

Article

Anger and Hope in Rural American Liturgy

Benjamin Durham

Theology Department, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, Saint Joseph, MN 56374, USA; bdurheim@csbsju.edu

Abstract: Sociologists and political scientists have published a number of studies recently dealing with the tumultuous and often angry ethos of rural and small-town America. However, while a number of scholars have recognized that the anger and resentment present in much of the atmosphere of rural and small-town America is multifaceted and deeper than a simple desire for policy change, very little scholarly work has focused specifically on the role of ritual in exacerbating or alleviating social anger in these contexts. This article argues that the liturgical cultivation of hope is a powerful antidote to the vitriol of the political atmosphere in rural and small-town America (which can often be cultivated in its own right by rituals such as political rallies), and examines the ways in which such cultivation of hope takes place in rural Christian liturgy.

Keywords: liturgy; eschatology; politics; hope; anger; rural



Citation: Durham, Benjamin. 2022. Anger and Hope in Rural American Liturgy. *Religions* 13: 590. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070590>

Academic Editor: Kimberly Hope Belcher

Received: 2 June 2022
Accepted: 17 June 2022
Published: 24 June 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Correction Statement: This article has been republished with a minor change. The change does not affect the scientific content of the article and further details are available within the backmatter of the website version of this article.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

“When people feel that it doesn't matter what they do, when they know the quality of their life cannot change, it's at that point of hopelessness that people begin to hurt other people . . . Until we can give people hope, nothing is going to change.” (Elijah Robinson, qtd. in [Wuthnow 2018](#), p. 68)

Rural and small-town culture in America tends to value independence, resilience, and an ability to take responsibility for and craft one's own thriving ([Wuthnow 2015](#)). However, the social, economic, and political conditions in many of America's small towns and rural areas have significantly constricted the ability to flourish in what many see as traditional rural and small-town ways of life: what Robert Wuthnow calls “moral communities,”¹ often grounded in surrounding agrarian enterprise. In many places this has, over time, dried up much of the hope for a better future (or at least hope for the waning of adverse conditions) that tends to catalyze resilience. When hope fails, its opposing vices tend to flourish, and they bring with them a host of toxic affects that have proliferated in the social climate of rural and small-town America: resentment, indignation, outrage. To be clear, these are not the totality of the social climate in rural and small-town America (there is immense diversity among rural communities); rather, this is a powerful narrative that many communities in rural and small-town America have lived into as their own.

Certainly, rural and small-town Americans are not the only Americans who inhabit a social and political atmosphere characterized by anger, resentment, or outrage. One has only to look at any American news source to see anger smoldering in nearly every corner. Nor are rural and small-town Americans unique in their experiences of economic marginalization, feeling that their way of life is under threat, or feeling socially disregarded. Many nonrural American groups and communities could claim much the same. What is distinctive about rural and small-town American anger instead is twofold: first, that it tends overwhelmingly to lean to the political right,² and second, that rural and small-town Americans' self-understanding tends to be grounded in identification with particular moral communities (in the sense that Wuthnow uses the term). What appears to be taking place in many areas of rural and small-town America is the supplanting of perceived responsibility to a local moral community by perceived belonging in a specific political

sect that can promise what the local moral community increasingly cannot: power and a home-group with similar social, political, and even religious views. This supplanting has been increasingly catalyzed on the political right by the co-opting of Christian ritual, music, and prayer to do for political rallies and demonstrations what Christian liturgy does (at least in part) for the church: ritually constitute a community of believers.³

Again, this evolving connection between Christian ritual and political spectacle is neither new nor uniquely rural (Wuthnow 2012), but the strongholds of the political right tend to be rural counties and the states that hold them. Certainly, it is not only the political right that has used ritual for political ends; in a sense, this project could be similarly conducted for other groups, but this discussion's focus on rural and small-town America necessarily means a focus on what the political right has done with ritual. Additionally, because anger has been shown to be a uniquely powerful politically motivating factor (Valentino et al. 2011, pp. 156–70), understanding the conditions that facilitate rural and small-town American anger is essential for understanding its political and social atmosphere and influence. The connection to Christian liturgy then, is the degree to which rural and small-town anger catalyzes a union between rural Christian religiosity and right-wing political power. Such a union may take place in espoused beliefs, writings, and interviews, but it is made real in a more potent way when political ritual co-opts the religious, or when Christian liturgy uncritically embodies partisan politics. To wit, understanding and responding to rural anger is essential for rural Christian liturgy to remain distinct and independent from right-wing political enterprise. Absent this, rural liturgy runs the risk of transmuting itself into merely a ritual arm of the political right.

While rural liturgy carries this risk, it also holds significant potential to address the anger of rural and small-town America in ways that partisan politics simply cannot. As the opening quotation suggests, hope is a necessary part of positive social change, and hope is not plentiful in much of the rural and small-town American atmosphere. This article attempts to account for that lack, ultimately arguing that (a) large swaths of rural and small-town America have been sold the vice of presumption in place of the theological virtue of hope, and (b) Christian liturgy fills a unique role in reconstituting authentic Christian hope in rural and small-town America. This is an urgent role, because if Christian liturgy fails to realize hope, it will be replaced—even liturgically—with a cheaper, easier, vicious substitute, and rural Christian liturgy will be reduced ever further toward right-wing political ritual.

To begin this conversation, the article sketches the pervading ethos of rural and small-town America, as discerned by a number of sociologists and political scientists. Following this, the second section outlines some of the exacerbating factors of rural and small-town resentment and anger, arguing that these factors amount ultimately to a consistent minimization of hope for large portions of rural and small-town America. The third section then turns to a theological understanding of Christian hope, in both its eternal and temporal aspects. Finally, the last section of the article outlines the kinds of hope Christian liturgy is built to embody and cultivate, focusing on the ordering of rural temporal hopes to the fulfillment of eschatological hope. Such an ordering requires discernment, work, and care—in a word, cultivation. Among the many things rural and small-town Christians do in liturgy, we should be planting and cultivating hope.

2. The Atmosphere in Contemporary Rural and Small-Town America

Anger and resentment characterize much of the contemporary political atmosphere in the United States, and rural and small-town America are not exceptions to this. Anger that has simmered for years or in some cases decades has reached, in many places, a steady, rolling boil whose pressure has been harnessed (and, often enough, stoked) to power distinct political, social, and religious machinations with a persistent efficiency that has made it impossible to ignore.⁴ Particularly since 2016, political and other commentators have been at pains to characterize the causes and exacerbating agents of America's rural rage, often with an implicit goal of either (a) stymying its potency or (b) making use of

its inertia. Sociologists and political scientists have also been looking deeply into the concerns and circumstances in which the spores of rural and small-town anger proliferate. As one might imagine, the closer and more carefully one studies the intricacies of rural and small-town America, the more complex the picture of pervasive anger becomes. Robert Wuthnow for example, on the basis of his extensive research and descriptions of rural and small-town America, has argued forcefully that what is happening in rural America cannot be reduced to a simple, one-dimensional set of problems, whether political, economic, or social (Wuthnow 2015, 2018). Other sociologists such as Jennifer Sherman and Cynthia M. Duncan concur and have likewise sketched complexities of rural experience (Sherman 2009; Duncan 2014), as have political scientists such as Katherine J. Cramer (Cramer 2016).

While academic accounts of rural and small-town America vary in emphasis, at least one common thread runs through many of them: many maintain that an essential aspect of understanding contemporary rural and small-town America is coming to grips with the widespread and powerful affective components of rural Americans' views of the world and what is wrong with it. As Wuthnow points out, "If [rural outrage] were strictly about economic issues, it would respond to policy proposals about bringing jobs and raising wages" (Wuthnow 2018, p. 113). That has not happened. Instead, what is in the air in rural and small-town America is a pervasive sense of distrust (Duncan 2014, pp. 239–41), Resentment (Cramer 2016, p. 5), estrangement,⁵ and outrage (Wuthnow 2018, pp. 113–15). These emotions run far deeper than individual and passing experiences of feeling. These are communally held and enacted narrative-forming agents that resist reductive classification as simple disagreement, whether political, social, or religious. Even where rural communities do not identify this kind of anger as their own, awareness of its rural and small-town pervasiveness often runs just beneath the surface. Anger is never far-removed.

We should note that anger, even social anger, is not always a bad thing. Scholars such as Michael Jaycox have argued convincingly for the appropriateness of social anger in movements aimed toward justice (Jaycox 2016, pp. 123–43). However, social anger that reduces possible action and adherence to a single social or political enterprise (such as right-wing politics in rural and small-town America) would be social anger that lacks what Jaycox calls "prophetic prudence" (Jaycox 2016, pp. 137–40). Recall that rural and small-town anger has not responded well to strategies that would alleviate the conditions that exacerbate it (for example, the 2021 American Rescue Plan's Child Tax Credit has provided, per capita, disproportionately more aid to largely rural states, but has been overwhelmingly opposed by Republican politicians (Hammond and Orr 2021; Sargent 2021)). Instead, this anger tends to short-circuit pursuits of long-term and sustainable change, seeking instead more immediate gratification in vanquishing whatever opponent has been deemed at fault (in the case of the 2021 American Rescue Plan, this would be Democratic politicians).

Such anger is sustained by myriad factors, but these factors tend to coalesce into an experience of being under threat, in which the very ways of life that rural and small-town Americans value appear to be vigorously besieged. As Wuthnow notes, "[This] is more about a perceived cultural threat that is often ill-defined even though it runs deep. A threat of this kind responds to symbolism and rituals, to feisty rhetoric and rallies" (Wuthnow 2018, p. 113). This is the point of confluence with Christian liturgy. If ritual is the place where rural and small-town anger finds voice, then ritual can also be the place where it can become something else, resurrected into something closer to Christian hope. To conceptualize this possibility, however, it is worthwhile to reckon with commonalities in the self-understanding of rural American communities. Wuthnow's conception of rural and small-town America as moral communities provides the framework for this reckoning, which then turns to a (necessarily abbreviated) account of developments and circumstances that fan the flames of rural and small-town anger in America.⁶

3. Drought Conditions for Hope in Rural America's Moral Communities

Wuthnow's framework for understanding rural and small-town America as moral communities comes from his reading of Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religion*

Life, and thinkers who follow in that vein (Wuthnow 2018, p. 4, n. 9). While it should be noted that Durkheim's conception of moral communities is integrally related to his work on religion (Durkheim 1995) and Wuthnow's use of the term appears to be only incidentally related to religion, it is nevertheless a helpful concept in understanding how rural and small-town America tend to self-organize. The idea of rural America as made up of moral communities is, for Wuthnow, about categorizing rural loyalties, self-understandings, and networks of accountability as constitutive for rural life. A moral community is, in his view:

“a place to which and in which people feel an obligation to one another and to uphold the local ways of being that govern their expectations about ordinary life and support their feelings of being at home and doing the right things.” (Wuthnow 2018, p. 4)

What is important in understanding the rural moral community is the social reality of mutual accountability and reference, tied to the business of everyday life in a particular place to which one belongs. For many rural Americans, location is more than just where someone is, works, or lives; location characterizes and often enough even defines identity. This blend of place and persons constitutes the moral community—there exists a “we” intimately tied to the land, to the local school, to the local churches, businesses, etc. Consequently, perceived threats to any part of that way of everyday life manifest as assaults upon the community itself, and by extension, upon community members themselves. As Wuthnow points out, “[rural and small-town Americans] *may be* rugged individualists. But they are not fundamentally that. Spend some time in rural America and you realize one thing: people there are community-oriented” (Wuthnow 2018, p. 4. Italics in original).

This orientation toward community—and *a specific* community, not community in general—can help explain in part why calls for justice and activism can often resonate differently in rural areas than in nonrural ones. The default reference point for what it means to support a community has particular faces and places attached to it, and those already carry a claim on community members. If, for example, many members of a rural community see the Black Lives Matter movement as opposed to support for law enforcement, the community is likely to find ready support for the most visible members of that local community (in many cases this has meant that rural America—approximately 74% white in 2020 (Rowlands and Love 2021)—has vocalized support for law enforcement officers over and against support for the Black Lives Matter movement). Of course, factors of race and racism also loom large in this, but it would be a mistake to engage the rural and nonrural manifestations of these realities in identical ways. What it means to live into the particularities of human existence (race, gender, religion, etc.) is conditioned in rural America by membership (or non-membership) in the local moral community, where people often know each other by name and face, and have intertwined histories of professional, political, and social relationships. Accountability in the rural moral community is first to the faces and names you know, because that is how everyday life survives in rural and small-town America. This is in no way to excuse the racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other evils that plague rural America alongside nonrural America; rather this is to maintain that reckoning with these and other evils, and resisting them, may need to look different in rural America than in nonrural America.

Given this understanding of moral communities, we can turn to some of the factors that have led many of these communities to feel under threat, and in many cases to embrace anger and resentment as the organic result. In doing so, the discussion will refer to these factors as drought conditions for the cultivation of hope, developing a metaphor that will provide a basis upon which to then turn to a Christian theological understanding of hope, and its germination and growth. I choose this metaphor because droughts can be tricky things; they may mean a precipitous drop in yield, but they do not always result in total loss. For example, after the 2021 historic drought in much of the Midwest, Minnesota's average corn production for grain fell to 178 bushels per acre (United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service 2021) from the previous year's average of 192 bushels per acre (United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural

Statistics Service 2020), a decline that was kept as narrow as it was at least partly by the arrival of rain and mild weather that autumn. Even in drought conditions, crops may still yield a harvest, but to do so requires the mitigation of drought factors *not* only by waiting for rain, but also by significant human innovation and effort (e.g., irrigation and work for soil health, among other endeavors). Without relief, however, interminable drought conditions can result in total losses of crops, which is where the parallel lies between crop cultivation and the current difficulty experienced by rural and small-town America in cultivating hope. What follows in this section is nowhere near an exhaustive list of factors that inhibit the cultivation of hope in rural and small-town America. Rather, drawing from relevant scholarship, I name here what I see as the most potent conditions feeding anger and opposing hope.⁷

3.1. Agrarian Rural America

A significant amount of work has been invested in understanding the seismic shifts that have taken place in agrarian rural America (See, for example, (Gardner 2002)), and while these are necessarily related to (and overlap with) shifts in small-town America, they are distinct in that they have immediately to do with the practice of farming.⁸ Consequently, factors that dry up hope for ways of life that center in agriculture are factors that desiccate hope for large swaths of rural America, and perhaps the most potent of these factors is a widespread perception that the traditional farming way of life is under siege (or that its death is becoming increasingly certain). By “traditional” here I do not mean “old-fashioned” or some related synonym; I mean an agrarian way of life that has been characterized by valuing independence, family farming, and the social authority of a moral community. In this way of life, one’s independence is conditioned by responsibility to one’s neighbors, one’s family history and traditions have significant weight, and locality is a source of pride.

The value of independence—of self-determination and personal responsibility—is a central fixture in the rural American agrarian ethos. In his interviews with America’s farmers, Wuthnow notes that the allure (and requirement) of independence often plays a powerful role in their vocation: “The part of farming they liked best, they said, was being in control, taking charge, being their own masters, counting on themselves” (Wuthnow 2015, p. 102). This kind of freedom to self-determine is conditioned by personal responsibility in that the success of the farm (and consequently the stability of one’s dependents and, indirectly, also one’s local community) depends upon good choices and judgment, and it involves prevailing through risk, challenge, and hardship (Wuthnow 2015, pp. 106–13). Such independence is threatened, however, when decisions and ownership become further and further removed from the farmer actually doing the work of farming. Social, technological, and political currents that have exacerbated this distancing have been called by many names (e.g., “industrialized farming,” or the “production revolution”),⁹ but they tend to share a common center: the prioritization of agricultural production volume over the independence and vitality of family farms. For example, genetic modifications to seeds have given farmers access to levels of productivity that previous generations could only dream of (which is nearly universally treated as a—if not the—primary measure of a farming technology’s worth), but that access comes with a steep price. A bag of cottonseed that may have cost USD 20 in the 1980s could be USD 350 or more now.¹⁰ Such price increases do not just affect profits; they reduce independence by funneling reliance on seeds to fewer and fewer companies (those whose expensive seeds are justified by minimizing risk to productivity), eroding the farmer’s ownership of the decision regarding “what exactly should I plant?” That decision has been overwhelmingly conditioned by laboratory and corporation before the farmer’s independent agency is ever brought to bear.

To take another example, farming equipment itself is extremely expensive, a reality due in large part again to the industrialization of farming and a hyper-emphasis on large-scale production. A new combine could easily cost more than half a million dollars (Dodson 2019), with tractors and other equipment costing significant fractions of that. Add to this the efforts by companies such as John Deere to restrict the legality of repairing their equipment

by farmers who purchase it,¹¹ and there is at least a two-layer separation between farmers' independent ownership of their equipment and the equipment itself (one separation being the financial institution underwriting the loans to purchase the equipment, and the other being the loss of farmer's legal ability to modify or repair equipment they purchase). The examples could go on, but with every layer of external conditioning that circumscribes farmers' independence, real or perceived, comes another blow to a central aspect of agrarian vocation in the United States. The traditional farming way of life is not *only* about independence, but without independence, that way of life dies—and independence has been consistently eroding in the perception of many rural Americans.

The value of independence also connects with the concept of the family farm, and what that concept entails. Put concisely, the family farm is exactly what it sounds like—a farm run by a particular family, likely through generations¹²—but there is a depth to the family farm beyond being a social and economic unit.¹³ The family farm connotes a history of triumphs and survival through difficulty, connected to the specific pieces of land one's family tends, often with special emphasis on the resilience family members (past and present) have shown when times were tough. However, as independence erodes, so also does the vitality of the family farm. In connection with the expense of technology, Wuthnow notes, "It would be impossible [in the view of some farmers] to accumulate enough capital to purchase expensive machinery or obtain land. For those farmers, newer and more expensive technology did not imply the demise of family farming in general, but it presaged the end of a valued way of life for their own family" (Wuthnow 2015, p. 160). The loss or death of "the family farm" is not a generalized abstraction for many in rural America; it is a personal lived experience that spills over into shared experiences of loss with others in their community and surrounding communities.

The value of social primacy of the moral community may initially seem at odds with the value of independence, but the two are inseparable for many rural Americans. The very definition of independence is conditioned by what that means in the context of a local community. Problems and concerns a person or family may face are often irreducibly tied to the rural community context—not in general ("rural Minnesota"), but in particular ("Holdingford," "Pierz," "Sauk Centre"). This provides the conceptual connection for our discussion between rural America and small-town America. As Cramer points out in her discussion of what she calls rural consciousness, folks in rural areas tend to form their perceptions in explicit relationship to their small town: "in this [rural] place, their concerns . . . were rooted in their sense of themselves as members of a rural community" (Cramer 2016, p. 50). The small-town community as a moral community is not accidental to rural American identity; it is the dominant conception of what social life is.

3.2. Small-Town America

As the family farm is more than just a farm run by a family, the small town is not just a city with a small population. It has an identity built around local pride and practice, of shared responsibility and accountability, of locally relatable joys, sorrows, aspirations, and regrets. The allure of this kind of community can often run parallel to that of independence in farming; there is a sense of worth in being responsible for and to one's immediate neighbors, and the flourishing of the community depends in a real way on good decisions made at the local level. However, similar to agrarian American life, there is a strong perception in small-town America that such a way of life is under siege, especially due to the interconnected problems of population decline, dependence upon (or interference by) non-local powers, and what has been called the "brain drain" problem.

Rural populations have been in decline for decades (Wuthnow 2018, p. 47). Beyond general trends of migration away from rural and small-town areas into larger cities, Wuthnow points out that, "The most serious causes of population decline in rural communities are man-made and natural disasters" (Wuthnow 2018, p. 46). There are of course systemic and cultural reasons for population decline in small towns, but this cause is most relevant to the current discussion. In the wake of a disaster, small towns may never recover. Many

small towns do not have the resources to fully heal or rebuild after a tornado or flood or other disaster, leaving them to rely on external aid that is often frustratingly slow in coming (Wuthnow 2018, p. 54). This backdrop of a threat to stability compounds the already-endemic perception that small towns are on the social and economic periphery, and this pushes against the cultivation of rural and small-town hope.

This sense of being relegated to the periphery goes beyond financial aid or consideration. For many folks in small towns, the centers of power have no discernable ability or desire to hear (much less take seriously or respond to) rural and small-town concerns. Taking Washington, D.C. as an example, Wuthnow notes that “As far as [small-town residents] can see, the federal government hasn’t the least interest in trying to understand rural communities’ problems, let alone do anything to fix them” (Wuthnow 2018, p. 98). Instead, non-local powers (federal and state governments, large-market players, etc.) appear to have no problem laying down unfunded mandates or using farmers and their communities as economic pawns. When new regulations for emergency preparedness or safety or accommodations are mandated without funding to realize them, as one town manager explains, “it gets very difficult. We just don’t have the money . . . If we have to do it, it means the things that are really affecting people, like the police, the parks, trash collection, and the schools, are the things that get cut.”¹⁴ This follows a similar line for the markets that determine so much of agrarian flourishing or hardship: “Markets can be manipulated—and are manipulated, farmers think—by human forces that do not have farmers’ interests at heart” (Wuthnow 2015, p. 163). When the dominant experiences of economic and political authority tend to be either absence when they are needed or intrusion when they are not, hope for a healthy relationship and mutual benefit with those authorities becomes nearly untenable.

This combination of instability and being on the periphery (among other factors) tends to lead to the out-migration of talent according to Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, who call this trend the “brain drain” (Carr and Kefalas 2009). This issue is more than simply out-migration, however. As young talent and aptitude are attracted out of rural and small-town contexts, many who choose to remain discern a pronounced disdain directed toward both them and their ways of life. This is particularly pronounced in farming, where real-world education and strategic thinking are necessary to thrive, “. . . but that’s not the stereotype” (Wuthnow 2018, p. 59). Instead, the popular image of rural and small-town folks tends to be bumkinish, slow-witted, uncultured, and uneducated. These images, like any negative images, can become internalized, particularly when they are compounded by the harsh economic realities of much of rural and small-town life. As one farmer noted to Wuthnow, he “just feels ‘dumb’ working as hard as he does and earning so little” (Wuthnow 2018, p. 59). In fairness, this assessment of Carr and Kefalas has been challenged by researchers such as Ben Winchester, who maintain that the narrative of out-migration of talent from rural areas is misleading (See, for example, (University of Minnesota Extension)). Even so, the brain-drain narrative has exerted significant power in the self-understanding of rural and small-town America, regardless of its factual reliability or lack thereof. In a wider culture where economic and social renown tend to go together, it can be difficult to cultivate hope even for dignity in the eyes of one’s fellow nonrural citizens, for whom such narratives of loss may not be potent in the same ways. This lack of respect, like the other factors discussed, compounds the drought conditions for hope.

Having sketched a (necessarily sparse) picture of the exacerbating factors inhibiting hope’s cultivation in rural and small-town America, this discussion now turns to what exactly constitutes a Christian theological understanding of hope, and the vice(s) that can militate against it and even be mistaken for it.

4. Christian Hope

Christian hope is, in its essence, active. Common non-theological usage of the term “hope” may often treat it as connoting a kind of passive gesture of desire, a nod toward something that one may want, but in which one’s participation is receptive or spectatorial

rather than creative (“I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow,” or “I got you a present; I hope you like it”). Certainly not all popular connotations of hope are this way—one may hope, for example, for one’s hard work to pay off, or for a relationship to develop well, both of which are built on one’s active participation—but it is worthwhile to note that an understanding of hope as a passive state or a wistfully inert desire stands in significant tension with a Christian theological understanding of hope. Instead, following Thomas Aquinas, hope is a virtue, something that “causes a human act to be good and to attain its due rule” (Thomas 1981, II-II, qq. 17, art. 1). For someone to hope, as Aquinas explains it, is for that person to hope for a specific object, namely “a future good, difficult but possible to obtain.”¹⁵ For Aquinas, this sets hope apart from simple desire for something because hope’s object is (1) in the future, that is, not already obtained, (2) good, in that it would be a category mistake for Christian hope to move toward evil, (3) difficult, because if the object were easy, we would simply obtain it rather than hope for it, and (4) possible to obtain, because without this possibility, hope transmutes into despair (Thomas 1981, I-II, qq. 40, art. 1; Doyle 2013, pp. 16–27). In this light, Christian hope connotes a movement, a genesis or continuation of practice directed toward its object. When one hopes, theologically speaking, one does something about it.

It is also important to note that the ultimate object of Christian hope is union with God (Doyle 2013, p. 17). That said, such an object risks vagueness without further explanation. Particularly in light of our current discussion, “union with God” risks being understood as primarily next-worldly, escapist, or opiating. As Elliot points out, however, Christian hope—even understood as hope for union with God—is deeply embedded in concerns of ethics and justice for this present world:

“Theological hope is not a moral or spiritual anesthetic . . . Aquinas was correct to say that hope does not detach us from earthly goods, but consciously refers them to our eternal end. Hope is therefore invested in earthly projects and cannot adopt Stoic apathy to insulate us from human vulnerability and tragedy.” (Elliot 2017, p. 139)

Christian hope, therefore, far from being a vague desire for “something better,” situates itself in the concrete reality of its context, discerns goods that ought to be realities for that context, and rightly orders the work and effort in realizing those goods toward union with the God of Jesus Christ, toward beatitude, and toward the reign of God. In doing so, Christian hope moves beyond hope for one’s self, growing and maturing into a hope that includes those around us. As Elliot explains, “through charity we hope for our neighbors. Ultimately, we hope for their eternal good, but proximately, we hope for their temporal good as referred to the eternal” (Elliot 2017, p. 140). Again, this “temporal good,” theologically understood, cannot dissipate into vagueness, hollowing out the lifegiving content of Christian hope (a bit like the now-cliché and oft-maligned offering of *only* “thoughts and prayers”). The temporal good is a linguistic placeholder that must expire as particular temporal goods are discerned as necessary and appropriate contingent objects of Christian hope. It is in this spirit (the ritual catalysis in discerning temporal goods ordered to the eternal good) that our current discussion works to understand Christian hope in the context of rural and small-town America.

As a theological virtue, there are of course accompanying vices that oppose Christian hope. David Elliot names at least three—presumption, sloth, and despair (Elliot 2017, p. 146)—and of these, the one that bears most significantly upon our discussion is the vice of presumption. Elliot explains presumption as “a peculiar vice of false and bloated hope which colonises and subverts moral agency, and which is often confused with theological hope itself” (Elliot 2017, p. 111). Presumption is taking the consolation of theological hope to an extreme. If one is overconfident in the realization of a particular hope, one denies one’s human finitude and vulnerability. Similarly, if one decides that *only* a specific form of a good is morally acceptable, to the exclusion of other possible manifestations of or avenues to that good, one presumes the primacy of that specific perspective on the good, and may be led to relativize or even ignore other necessary goods that should connect with it.

A classic illustration of this would be resorting to single-issue politics, an approach that is alive and well in rural America, for example, with regard to abortion (though of course this is neither universal throughout nor limited to rural America—but again, when social anger flares in rural America, it tends to flare overwhelmingly in one political direction). As Emily Reimer-Barry has pointed out, drawing on the consistent ethic of life espoused by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, if the good of life is reduced to only one concern—in this case, about legally prohibiting abortion—many other goods (immigration reform, humane treatment of detainees, along with numerous other issues) fall from consideration and action (Reimer-Barry 2019, pp. 21–22, 25–27). While Reimer-Barry does not specifically call this presumption, such singular focus on one way of approaching a particular good (the good of protecting human life) short-circuits the integrity of Christian ethics by isolating and holding as supreme that one particular way of engaging an issue. In doing so, the “future good, possible, yet difficult to obtain” sets itself against other goods, consequently choking off its ordering toward the eternal good. What may have begun as Christian theological hope twists instead into partisan presumption. As Elliot articulates, “the confidence of hope needs to be balanced by a continuing sense of creaturely dependency and ongoing moral accountability” (Elliot 2017, p. 110). To hope in this way precludes both the uncritical and the over-zealous adherence to a particular political or social agenda, as if discipleship could be reduced to such things.

This leads to another aspect of Christian hope that bears upon our discussion: Christian hope does not reject the vulnerability and mortality that condition human existence. Grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, especially in Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection, Christian hope endures the tragedies and deaths of this world with the conviction that God is always with us. Elliot calls this a kind of “zealous patience,” which “motivates a socially committed way of life that faces down utopianism, misanthropy, and despair by ardently seeking such beatitude as may be had in this life” (Elliot 2017, p. 159). Put another way, while the discernment of particular temporal goods is a necessary function of Christian hope, those temporal goods remain ordered toward the eternal good, not vice versa. Practically speaking this means that the process of discerning what is actually “good” is not simply the same as discerning what a person or community *wants*, or even what *has been good thus far*.

Tragedy and death are not realities that only affect particular human bodies. Communities carry tragedy, ways of life can die, and loss can be cultural as much as it can be personal. None of this is to say that the pain of such tribulation can be mitigated by a dose of hope—recall that hope is not an anesthetic—rather, this is to say that Christian hope is resurrection hope. It looks to the future neither as fantasy nor as reducible to human control, but instead as the new creation that has already begun and is not yet complete. This involves a twofold embodiment of vulnerability: first, vulnerability with regard to tragedy and death wrought by a world conditioned by finitude and sin, and second, vulnerability with regard to the eternal good toward which all temporal goods of Christian hope are ordered. That eternal good is one where death is defeated in resurrection, not one that prevents death in the first place, and what rises on the other side of death and tragedy may be neither exactly what we expect nor exactly what we want. Resurrection does not undo loss; it is the horizon before which loss appears.

This said, death does not necessarily entail discontinuity. Jesus’s wounds remain in his risen body,¹⁶ and his risen body is recognizable to the disciples.¹⁷ Just as Christian hope does not deny death, tragedy, or loss, it does not take as its object some reality that is so new that it would be unrecognizable. There is continuity with the good of this world—and retention of the wounds this world inflicts. Such characterizes the urgency of Christian hope. Christian hope does not give itself to the work of ethics and justice as if it were merely an instrument for them; Christian hope acts toward justice because the brokenness of this world writes itself on the body of humanity. To hope then, is to move, patiently, humbly, and in vulnerability, toward the difficult but not impossible goods that are ordered toward union with God, toward the justice of God’s reign.

Yet, this kind of hope may well be an acquired taste, and it grows or withers according to the circumstances of the communities who cling to it. Christian hope includes the recognition that all temporal goods may suffer loss, and yet God never abandons us. This becomes particularly delicate, however, when death and narratives of loss protract, desiccating hope in ways that can make it brittle and susceptible to the vicious disease of presumption.¹⁸ Such desiccation has been well underway in rural and small-town America, making presumption a common affliction for rural Christian hope. This discussion now turns to some temporal hopes common to many areas of rural and small-town America, and to some ways they may be cultivated—or distorted—by Christian liturgy.

5. Ritual Cultivation of Rural and Small-Town Hope

To begin this section, a word is warranted about how a virtue such as hope may be conceived of as developing in a rural moral community rather than in an individual person. While some attempts have been made to speak about hope as a communal or social virtue (see for example (Cobb and Green 2017, pp. 230–50)), much theological discussion of hope tends to retain Aquinas's focus on its embodiment in particular human persons/agents. However, if a moral community—or liturgical assembly—could be conceived of even analogically as exercising a kind of moral agency, an avenue is open for considering the community and assembly to be participating in the habituation and development of virtue. Some have bluntly argued that “communities are also moral agents in their own right” (Chambers 2016, p. 224), but for our discussion of the role of Christian ritual in cultivating hope, it is most relevant to note Louis-Marie Chauvet's insistence that the *we* constituted by the Christian liturgical assembly is “a complex moral person” (Chauvet 1995, p. 183). Viewed in this light, there is more going on in the hope-forming exercises of Christian liturgy than a simple aggregation of individual Christian hopes, or even forming only individual Christian hopes. When hope takes form in Christian liturgy, it is the hope of an assembly in communion with other assemblies and the universal church—it is ritually *our* hope, not just *my* hope alongside the hopes of others.

So what is the hope (eschatological and temporal) that Christian liturgy can cultivate, and what exactly are the hope-forming exercises of Christian liturgy? To be clear, I do not in any way mean to reduce Christian ritual to simply an implement for cultivating hope. That said, the primary hope that Christian liturgy has been structured to cultivate is eschatological hope for union with God in God's eternal reign. As John Baldovin explains, liturgical celebration is “meant to be a manifestation, an epiphany of God's reign” (Baldovin 2013). Eschatology lives at the eucharistic table and in the eucharistic assembly, where God's reign breaks into history as present but incomplete—as a future good, difficult, yet possible to obtain. However, this liturgically embodied hope is not the focus *instead of* the temporal hopes that find their ground in such eschatological hope, but rather this liturgically embodied hope *subsumes* this-world hopes and orders them to their ground and goal: beatitude and union with God. As Baldovin sees it, Christians come to liturgy “not only because of their immediate hopes for themselves and those they care about, but because of the ultimate hope that grounds these hopes: what we would more formally call eschatological hope” (Baldovin 2013, p. 143). The problem, as Christopher Frechette maintains, is that temporally focused hopes can become compulsive attachments that distract from eschatological hope (Frechette 2013, pp. 130–33). For Frechette this ultimately runs the risk of idolatry, in that temporal hope, if it calcifies into something inflexible or obsessive, would usurp the rightful primacy of eschatological hope.

This tendency can also be conceived of as presumption. To presume that one's own approach to the good is the only Christianly correct one, particularly if that approach is wedded to partisan politics, circumscribes the perceived moral accountability of that approach and artificially amplifies moral suspicion aimed at other approaches to the good. This can become particularly visible in Christian preaching. To preach something other than right-wing politics (currently often identified in the U.S. with Donald Trump) has become a minefield for many rural and small-town pastors. Experiences like that of Pastor

Franz Gerber, who has watched his church community in rural Forest County, Wisconsin become increasingly enchanted with Trumpism and its rhetoric—and who has lost at least one church member due to his being insufficiently hostile to Democratic members of the church—have become relatively common in rural and small-town American Christianity (McGreal 2020). What hope can rural pastors preach if the primary hope that resonates with their churches is the triumph of Republican partisan politics? Of course, the story can also go the other way—many rural pastors may be quite happy to preach the union of Christian hope with hope in right-wing politics—but in both cases the presumption is that the exclusive set of worthy Christian hopes is housed in a particular approach to politics, and to challenge that agenda or its divine mandate is to step outside “true” Christianity.

What makes this presumption particularly damaging in rural and small-town America is, again, the self-understanding of much of rural and small-town America as moral communities. While anger that feeds this presumption has crystallized into the widespread support of rural counties for Republican policies and candidates, the communities in those counties are of course not politically homogenous (even though roughly 90% of rural counties voted Republican in the last few elections, that does not mean that 90% of rural Americans are Republicans (Benzow 2020)). When vitriolic politics wreaks havoc on a rural church or rural community, the fabric of that moral community may fray far more quickly and permanently than in nonrural communities. If a church alienates a group of its members or attempts to enforce a political or social homogeneity that does not exist, there may not be an option to “vote with your feet” and attend a different church; a different church may not exist in the moral community. Additionally, because moral communities include the communal intertwining of many aspects of life (political, social, religious), rancor and division at church is particularly likely in rural communities to bleed into rancor and division in other areas, and of course vice versa. In my own small town for example, a local pastor is also currently the city’s mayor, and works at the post office. Diverse areas of community life find confluence in particular persons and groups, whose actions are often integrated into many parts of a community rather than compartmentalized into a single area. Wuthnow notes that this confluence of religious and social life is often the substance of rural church attendance:

“ . . . many of the farmers we interviewed saw their church as the center of their family’s social life. They attended regularly as they could . . . they served on the vestry or deacon board. They helped keep the building in good repair and brought casseroles to church suppers. [The] principal theme in these activities was that they were *practical*. Few of them had anything to do with doctrine, biblical teaching, or worship.”¹⁹

This, then, is the danger of rural liturgy coming to resemble a ritual arm of partisan politics. If the message of Christian preaching (as well as prayer and other liturgical practices) becomes inseparable from a particular political agenda, Christians who do not identify with that agenda may experience this as exclusion from their faith itself. This can be exacerbated by the increasingly efficient diffusion of narratives regarding right-wing Christianity that many in rural and small-town America resonate with, facilitated by communication technologies that make moral communities more permeable for both good and ill. What it means to be a conservative Christian in a rural community may be influenced more by stories about non-local conservative Christianity than by the local moral community. For example, in 2018 when members of Sanctuary Church in small-town Newfoundland, Pennsylvania made headlines by liturgically blessing firearms (Munoz 2018), the accounts of the event often minimized or ignored that the church is an offshoot from Unification Church, which has been characterized as a cult by former members (Hassan 2012). Instead, the narrative was largely received as “small-town Christians bless guns in church.” Such a liturgy did not need to happen in every rural moral community in order for rural moral communities to be affected by its narrative weight.

Again, because rural America tends to be a stronghold for right-wing politics, nonrural liturgical actions that instrumentalize liturgy for right-wing agendas have outsized impact

in rural and small-town areas. When Frank Pavone, a priest in Amarillo, Texas (neither rural nor small-town) released a video in which he placed an aborted fetus on the altar in an effort to galvanize increased Roman Catholic opposition to Hillary Clinton (Clemmer 2020), his coopting of liturgical instruments (the altar) and abuse of human remains spoke far louder than the subsequent words of condemnation and investigation from bishops (see Gibson 2016). More recently in the Roman Catholic world, discussions of banning from the eucharist those politicians who support abortion rights have taken on renewed vehemence (both with the USCCB's document on "eucharistic coherence"—popularly interpreted during its writing as related to U.S. President Joe Biden²⁰—and with Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone's recent barring of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi from the eucharist (Karni and Graham 2022)). In rural and small-town America, those who find themselves at odds with this agenda—or even insufficiently zealous in supporting it—carry an outsized risk of experiencing these liturgical developments as exclusion from the moral community, which is their home and a large piece of their identity. When this takes place, the presumption that had been mistaken for hope harms the vitality of the moral community, making the virtue of hope even harder to cultivate successfully. When a moral community is fragmented by presumption that had carried a false promise of unity in hope, real theological hope is left to dry and wither.

This is the point at which Christian liturgy holds significant promise, however, for cultivating hope even in the drought conditions of rural and small-town America. Where preaching or church statements might easily be mistaken as just another voice with an agenda among the cacophony of messaging and propaganda to which people are exposed, other aspects of Christian liturgy are less susceptible to this misinterpretation. In preaching, people in the assembly may be expecting either affirmation of or challenge to the social and political perspectives that they find compelling/repelling, but much of Christian ritual speaks in language and action that is less easily instrumentalized. One central reason for this is that liturgy of its nature unfolds in a local, embodied place. In the celebration of Christian liturgy, methods of telecommunication that may otherwise import harmful distortions of liturgical practice are minimized in favor of attending to the concrete assembly. The narrative of a Christian liturgy does not begin from a place of importing external propaganda; it begins simply with who shows up and what they carry with them. Hymns and songs of worship and praise of course carry potent messages, but the acts of singing together and sharing music bespeak belonging that crafts and re-crafts shared community even in a political atmosphere that seeks to set distinct parts of the community at odds with each other. Processing together down the aisle to the altar as part of an assembly to receive a ritual meal embodies openness to true sustenance even where discourse may be poisoned by vitriol. Praying the shared prayers of the church, most especially those that invoke the Holy Spirit, writes the language of discipleship on the tongues of those gathered. Sharing ritual words such as those of confession in the penitential rite, those of the gospel acclamation, and perhaps most poignantly those of the creed, binds a Christian assembly together *as* a Christian assembly, manifesting belonging—however imperfectly—even where suspicion and exclusion would otherwise hold sway.²¹

Rural liturgy is not uniquely expressive of these characteristics of Christian liturgy. However, because the significantly asymmetrical rural political atmosphere has drawn so close to Christian liturgy (often borrowing from it and lending its messaging to it), and because rural identity is tied so closely to the moral community, these liturgical characteristics speak in a unique way in rural liturgy. They can speak a hope to which political and social discourse increasingly have neither access nor credibility. This is to say that there is at least one temporal good, embedded in the experience of rural and small-town America, that is worth preserving as ordered toward the eternal good: the moral community. A community characterized by belonging to one another, sharing responsibility for one another, delighting together in local triumphs and lamenting together local tragedies—this certainly would be a temporal good, difficult, yet possible to obtain.

No community embodies this good perfectly, but that is why hope is the appropriate category through which to view this good.

For much of rural and small-town America, this good of the moral community tends to include the three particular values we discussed in the section on agrarian rural America above: independence (conditioned by mutual responsibility), family enterprise tied to the land (especially farming), and the enduring social relevance of the local community. These are not conjectures of potential temporal goods to be weighed and evaluated at a disinterested arm's length. These are realities that have been experienced as good by innumerable rural and small-town Christians, in the truest sense of resonating with the eternal good of God's reign. These are worth manifesting and forming liturgically, to provide ritual discourse in an altogether different key than the social and political powers that would seek to use Christian ritual for their own ends. Hope for the moral community as it lives in rural America, with its values of independence, family enterprise, and local identity, can, should, and in fact *does* find voice in the liturgies of rural America. As this discussion draws to a close, we gesture now to a few brief examples of liturgical practice that, from a rural perspective at least, give voice to these hopes.

With regard to hope for independence, in the rural understanding—as conditioned by responsibility and accountability—the offertory rites and prayers ritualize a nexus point between offering gifts to God and bearing responsibility for one's community (this would be especially true of monetary gifts, but in a certain way also of the gifts of the eucharistic elements, bread and wine). Monetary gifts, as well as gifts of time, energy, and expertise, are concrete instances of constituting the vitality of a church community. This is an integral aspect of rural understandings of independence because in many cases the particular church building and assembly stand for the wider moral community, and vice versa. This has become all the more poignant in American rural areas and small towns as population numbers decline and denominations are forced to close churches. If a church can be kept open and operational through the efforts of its rural and small-town members, this is often interpreted as the church holding a certain kind of independence from the power structures of the denomination, and yet it does so by the very fact that it is responsible for and to the local moral community. In many cases, keeping the rural or small-town church open requires much both logistically and financially from its members, and so the liturgical offerings embody not just that reality, but also hope for an independence that is experienced as under threat.

Hope for family enterprise and thriving may be a bit easier to read liturgically, as it looms large in both weddings and funerals. Wedding liturgies provide a clear ritual embodiment of this hope in both the gathering of family and friends to celebrate the union, and in the prayers (in some Christian traditions) for the thriving of the couple and their reception and raising of children.²² When a couple gives themselves to one another in a public Christian ritual, exchanging vows of fidelity, love, and support, they bring into being a new center—their immediate family—as a locus of independence, responsible to and for its dependents, and build a legacy that brings a new and emergent hope for family prosperity to the family circumstances that have formed the two persons entering marriage. In this hope, the rural liturgical community sees its own hope.

Such hope takes on a different character in Christian funeral liturgies. In Christian funerals, a mortal life is bid farewell in the hope for life eternal, but the tradition and legacy of that mortal life live on in those whose mortal lives are still unfolding. The one who has died leaves behind stories, experiences, and artifacts that become part of the lore connected to the land, the most recent pieces of tradition layered upon those defining narratives that came before. Sometimes this legacy is of a continuing and thriving family farm or other enterprise, and many times it is of a farm or enterprise truncated, sold, or lost. In all these cases though, the funeral liturgy—even by being a gathering before God of surviving family and friends—speaks hope for the continuation and/or re-imagining of a family legacy into its next form. This is temporal hope for healing,²³ consolation, and strength to endure, but it is also resurrection hope.

Finally, I would suggest that baptismal liturgies and the prayers of the people—the general intercessions that are part of so many regular Christian liturgies—embody well the rural hope for the enduring relevance and authority of the local community. In baptism, a Christian is welcomed into the universal church, but in the context of a particular local church. Furthermore—especially for those traditions who practice infant baptism—the one being baptized is often presented for baptism by other members of the community. Consequently, the unrepeatably initial rite of Christian initiation takes place not in a generic, replaceable church building, but instead for many rural and small-town Americans, baptism takes place in a particular church that is a pillar of the moral community. While the mutual recognition of baptism may be nearly universal among Christians, *where* one is baptized carries a particular kind of hope—hope in the local community—for many rural and small-town Christians.

The prayers of the people operate with a similar locally referenced hope. When persons are named in the intercessions for healing or support, those names are not just faceless nominatives that flow over rural Christian liturgical assemblies. Folks know each other, and being named in the prayers often enough occasions real support (someone dropping by with groceries, offering childcare, taking care of some yard work, etc.), because the moral community shares responsibility for those who are hurting. These prayers can be powerful when they name concrete local realities and concerns, and often still more so when they connect local realities and concerns with national or global needs, but they can run a similar risk to preaching if they simply put into prayer the talking points of a particular partisan group. To be hopeful in the sense of speaking rural hope for the moral community, the prayers of the people need only do what they have been designed to do: lift up publicly before God, in the presence of the liturgical assembly, those concerns that need voice in this particular place and time.

6. Conclusions

In this article I have argued that hope is in drought conditions in the atmosphere of much of rural and small-town America. Exacerbated by a number of social and economic factors, this drought has given voice to rural and small-town anger that has overwhelmingly leaned to the political right, and characterizes a significant amount of rural Christianity. Consequently, political spectacles have begun to import elements of Christian ritual in order to blur the lines between political agenda and Christian discipleship, and rural Christian liturgy is at increasing risk of becoming a ritual arm of the political right. This risk, however, is mitigated by the fact that rural liturgy embodies hope—specifically hope for the moral community as conceived in relation to rural values of independence, family enterprise, and local identity—and it does so in language and action that is not easily instrumentalized by external powers. Particularly in weddings, funerals, and the prayers of the people—in music, in procession, in invocation and in ritual language—rural Christian hope that is ordered toward union with God takes on the temporal form of hope for the survival and thriving of this particular moral community. Anger swirls through rural and small-town America, but rural Christian liturgy is fertile for the cultivation of hope.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not Applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not Applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not Applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ This is a term he borrows from Émile Durkheim (Wuthnow 2018, p. 43).

² For example, Donald Trump carried roughly 90% of American rural counties in both the 2016 and 2022 elections, making it difficult—though not impossible—to see significant political diversity in rural America (Benzow 2020).

3 For an account of a rural political rally ending with a pseudo-pilgrimage and singing of “Amazing Grace,” see (Medina 2022).

4 For example, Christian worship practices have become increasingly a part of right-wing and conservative political rallies. See (Dias and Graham 2022).

5 Lyn C. Macgregor speaks about the pervasiveness of divisions among folks as rural Americans work to conceive of and make real senses and spaces of community (Macgregor 2010, pp. 228–30).

6 To be clear, in no way do I wish to argue that the conditions in rural and small-town America are somehow “worse” than conditions experienced by other communities that are under threat. Rather, what follows is an attempt to sketch the particular dynamics of rural and small-town conditions that inhibit hope. I do this in the conviction that just as conditions are particular and local, so also must be the ritual and liturgical engagement with them.

7 For further discussion of difficulties in rural and small-town America, see (Brown and Swanson 2003; Wood 2008).

8 To be sure, many parts of rural America are characterized as well by non-agricultural industries such as mining or timber, but agriculture consistently remains a defining subject in the literature for discussions of America’s rural areas.

9 David B. Danbom locates the genesis of industrialized farming in the late 19th century, and couples it with what he calls the “commercialization” of farming. What many tend to think of as the later 20th century development of industrialized farming Danbom refers to as the “production revolution,” and while it remains potent, he is also careful to point out that a counter-revolution has been underway for at least the last few decades. See (Danbom 2017, chps. 7, 11, 12).

10 Even this is a somewhat dated example (Wuthnow 2015, p. 154).

11 See, for example, John Deere’s comments to the copyright office advocating copyright protections to extend to the prevention of circumventing technological protection measures (“TPMs”) on their equipment even for the purposes of repair: (Bartholomew n.d.).

12 Sonya Salamon argues that family land transfers constitute an essential aspect of understanding rural social relationships and communities. See (Salamon 1992).

13 In this, Wuthnow’s chapter on farm families is most valuable (Wuthnow 2015, chp. 1).

14 Qtd. in (Wuthnow 2018, p. 101).

15 (Thomas 1981, II-II, qq17, art. 1). For a detailed discussion on Thomas Aquinas’s thought regarding hope, see (Doyle 2012).

16 See John 20: 19–29.

17 This is perhaps most poignant in the account of Jesus’s appearance on the road to Emmaus, where the disciples end up recognizing Jesus not just because of what he looked like, but because of what he did in their presence (the breaking of the bread—see Luke 24: 13–35), but all the resurrection accounts include some aspect of the disciples recognizing Jesus (except perhaps the shorter ending of Mark).

18 Despair and presumption are the contrary vices that traditionally oppose hope. See (Thomas 1981, II-II, qq. 20–21; Elliot 2017, chps. 4, 5).

19 (Wuthnow 2015, p. 82). Italics in original.

20 (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2021). For an example of a commentary linking this document to Joe Biden, see (National Catholic Reporter Editorial Staff 2021).

21 It is in this sense that Virgil Michel spoke in the early 20th century of liturgy as the basis for social reform and regeneration. The liturgy teaches Christians in ways that rhetoric and propaganda cannot (see, for example, Michel 1936a, pp. 198–202; 1936b, pp. 9–14).

22 I should note here that in this example, I do *not* assume a heterosexual couple, though many Christian denominations do so.

23 In this, Bruce Morrill’s work *Divine Worship and Human Healing* would be illuminative (Morrill 2009). What Morrill does with healing as social would be helpful to think through as communal as well (in the context of rural moral communities), but such a discussion runs beyond the scope of this article.

References

- Baldovin, John. 2013. Pignus Futurae Gloriae: Lurgy, Eschatology, and Hope. In *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*. Edited by Richard Lennan and Nancy Piena-Madrid. New York: Paulist, pp. 142–54.
- Bartholomew, Darin. n.d. Long Comment Regarding a Proposed Exemption under 17 U.S.C. 1201. Available online: https://copyright.gov/1201/2015/comments-032715/class%2021/John_Deere_Class21_1201_2014.pdf (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Benzow, August. 2020. *Rural America is Not All Trump Country: A Closer Look at the Rural Counties that Biden Won*. Washington, D.C.: Economic Innovation Group, Available online: <https://eig.org/rural-america-is-not-all-trump-country> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Brown, David L., and Louis E. Swanson, eds. 2003. *Challenges for Rural America in the 21st Century*. University Park: Pennsylvania University.
- Carr, Patrick J., and Maria J. Kefalas. 2009. *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*. Boston: Beacon.
- Chambers, David W. 2016. *Building the Moral Community: Radical Naturalism and Emergence*. London: Lexington.

- Chauvet, Louis-Marie. 1995. *Symbol and Sacrament*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
- Clemmer, Don. 2020. 'Catholics for Trump' puts Fr. Frank Pavone Back in the Spotlight. *National Catholic Reporter*. May 18. Available online: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/catholics-trump-puts-fr-frank-pavone-back-spotlight> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Cobb, Aaron D., and Adam Green. 2017. The Theological Virtue of Hope as a Social Virtue. *Journal of Analytic Theology* 5: 230–50. [CrossRef]
- Cramer, Katherine J. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Danbom, David B. 2017. *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.
- Dias, Elizabeth, and Ruth Graham. 2022. The Growing Religious Fervor in the American Right: 'This is a Jesus Movement'. *The New York Times*. April 6. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/06/us/christian-right-wing-politics.html> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Dodson, Dod. 2019. How Much Is That Combine in the Window? *The News-Gazette*. June 25. Available online: https://www.news-gazette.com/news/how-much-is-that-combine-in-the-window/article_01a8f117-72b2-54d1-9dae-b3152063f8c0.html (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Doyle, Dominc. 2012. *The Promise of Christian Humanism: Thomas Aquinas on Hope*. New York: Crossroad.
- Doyle, Dominic. 2013. 'A Future Difficult, Yet Possible Good': Defining Christian Hope. In *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*. Edited by Richard Lennan and Nancy Piena-Madrid. New York: Paulist, pp. 16–27.
- Duncan, Cynthia M. 2014. *Worlds Apart: Poverty and Politics in Rural America*, 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press.
- Elliot, David. 2017. *Hope and Christian Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Frechette, Christopher. 2013. 'Happy Are Those Who Fear The Lord': Hope, Desire, and Transformative Worship. In *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*. Edited by Richard Lennan and Nancy Piena-Madrid. New York: Paulist, pp. 128–41.
- Gardner, Bruce L. 2002. *American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How It Flourished and What It Cost*. Cambridge: Harvard University.
- Gibson, David. 2016. Bishop Launches Probe of Priest Who Posed with Fetus on the Altar. *Religion News Service*. November 9. Available online: <https://religionnews.com/2016/11/09/bishop-launches-probe-of-priest-who-posed-with-fetus-on-the-altar/> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Hammond, Samuel, and Robert Orr. 2021. Report: Measuring the Child Tax Credit's Economic and Community Impact. *Niskanen Center*. August 2. Available online: <https://www.niskanencenter.org/report-measuring-the-child-tax-credits-economic-and-community-impact> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Hassan, Steven. 2012. I Was a Moonie Cult Leader. By Emine Saner. *The Guardian*. September 3. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/03/moonie-cult-leader> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Jaycox, Michael P. 2016. The Civic Virtues of Social Anger: A Critically Reconstructed Normative Ethic for Public Life. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 36: 123–43. [CrossRef]
- Karni, Annie, and Ruth Graham. 2022. Archbishop Bars Pelosi from Communion over Abortion Stance. *The New York Times*. May 20. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/us/politics/pelosi-communion-abortion.html> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Macgregor, Lyn C. 2010. *Habits of the Heartland: Small-Town Life in Modern America*. Ithaca: Cornell University.
- McGreal, Chris. 2020. Where Christian Evangelicals Worship Trump More than Jesus—Key Voters Stay Loyal to the President. *The Guardian*. January 15. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jan/15/evangelical-christian-swing-voters-stay-loyal-donald-trump-wisconsin-2020-election#top> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Medina, Jennifer. 2022. The Traveling Trump Show. *The New York Times*. February 11. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/us/politics/trump-rally-texas.html> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Michel, Virgil. 1936a. Back to the Liturgy. *Orate Fratres* 11: 9–14.
- Michel, Virgil. 1936b. Frequent Communion and Social Regeneration. *Orate Fratres* 10: 198–202.
- Morrill, Bruce. 2009. *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
- Munoz, Eduardo. 2018. Couples Lug AR-15 Assault Rifles to Pennsylvania Church Blessing. *Reuters*. February 28. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-guns-church/couples-lug-ar-15-assault-rifles-to-pennsylvania-church-blessing-idUSKCN1GC2V3> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- National Catholic Reporter Editorial Staff. 2021. Editorial: US Bishops' Eucharist Document Has Always Been About Biden. *National Catholic Reporter*. November 11. Available online: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/editorial-us-bishops-eucharist-document-has-always-been-about-biden> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Reimer-Barry, Emily. 2019. Another Pro-Life Movement is Possible. *CTSA Proceedings* 74: 21–41.
- Rowlands, D.W., and Hannah Love. 2021. Mapping Rural America's Diversity and Demographic Change. *Brookings Institute*. September 28. Available online: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2021/09/28/mapping-rural-americas-diversity-and-demographic-change/> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Salamon, Sonya. 1992. *Prairie Patrimony: Farming, Family, and Community in the Midwest*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

- Sargent, Greg. 2021. The GOP Scamming of Rural Trump Voters Continues: A New Study Shows the Latest. *The Washington Post*. August 2. Available online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/02/gop-scamming-rural-trump-voters-continues-new-study-shows-latest/> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Sherman, Jennifer. 2009. *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Thomas, Aquinas. 1981. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame: Ave Maria.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2021. *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2020. *Minnesota Ag News—2020 Crop Production*; Saint Paul. Available online: https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Minnesota/Publications/Crops_Press_Releases/2021/MN-Crop-Production-Annual-01-21.pdf (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2021. *Minnesota Ag News—2021 Corn County Estimates*; Saint Paul. Available online: https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Minnesota/Publications/County_Estimates/2022/MN-CtyEst-Corn-02-22.pdf (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- University of Minnesota Extension. n.d. Available online: <https://extension.umn.edu/economic-development/rural-brain-gain-migration> (accessed on 22 June 2022).
- Valentino, Nicholas A., Ted Brader, Eric W. Groenendyk, Krysha Gregorowicz, and Vincent L. Hutchings. 2011. Election Night's Alright for Fighting: The Role of Emotions in Political Participation. *The Journal of Politics* 73: 156–70. [CrossRef]
- Wood, Richard. 2008. *Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2012. *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2015. *In the Blood: Understanding America's Farm Families*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2018. *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America*. Princeton: Princeton University.