

## Article

# Restoring Community and Covenant in the 21st Century: The History and Potential Revival of Coventism in the Era of the ‘Global Village’

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**Abstract:** This article offers a rationale for research and engagement on conceptions of ‘community’ in the twenty-first century in the context of changing conceptions of relationality through the impact of secularisation, social media, and online gaming. It highlights the growing concerns and healthcare outcomes of isolation in the context of shifting perceptions of ‘community’ as the basis for a re-examination of the value of ‘covenant’ as ‘communities of purpose’ in our interdependent world. In so doing, it proposes that covenant communities offer a route through which fundamental relationalities which engender belonging, security, and personal value can be restored at local, national or even trans-national levels.

**Keywords:** community; covenant; isolation; relationality



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## 1. Introduction

Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as technology has expanded the human capacity to communicate and interact over vast distances, almost instantly conceptions of ‘community’ have been fundamentally changed. ‘Community,’ once the preserve of localised relationships, has evolved with this technology and infrastructure to now include conceptions of the term in which the members never meet one another physically, yet come together in a virtual world. This reconceptualising of ‘communities’ has come at a time when, in the famous term coined by Marshall McLuhan, the world is fast becoming a “global village” with the post-Cold War development of ‘globalisation’ (McLuhan and Powers 1992).

The trade and economic migration made possible with this ‘globalised’ world has had profound cultural impacts in every sphere of life in the Minority World of advanced industrialised liberal democracies to the extent that the idea that one might grow up, live and grow old in the same place has now become almost anathema. Dislocation from one’s roots therefore has become normative, even expected, particularly for urban elites on both sides of the Atlantic (McLuhan and Powers 1992). Economic and commercial motivations continue to be cited as the major drivers of the flow of migration around the world. Data from the United Nations and other respected migration observers show that the flows of migrants are having unprecedented impacts on cultures around the world (Bhugra and Becker 2005; Eisenbruch 1990; Rapoport et al. 2020).

For these reasons, the question of relationality, including the concept of ‘community’ has become a major policy issue for governments in the Minority World. Individuals and organisations in pluralist, diverse societies that constitute much of the Minority World (with the exception of nations such as Japan) are posing questions to policy makers about what citizenship and belonging mean in a day and age in which little manifested commonality, even within national boundaries, is readily apparent. As a consequence, the question of

common values has come to the forefront, which, in turn, has prompted thinking about ‘communities of purpose’ to be explored once again.

This article seeks to explore how ‘community’ is understood in the Minority World, to provide a brief tracing of the problems besetting the prevailing contemporary sense of community, and to examine tentatively how the concept of covenant might be redeployed in contemporary life. Although what can be achieved in this piece is modest, the topics explored are of considerable importance for the flourishing of individuals and communities in the Minority World.

To these ends, we first discuss the condition of ‘community’ in the 21st century. We then highlight the problems associated with the contemporary concept of community, focusing on how the contemporary understanding of community frustrates persisting human aspirations and also generates unwelcome physical and psychological strain. We next trace historically the core elements of covenant, looking at points in the evolution of the meaning of covenant in the Minority World. In this section, we draw on the work of Stephen Strehle by focusing on key “deconstructions”, or reinterpretations, over time of the concept of covenant that occurred in the Minority World (Strehle 2009; Etzioni 2014). Specifically, we chart five deconstructions of the covenant concept. These deconstructions form what we call a covenantal dialectic, or an absolutizing of the free choice inherent in a covenantal relationship. This process has fed the conceptualisation of ‘community’ as a mere contractual grouping of freely choosing individuals. This series of deconstructions of covenant, therefore, has contributed to the “dissociative” (Bessant 2018, pp. 3–7) nature of contemporary social life and has thus abetted the sense of dislocation and lack of connectivity that increasingly defines contemporary ‘community’, along with the frustrations and pains attendant on this understanding of social life. We next rally a charge to reinvigorate covenant in contemporary life. We first attend to the need of arresting the covenantal dialectic, and then develop recommendations for what we call covenantal means to achieve the goal of renewed covenantal communities.

We conclude by rejecting the argument that a revival of covenantal communities amidst the wide diversity of contemporary values would endorse relativism, arguing, instead, that the reflourishing of covenantism would be a friend of genuine missionary conversation across communities in pursuit of the true human good, a conclusion we derive in large measure from Hannah Arendt’s indictment of the epistemic and spiritual consequences of chronic dislocation and loneliness.

## 2. Definitions of Community over Time in the Minority World: A Brief Sketch

In *Defining Community in Early Modern Europe*, Michael Halvorson and Karen Spierling cite Peter Burke’s proposition that ‘community’ is both an indispensable term for understanding human relationality, but at the same time a highly problematical one (Halvorson and Spierling 2008, p. 1, citing Burke 2004, p. 5).

To help address this slippery concept, we can look to the work of Kenneth Bessant. In his 2018 book *The Relational Fabric of Community*, Bessant traces the evolution of narratives about ‘community’. In ancient Greek times, community entailed “intimate social relationships” and connoted a “lifeworld” of intimate, direct social ties and belongings. Richard Tyler argues that this conception of community remained largely the same until the Renaissance and Reformation period, during which wider understandings of common good and shared identity began to emerge (Tyler 2006). In the modern age, a conception of community developed that was broader than the earlier understanding of intimate relationships but somewhat more compact than what became prevalent in the Renaissance and Reformation periods. Specifically, Tyler argues that it was only in the modern era that the understanding of community connected to a geographic locale became the norm. Talcott Parsons nuanced this by positing that community is conceptualised in the modern era as a set of ‘collectives’ within a territory who might be associated through occupation or family.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the claim that geographical compactness arose in the Modern era as a key constituent of community was underpinned with the detailed study by George

Hillery, who compared concepts of community across a range of cultural situations to come to a broad modern definition of ‘community’ as constituting in

“territory or place, shared social ties, and localized interaction. ...[constituting a] geospatial locale in which people meet their everyday needs, engage in sustained interaction, and act together in relation to common interests, concerns, or problems”. (Bessant 2018, p. 4, citing Hillery 1955. See also Wilkinson 1991)

In his seminal study on changing perceptions of ‘community’ published in the late 1970s, Ronald Warren observed the fraying of such largely homogenous, geographically circumscribed communities, a shift he labelled “the great change” (Warren 1978, p. 53). Bennett Berger’s *Disenchanted the Concept of Community* concurred with Warren, arguing that developments in the post-World War II period brought about a visible decline in close-knit, geographically bound community relations and their growing replacement with individual involvements in “diverse collectives” (Berger 1988, p. 51). That is, in contemporary society, ‘community’ has increasingly come to be seen as constituted by a diverse subset of affinity groups with whom individuals freely contact to form relationships, and which are often formed over vast physical distances.

This trend toward defining ‘community’ in reference to diverse subunits was accelerated with the work of postmodernists, for whom diversity and difference have been highlighted over continuity. Indeed, in light of the emergence of considerable diversity within previously homogenous societies, scholars such as A.P. Cohen have moved to redefine community itself so that it denotes only a loose association with only some very limited sets of shared values and beliefs (Cohen 2002; See also Blumer 1969; Bender 1978; Calhoun 1980). At the same time, the reduction in the ‘geographic’ or ‘territorial’ elements of ‘community’ in the internet era has led recent scholars of community, such as Robert Chaskin (2008) and Flora and Flora (2008), to develop definitions of community in which geographic dislocation is no obstacle to the realisation of the term. All the while, the individual is seen as freely choosing their affinity groups amidst a farrago of diverse options.

The resulting definition of community that seems to prevail in the contemporary Minority World is a sense of the term that allows within ‘community’ tremendous internal diversity of views and values but which, when some measure of commonality is deemed to be present, is geographically dislocated, and which emphasises the choice of affinity groups among a wide, even dizzying variety.

### 3. Contemporary Community: A Critique and Proposal for the Future

Is this contemporary conception of community—with its disjoint focus on tremendous internal diversity of values, and, when some measure of commonality is present, accepts geographic dislocation, while emphasising throughout the power of individual choice—a conception conducive to human flourishing?

It is our position that such a conception of community ill serves the human good, and for two major reasons.

First, it leaves human aspirations unfulfilled. As Zygmunt Bauman observed some two decades ago, the narrative of the destruction of ‘community’ does not completely reflect current reality. Rather, he argues that the aspiration for deeper association, belonging and relationships remains and that, if anything, the trends that we have identified have caused a renewed search for these relational connections, even in the context of the ‘atomisation and hyper-individualisation that are so seemingly pervasive’ (Bauman 2001). For, despite the development of what has been dubbed the ‘Global Middle Class’,<sup>2</sup> local shared interests, concerns and perspectives continue to play a vital ongoing role. These local interests, concerns and perspectives of people might include religious worship, welfare projects such as a food bank or litter picking as well as more socially orientated functions such as hobbies and sports—this, despite of, or ‘perhaps, independent of, the widespread use of social media and online gaming creating virtual groups thought to be ‘communities’. Yet this desire for deeper community is increasingly unmet in the fractured societies of the contemporary Minority World.

Second, the prevailing contemporary conception of ‘community’ is having material impacts on citizens. On the face of it, the ‘Community Life Survey’ of 2021/22, which was commissioned by the British government’s Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, offers good news with only a small percentage (6%) of adults in Britain reporting feeling lonely often or always. Yet, the percentage of feeling lonely often or always was highest amongst young people (16–24-year-olds), of whom 13% reported high levels of loneliness. (Skinner 2021) This data strongly suggest that isolation will increase going forward, rather than decrease. Furthermore, if the percentage of feeling lonely ‘some of the time’ was also taken into account (19%), then it means that one quarter of the English population is reporting high levels of loneliness (25%) (Office for National Statistics 2022).

On the other side of the Atlantic, data from Harvard University’s ‘Making Caring Common Project’ found that 61% of the population reports feelings of loneliness, and a further 21% report having no close friends. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these trends were magnified: 36% of Americans, for example, reported increased feelings of loneliness (Weissbourd et al. 2021). Whilst in the European Union, similar findings have been reported (Baarck et al. 2021).

It is not just in feelings that the effects of isolation are found in society. An article published by the group No Isolation in 2021 highlighted the fact that isolation increases the chances of heart disease by 29% and stroke by 32% (Anon 2021). Vivek Murthy, former Surgeon General of the United States, notes that “loneliness and weak social connections are associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day” (Murthy 2020, p. 37). Lack of human connection is therefore not simply a problem of ‘feeling’, it is a problem for society and the health of the individuals within it.

In response, we maintain that there needs to be a movement towards a more ‘covenantal’ understanding of community: what is needed is the rediscovery of the idea of ‘communities of purpose’, rather than simply diverse communities of contractual association. In this proposal, we join a number of social thinkers, including Thomas Kuhn.<sup>3</sup> Kuhn has been particularly energetic in proposing ‘covenant’ as a route for social restoration in the Minority World (Kuhn 1970).

To the end of restoring covenant in contemporary life, we must first say more about what covenant is and what it has become in the Minority World. In tracing this history, we shall see that covenant has actually enabled the dislocative, diversity-infused and contractualised conception of contemporary ‘community’.

#### 4. Covenant: A Short Survey of Its Meaning and History

“...the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I made a covenant with you and with Israel’”. (Exodus 34 v27)

So records the book of Exodus following the Israelite escape from Egypt and Moses’ time with Yahweh at Mount Sinai. Over the course of the previous fourteen chapters of Exodus, God had laid out how the relationship between Himself and His people was going to be framed as well as how they should relate to each other (including non-Israelites) as part of that relationship.

It is probably the best-known example of covenant in Israelite history, but it was not the first example of covenant recorded even in the Bible. Daniel Elazar, the noted American political scientist, argues that Ancient Israel appears to be the origin-point of the concept of covenant governance models, although there are some parallels also in ancient Hittite and Amorite treaties (Elazar 1980). He goes on to note that covenants always took the same broad form: they began with a prologue that named the parties involved and then moved to a preamble in which the purposes of the covenant were laid out that also included the principles that were to govern it. It then moved into the body of legal agreement in which the conditions and clauses were laid out. Finally, there was an oath, which made the covenant morally binding and which also included the actions to be taken if the terms were violated (Elazar 1980). In the Bible, the relationship between the Jewish people and God made the Jewish people *bnei Brith*—Sons of the Covenant—and established that Yahweh

chose to enter into this relationship in order to create a ‘witness community’. This in turn influenced the course of Israelite politics (ibid.).

The destruction of the final iteration of the Jewish state by the occupying Roman legions following the Jewish rebellion of 66–73 CE, and the subsequent dispersal of the Jewish people, appears to have resulted in a steep decline in covenant thinking in politics for nearly 1000 years. It was in the time of the Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian settlements, when the growth of the Christian faith on the continent had reached such a point that some form of government to reflect the changed nature of the religious culture emerged, that covenantalism was explored as a basis for societal organisation in the face of common threats from its eastern and western borders (Holland 2008, 2019). This ‘Christianisation’ included changing the dating system as well as the construction of the relationship between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. The agreement reached between the Papacy and the Carolingians that resulted in the Papal coronation of Pepin and his successors became, at least theoretically, the anchor that would prevent the ship of Europe from being swayed by the currents swirling within and without the continent. The Pope legitimised the rule of Pepin, Charlemagne and their successors, in return for the ‘sword’ of their defence of the Papal territory. Charlemagne’s dazzling series of conquests and victories that marked out the boundaries of the vast Carolingian, then the Holy Roman Empire for centuries to come, cast him as the new King David. This image of Frankish rulers as King David specifically appears to have been quite common and showed the continued consciousness of the connection between Israel, God’s chosen people and the nescient Christian Frankish Empire being set up in Europe (Wright 1991; Evans 2018).

Consciousness of ‘covenant’ still surfaced at differing points in late-Dark Age and Medieval Europe, notably in the treaty that created a united England: the Treaty of Wedstone (879) between King Alfred (the Great) of the Anglo-Saxons and the Viking King Guthrum, which was reconfirmed in the ‘Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum’ of 886 (Adams 2017). What is more, the Anglo-Saxon word ‘Wed’, from which the English word ‘Wedding’ comes was also the word they used to mean covenant or contract: a term that is also used in the treaties to describe the nature of the relationship between them. For the baptism of Guthrum and his adoption by Alfred raised the relationship above the simple contract of peace between erstwhile enemies towards a deeper relationship. Indeed, it was Alfred again who used the book of Exodus as a basis for the unified book of English law called the *Domboc*, which became the basis for English Common Law (Preston 2012). This consciousness of Anglo-Saxon England as the new Israel was not just present in the law; the Old English poem *Exodus* expressed the concept in the literature, for the Israelite Patriarchs are remembered as if they were Anglo-Saxon forbears.<sup>4</sup>

Between the Anglo-Saxon expression of covenant and its ‘flowering’ during the 16th and 17th centuries, there had been explorations of covenant applications in politics that had seemingly spontaneously appeared in four areas of Switzerland in the 13th century (Berne, Zurich, Basel and Geneva). Daniel Elazar suggests that

“the Swiss invented, or reinvented federalism in Europe and, indeed, represented the greatest expression of federalism in the world between the time of the Israelite tribal federation and the establishment of the United States of America”. (Elazar 1993)

But why the Swiss? Elazar explains that this was due to the fact that the Helvetian peoples who populated Switzerland as a Celtic (Alemanni) people were pre-disposed to covenant thinking. In Elazar’s words, “The Franks brought Christianity and the Alemanni brought freedom” (ibid.). The key to the parallels with ancient Israelite covenant was the development of the concept of the *heimat*: an original home to which any citizen could return that mirrored the system of tribal and familial allotments set up in the Old Testament. The key principle for the Swiss (as it had been in ancient Israel) was that ‘liberty’ was to be found in community, rather than the individual.

‘Communal democracy’ as found in Switzerland understood that communities were natural and that the satisfaction of the community and that of the individual were indistin-



guishable from one another. They, in turn, were seen as the central pillars of a healthy state. In that context, there is an emphasis on consensus, but also that competition within that is appropriate, even to be encouraged. Those communities were based upon shared norms and history and ultimately, a shared fate.

Aside from this Swiss experiment enclosed in the mountains of the Alps and largely removed from the wars that raged over the continent throughout the period, covenant was largely ignored in the Medieval European political system in which freedom for his subjects was the 'gift' of the monarch (Wickham 2017). However, for the Jews of Europe, covenant remained an important element of their community constitution in their minority situation throughout the period (Hueglin 1979).

Covenant really began to be thought about seriously among Christians with the revival in interest in Jewish studies that accompanied the deadly contest between Protestants and Catholics in the 16th and 17th centuries. Both sides, in order to evidence the validity of their perspectives, began to burrow back into primary scriptural texts and examine nature itself in a frenzy of enquiry that fuelled not just the theological contest but also the wider scientific method.

Moreover, one especially energetic Protestant re-engagement with primary sources emerged not from tensions between Protestants and Catholics but from debates within the burgeoning Protestant movements. In Switzerland—interestingly, as we saw a place where covenantal thinking had already been developed as a political concept—Ulrich Zwingli utilised the concept of covenant to support the continued practice of infant baptism. As Strehle has documented, by the end of the 16th century, covenant was central in the Reformed Protestant mindset across Europe. Strehle shows how the concept of covenant, once it began to enjoy considerable influence in the 16th century and beyond, expanded and altered through a process of “deconstructions”, or reinterpretations. We shall first adumbrate these deconstructions and then say a few words on what this process suggests about the concept of covenant and any tendency inherent within disclosed using this history.

By the middle of the 16th century, the resurgent idea of covenant was thoroughly theological, and only minimally bilateral: God freely extended to a group the surety of blessing on condition that the individuals in the group express faith, and then perform specific actions, but actions performed not under obligation, but only out of gratitude. Zwingli is a primary exponent of such an idea. Yet equally important for Zwingli is the idea that the terms extended by God participate in the economy of divine predestination, and the gratitude God calls for is conceived of as emerging from the divine grace that empowers personal faith (Strehle 2009, p. 24).

However, for other thinkers a second conception of covenant emerged, one which grew to become more broadly agreed upon: God freely extends to a group of individuals His surety of blessing, on condition that the individuals in the group respond to God through faith but also through their own interactions among themselves, interactions undertaken beneath God's watchful eye and providential care. An early exponent of this idea, Heinrich Bullinger, “recast[s] the covenant into a relationship of mutual responsibility between God and the people, contingent upon the faithfulness of both parties to fulfil their respective roles” (ibid.). Or, as another early Protestant exponent of the idea maintained, “the fulfilment of the covenant depends upon the faithfulness of the people in meeting ‘condiciones’ of the divine law and living under its stipulations” (Strehle 2009, quoting Robert Browne, p. 4).

This more bilaterally defined concept of covenant often entailed significant political reforms, for there was no clear separation of church and state for most at this time, so what affected church was bound to affect the state. In his book, *The Hebrew Republic*, Eric Nelson, the Robert M. Beren Professor of Government at Harvard University, argues that the 17th century saw political philosophers using the Bible and its conception of covenant as a source text to argue for land reform and republicanism. The Ancient Israelite kingdom became

not just a source for religious doctrine but also became a teaching tool and a blueprint for conceptualising a new form of government (Nelson 2011; Reardon 1995).

One new conceptualisation of government based on such a deconstruction of covenant can be seen in the thought of Johannes Althusius. Althusius was born in Diedenshausen, Wittgenstein-Berleberg in 1557, 2 years after the Peace of Augsburg granted the freedom to each German prince to choose what was to be the official religion of his state. Althusius seemed set for an academic life, studying in Switzerland before taking up a Professorship at the University of Nassau in the Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany. Yet, as he received his Doctorate and began his teaching life, the Peace of Augsburg had been shattered with the Cologne War (1583–1588), which raged across western Germany as a result of the conversion of the Prince-Elector of Cologne (Gebhard Truchsess von Waldburg) to Protestantism in 1582 (ibid.). Consequently, Althusius was highly conscious of the need for order that included a place for religion, but not subject to the whirlwind that could result from a change of faith by one dynastic ruler. To this extent, Althusius shared in the second deconstruction of covenant, which involved broadening its bilateral character and in a way that included political reconstruction. Specifically, he saw in covenant a solution to the potential whirlwind of change from one ruler of one faith to a ruler of another, and back and forth. His response was encapsulated in his third book, *Politica Methodice Digesta*, originally published in 1603, but eventually published in its final form in 1614. In his view, the model for good governance should be based around Ancient Israel because it provided not just a settled form of government based around a shared relationship with their God, but also because it encouraged a concept of governance that was not simply about order, but about aspiration for shared societal goals. Covenant was the ideal form of government not just because it was aspirational, but because it was also federal and republican: removing the concept of kingly headship and replacing it with representative, locally driven, community-focused governance. It was driven by the connection between his historical analysis of the nature of the Ancient Israelite state and the Latin translation of covenant as *feodus*, meaning ‘federal’ (Hammersley 2019).<sup>5</sup>

A third deconstruction of covenant went beyond both church and state and involved core elements of society itself (Kendall 1979; Torrance 1970, 1994). As Strehle records, covenant, especially but not exclusively in the Reformed tradition, both in Europe and in the American colonies, became a means “of interpreting...all of life” (Strehle 1988, p. xiv). Indeed, covenant began to be “applied to relations outside the church and begins to transform all of life in its image” (Strehle 1997, p. 4). In fact, at the heart of a thinker whom we have previously addressed, Althusius, was a system of thought that held that ‘association’ should be at the core of societal order and communication.<sup>6</sup> This Althusius termed ‘sympiotics’, which he understood as the science and art of association. In the covenantal model of Ancient Israel, Althusius found what were, for him, the key elements of sympiotics: family and political rule based on consent. These were the essential units of a healthy commonwealth, and valuable in and of themselves. The Puritans began to apply this idea of a familial covenant to the law of divorce. As Strehle relates, “Puritans began to deconstruct the marital bonds in terms of covenant” (Strehle 1988, p. 26). Arguably the greatest exponent of this expansion of covenant was John Milton, the famous poet who was reared in a devout Puritan home. For this Puritan-bred man of genius, “marriage is a mutual covenant based upon love and peace, and if these conditions are not present, it becomes the duty to end it”—this notwithstanding the Saviour’s statements in Mark 10:9!<sup>7</sup> As Strehle notes, “this application [of covenant] provides testimony to the power of the doctrine as it is applied to a subject outside its original setting and changes customary ways of addressing that subject” (Strehle 1997, p. 26).

A fourth deconstruction can be found in the decoupling of covenant as a bilateral agreement, either politically or more invasively as a social paradigm, from the superintendence of God as a key element of the covenant—a partial or, for others, complete secularisation of covenant thinking. We see this in the later periods of the Enlightenment and in subsequent developments in the 19th century. A number of prominent leaders in

the American founding, such as John Adams, “largely ignored religious influence” in the construction of the best systems of government. In his work *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States*, Adams maintained that “the American way of government resulted from the hard work of reason and consultation with scientific writers in the field and not ‘interviews with the gods’ or the ‘inspiration of heaven’.” (Strehle 2009, pp. 64–65, 80). In the 19th century, Abraham Lincoln would use covenantal language to describe the relationship that had been established between the original thirteen colonies of the United States when they came together in the Declaration of Independence, and religion would play only a minimal role in this description (Elazar 1980). Gods become inessential to the construction of political covenants. Nevertheless, the fundamental values that were covenanted to were still largely seen as fixed moral principles. By a large number of the thinkers at the time, they were deemed principles inherent in the natural law of the world’s creator.

A fifth deconstruction has been occurring since at least the late 19th century. The concept of ‘communities of purpose’ with a moral core has come to be abandoned by many, and covenant has tended to be replaced with a more contractual understanding of the citizen, rather than any understanding of community ties based upon enduring moral values that subsist beyond individual choice. As Mark Gismondi (2000) notes in his PhD thesis, in this way, the spiritual element of covenant has in many areas of the Minority World effectively perished. In a way, Max Weber’s thesis seems correct in the main: our secularised, contractualised society *was* to a large degree the outworking of Protestant doctrine and practice.<sup>8</sup>

What can we say of this series of reinterpretations of the covenantal idea? This series of deconstructions exhibits a kind of logic that Kant called ‘dialectic’. Reason within the framework of Kantian thought is dialectical in the sense that it has what can be called a totalising disposition. He is ineluctably driven to define and seek what is systematic, total and complete. Kant states this conviction with precision in the *Critique of Judgment*: “The unconditioned is the ultimate goal at which reason aims.”<sup>9</sup> It seems accurate to say that a totalisation of the reciprocal free choice inherent in the concept of covenant occurred through these deconstructions, to such an extent that, for many, individual contractual choice came to be the centrepiece of social and political life.

This dialectical declension has resulted in conditions that support the disconnection that we have indicated is facilitating negative health and social outcomes. And, indeed, as we also noted, covenant is being explored once again in the academic sphere and public square by such thinkers as Thomas Kuhn as the realisation continues to grow that contractual relationships in citizenship can be divisive and ill-conducive to flourishing, especially in relation to the basis of a society’s ethics and the pluralist societies of the North Atlantic. Yet the question becomes, what way forward is there for covenantal thinking in the 21st century?

## 5. The Outlines of a Way to Covenant Restoration

We have noted that there are significant problems of relationality in Minority World societies at present, which are manifesting in the data on loneliness and the growing realisation of the limits of contractualised social relationships. The argument of this article is that an exploration of covenant and the deeper concept of ‘communities of purpose’, rather than simply communities of contractual association, represents a pathway back towards the reinvigoration of contemporary community life.

It is important to note that the deconstructions of covenant that have occurred and that we surveyed in Section 3 allow for a wider berth to the re-emergence of communities based on covenant: the historical secularisation of the concept of covenant shows that space exists for its emergence among communities that may no longer be knit together with any conception of shared religiosity.

Although a God may not be necessary to form a covenant, we maintain that the transcendentality of the shared values seems to be indispensable. The history we canvassed



about the various deconstructions that occurred to covenant suggests that the concept itself is prone to reduce to contractualism over time. That is, unless special attention is given to avoiding just this fate. Indeed, we maintain that covenantal renewal requires awareness of this tendency toward decline inherent within covenant and careful attention to the problem. The values to which a community is covenantally connected cannot be seen as entirely the product only of a group agreement, but must be seen as transcendental values beyond human construction around which the community forms its agreement, lest the concept of social values as the products of mere human agreement quickly erode the values themselves and reduce the 'community' to a bare contractual horde unbound by sustained moral values at all. An indispensable element of arresting a quick contractualisation of covenant, therefore, is a shared transcendental conception of the unifying values. They must be maintained as "spiritual", to use Gismondi's term.

To be sure, the fact that covenantal communities in the past had spiritually grounded transcendental values yet still eroded into contractualised 'communities' suggests that a careful, self-conscious attention to the preservation of the transcendental nature of the values does not guarantee the maintenance of such shared values in perpetuity. But all that follows from this recognition is that the erosion might, to some degree, be unavoidable. It does not mean that erosion cannot be delayed—perhaps for considerable periods of time.

Beyond the recognition of the precarity of covenantal communities and the acknowledgment of the need for a special solicitude about their preservation, to develop a practical proposal for covenant renewal requires that we must acknowledge a number of other challenges. First, as we acknowledged at the beginning, 'community' itself has had difficulties of definition. Yet, whilst there are differences of opinion amongst scholars about what constitutes a community, there can be little doubt that some form of human relationality must be at the core of any definition. In our current day and age, associative relationships such as clubs and societies are often described as 'community', and commercial ventures frequently describe themselves as 'family'. There appears, therefore, to be a dissonance between the relationships that have traditionally been characterised as 'community' and a blurring of the typologies of association that have also characterised themselves as 'communities'. Perhaps, therefore, one of the key problems to be addressed around 'community' arises from the lack of clarity around the term itself, which, in and of itself, muddies the waters and in the process indirectly lowers the aspiration for meaningful relationships, which are inculcated within the traditional conceptions of the term. Seeking to clarify once more what 'communities,' as distinct from contractual associations, are is therefore an important strand of research, which would help to provide a foundational basis from which to begin to build back relationality and purpose in 'community'.

Within this overarching context, therefore, it is necessary to understand properly what can be understood with a number of terms and expectations, which perhaps have increasingly lost their value: What is the nature of deep, quality, human relationships? How is trust and accountability in human relationships to be sustained? Moreover, there remains, of course, the issue of defining and agreeing on the substantive moral and social values that can be foundational for a covenantal community that sees itself as knitted together for the realisation of those values in associational life.

How can we best explore, with the goal of restoring covenant communities, these questions about the nature of human relationships and whether there exists shared transcendently sourced values? Any such approach should avoid a top-down 'Functionalist' methodology. Instead, the research needed can be characterised itself as, in a sense, covenantal. That is, we maintain that the search for answers to these questions must arise from common agreement among individuals who 'covenant' to form a collective of inquirers seeking to discover common ground on these issues wherever they may exist. Technology—the very force that has resulted in an erosion of community historically understood—can aid in this process. In this way, covenant communities could emerge from the identification and subsequent gradual sorting of individuals who share over-riding conceptions of what

constitutes community itself, as well as high degrees of similarity of substantive moral values.

To be sure, any such approach must be rooted in reality: it must be shaped using the moral observations derived from past human practice. Sorting is a complex affair that must be performed with the utmost prudence, taking into consideration the myriad factors that make voluntary sorting difficult (economic, familial, etc.). And it must never be compulsory, since such is intrinsically offensive to human rights and dignity and something history discloses as a road to ruin (one can think of the partition of India, were examples ever needed).

## 6. Relativism?

A last concern we should consider is the thought that coventism as we have outlined its revival in contemporary life would endorse values of relativism. We sketched a plan involving individual sorting based on agreed values. Such might be thought to promote and endorse the concept that no universal values exist, but that all values are instead relative to associational communities.<sup>10</sup>

In response, we should note that there is no necessary connection between coventism and the *eventual* agreement among covenanted communities on the values around which each is centred. Communities, after all, can be distinct in terms of local features yet still each hold to a common set of basic moral values.

Moreover, the eventual emergence of such a commonality of basic values amidst distinct communities is, we maintain, more likely to develop, given contemporary circumstances in the Minority World, if a deeper conception of community was to surface. For what allows commonality of values to emerge among those in deeply rooted communities? One large part of that answer is rational conversation across communities over the truth of basic human values. Yet the very non-covenantal communities that have arisen in the contemporary Minority World are, as we saw, scarred by loneliness and social isolation. And isolation and loneliness are no friends of rational dialogue, a point astutely developed by the noted political theorist Hannah Arendt.

In her important work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt reflects on the epistemic consequences of loneliness. She argues, cogently we believe, that loneliness is “contrary to the basic requirements of the human condition” (Arendt 1951, p. 41). One way in which this is true is the manner in which loneliness corrupts human rationality. As an Arendt scholar, Christian Sheppard eloquently summarises this Arendtian point: “Loneliness distempers desire, saps will, and confounds reason. You hopelessly yearn. Your spirit is low; you fill with inertia. You think yourself misunderstood and begin to doubt yourself” (Sheppard 2022, p. 86). As such, loneliness is not just psychologically painful, it is “an intellectual experience, a problem not only of feeling, but also, of thinking”. For Arendt, the lonely individual becomes prone to befuddlement and to temptations toward grand irrational fairy tales. Whether this is always the exact tenor taken by the lonesome, it nevertheless appears clear that chronic isolation and loneliness are no supports for the epistemic virtues necessary for rational dialogue over basic human values.

It is therefore actually in covenanted communities, despite what is likely to be initially considerable diversity of values, that the best hope arises in the Minority World for arresting the spread of relativism.

## 7. Conclusions

In sum, we need a restoration of a fuller and more meaningful conception of community in contemporary life. But, it is only if a revitalisation of community is itself community-based through collectives of inquiry that a new coventism could reach its true potential: covenantal means are needed to secure a renewal of covenantal communities. Such an object need not be dismissed as relativism but should instead be seen as aiding the fulfilment of universal features of human flourishing, and, in the process, making rational moral suasion across communities more likely to bear fruit.

The time to start is now.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> (Parsons 1951, p. 91). This is also developed in (Mercer 1956) who offers a more detailed list of the components, or attributes, of ‘community’.
- <sup>2</sup> By this term is meant an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse, yet in terms of consumerism, worldview-homogeneous middle- and upper-income group who have enjoyed the benefits of international travel and expatriate lifestyles drawn from the burgeoning merchant and political classes across the globe (particularly India and China). The concept is further discussed in (Versace et al. 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> Our proposal also bears some similarities to the communitarianism developed by (Etzioni 2014). See also (Sheppard 2022).
- <sup>4</sup> Our point is only that there was a relatively lesser emphasis placed on covenant in the medieval period, not that covenant as a political concept was entirely absent. Stephen Strehle has documented a train of covenantal thinking in medieval Europe in his important work *The Catholic Roots of the Protestant Gospel: Encounter Between the Middle Ages and the Reformation* (Strehle 1997). See also (Love 2002; Aniezark 2005).
- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the theological concept of federal headship and its interesting social implications, see (Strehle 1988).
- <sup>6</sup> As discussed in (Elazar 1991a, 1991b).
- <sup>7</sup> “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” KJV.
- <sup>8</sup> (Weber 1930). What is more, in the twentieth century, from within Christianity, Karl Barth challenged the development of covenant theology and ideology as fundamentally dangerous for modern political settlements (Barth 1950, 1961), thus allowing the deconstructions of covenant to be abetted by reducing to some degree the theological critique of its transformations.
- <sup>9</sup> Kant also discusses the totalising disposition of reason in the first chapter of book two of the *Critique of Practical Reason* where he asserts that “in both its speculative [theoretical] and practical employment, pure reason always has a dialectic, for it demands the absolute totality of conditions for a given conditioned thing”. As cited in Paul Guyer’s article published in *The Monist* in 1989 (Guyer 1989).
- <sup>10</sup> For criticism along these lines, see (Harwood 1996).

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