWilliams, however, sees a different aspect of Puritanism. Whereas many of us are troubled by the coercive side of the Puritans, McWilliams sees in them a source of virtues and the moral covenant, as recognition that a good society cannot be based merely on contracts, consensus, and properly designed political institutions. McWilliams makes it clear that people cannot be coerced into the Puritan covenant; it must be entered into freely. Unlike people in the Old World who were born into their locality's standing traditions and moral culture, people in the New World still had the choice to enter into the Puritan covenant and community. They were not chained on the ships that brought them from England. As McCorkle and Price put it,

"the act of becoming a Puritan communitarian in the New World was still a choice."<sup>22</sup> McWilliams argues that this aspect of the Puritan tradition is an excellent example of that to which we should aspire. We should teach people virtue, particularly the virtue of love for the whole and sacrifice for the common good, so that they will choose virtue for themselves. But we should not force virtue on them through coercion.

To the extent that one views Puritanism in this light rather than in light of its coercive elements, it has a central place in communitarianism. The same holds true for McWilliams's emphasis on the importance of forming virtue through education and covenant, not compulsion and punishment. It is here that McWilliams's work is most clearly responsive rather than fundamentalist.

McWilliams presents several methods for nurturing virtue without coercion. First, he emphasizes the importance of family relationships, which, by their nature, teach people that they are indebted to others. McWilliams points out, however, that the family is not entirely sufficient to nurture virtue; political society must do some work too. "As one grows up, the shortcomings of the family become obvious. The family has to love you. . . . A political society, by contrast, depends on relationships which are chosen. Civic loyalties are, in a broad sense, bonds of friendship."<sup>23</sup> He emphasizes the importance of political participation in democracy as a way to promote fraternity and the value of the common good: political participation "exercises . . . the human capacity for love and friendship."<sup>24</sup> McWilliams expressed his profound commitment to participatory democracy in founding the Institute for the Study of Civic Values, which works to increase neighborhood participation in politics as well as raise the bar on civic education. These are all basically persuasive and not coercive measures.

Even McWilliams's treatment of the law is mainly expressive of values and not primarily coercive. Indeed, he sees the law as an important vehicle in nurturing virtue. "The effort to reconcile human with human requires laws which nurture and strengthen the bonds of community and the capacity for love,"<sup>25</sup> writes McWilliams. For example, he favors laws to reform campaign finance to better foster political participation that, in turn, nurtures civic fraternity.

Finally, McWilliams holds that religion—particularly Christianity—has a key role to play, if not the most important one, in educating American citizens in virtue. Central to McWilliams's understanding of Christianity is the doctrine of redemption, which "points toward the reconciliation of human beings with the order of creation—with nature, with their fellow human beings, and with their own finite humanity."<sup>26</sup> This teaching gives people the notion of a higher purpose outside themselves. In McWilliams's eyes, a democracy needs citizens with that sense of higher purpose; it needs citizens who can sacrifice for others. Thus, McWilliams argues that America cannot abandon the religious sentiments that marked its early days. "Americans seem to be losing the ability to speak and think in that language of grace and redemption which has been the counterpoint to liberalism in our national composition. We cannot do without that second voice [of grace and redemption] in our pub-

lic forums."<sup>27</sup> This great reliance on religion parts McWilliams from several other responsive communitarians who do not see religion as the central reliable source of morality (bringing to mind all the evil that was and is done in its name) and hold that there can be secular sources of ethics and of moral renewal. This difference may be the reason McWilliams, despite closeness to responsive communitarianism, did not endorse its platform.<sup>28</sup>

The issue is not to specify to which exact camp McWilliams hails or which can claim his work. In effect, many can and do. The lines that separate the various philosophical approaches help clarify his position. McWilliams's work is strongly normative, never morally neutral. He strongly privileges community, in both the social and moral sense, over autonomy. But he strongly favors nurturing virtues by educational and persuasive means rather than by coercion. And he finds the source of the values to which he is so profoundly committed not in consensus or local culture, but in religion, in God.

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#### NOTES

1. Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
2. For further detail on the responsive communitarian position, see "The Responsive Community Platform: Rights and Responsibilities," Communitarian Network, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/rcplatform.html> (accessed September 29, 2005).
3. Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Values and Politics" (speech given at the Alliance for Citizen Education, June 9, 1979), text available from the Institute for the Study of Civic Values at [http://www.iscv.org/Civic\\_Idealism/McWilliams/ValuesPolitics/valuespolitics.html](http://www.iscv.org/Civic_Idealism/McWilliams/ValuesPolitics/valuespolitics.html) (accessed September 29, 2005).
4. Wilson Carey McWilliams, "The Discipline of Freedom," in *Principles in the Constitution*, ed. Sarah Baumgartner Thurow, 49 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).
5. Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Religion and the American Founding," in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 8, no. 3 (1987): 46–56.
6. Wilson Carey McWilliams, "The Alternative Tradition" (speech given June 25, 1977), available from the Institute for the Study of Civic Values at [http://www.iscv.org/Civic\\_Idealism/McWilliams/AlternateTrad/alternatetrad.html](http://www.iscv.org/Civic_Idealism/McWilliams/AlternateTrad/alternatetrad.html) (accessed September 29, 2005).
7. McWilliams, "Religion and the American Founding," 47.
8. McWilliams, "The Bible in the American Political Tradition," in *Religion and Politics*, ed. Myron J. Aronoff, 11 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1984).
9. McWilliams, "Values and Politics."
10. McWilliams, "Justice: Ancient and Modern" (speech given in 1980), text available from the Institute for the Study of Civic Values at [http://www.iscv.org/Civic\\_Idealism/McWilliams/ValuesPolitics/valuespolitics.html](http://www.iscv.org/Civic_Idealism/McWilliams/ValuesPolitics/valuespolitics.html) (accessed September 29, 2005).
11. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985). For more discussion of the new communitarian movement, see Amitai Etzioni, *My Brother's Keeper* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 2003).
12. I refer to true communities, not to gangs, the Taliban, or the folk-Gemeinschaft that the Nazis promoted.
13. For more discussion on this point, see Robert Booth Fowler, *The Dance with Community: The Contemporary Debate in American Political Thought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991) and Elizabeth Frazier and Nicola Lacey, *The Politics of Community: A Feminist Critique of the Liberal-Communitarian Debate* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

14. Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule*, 127.
15. McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 7.
16. Michael Zuckert, "Pride and Political Philosophy," *Human Events* 1, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 17. For McWilliams's own thoughts on Strauss, see McWilliams, "Leo Strauss and the Dignity of American Political Thought," *Review of Politics* 60, no. 2 (Spring 1998).
17. McWilliams, "The Bible in the American Political Tradition," 37.
18. It is possible that this dividing line also helps distinguish communitarians and social conservatives. For a debate on this issue, see Amitai Etzioni and Robert P. George, "Virtue and the State: A Dialogue between a Communitarian and a Social Conservative," in *The Communitarian Reader* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).
19. For more discussion of the ideological positions involved, see Don Browning's forthcoming book to be published by Rowman and Littlefield under the tentative title *Universalism versus Relativism: Making Moral Judgments in a Changing, Pluralistic, and Threatening World*.
20. McWilliams, "The Bible in the American Political Tradition," 17.
21. Mac McCorkle and David E. Price, "Wilson Carey McWilliams and Communitarianism," in *Friends and Citizens*, ed. Peter Dennis Bathory and Nancy L. Schwartz, 234–71 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).
22. *Ibid.*, 249.
23. McWilliams, "Values and Politics."
24. McWilliams, "Religion and the American Founding," 48.
25. *Ibid.*, 47.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 56.
28. The text and the list of endorsers of "The Responsive Community Platform: Rights and Responsibilities," Communitarian Network, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/rcplatform.html> (accessed September 29, 2005).