

APOSTOLIC FREEDOM

THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

By GRAHAM DOWELL

‘**W**HAT’S MY TURN today may be thine tomorrow’. Those spine-chilling words were spoken by the worthy Dr Fuller 300 years ago, when this country was in the throes of a social and constitutional revolution. They might well be spoken to us today by any of Dom Helder Camara’s parishioners or by anyone in the Third or Fourth Worlds living out his ‘revolution of rising expectations’. As we look out from our churches and seminaries, our grey ghettos and not-so-ivory towers, we cannot but be appalled both by the gravity of ecological crisis and by the lack of integrity with which we approach it: integrity both as personal (in the sense that I am conscious that my practice never measures up to my pretensions) and as corporate (in that the power of the Gospel seems to us and to the world fatally eroded by the institutional involvement of the Church in an unjust, corrupt economic *status quo*).

Preoccupation with economic growth, which dominated the ‘fifties and ‘sixties, has brought nothing but disenchantment in the ‘seventies. If we still need convincing, we should listen to one of the more realistic development economists, Professor René Dumont:

It is one and the same system which organizes the exploitation of the workers and the degradation of living and working conditions and puts the whole earth in danger. . . . Growth has not done away with inequalities, it has accentuated them. . . . Our expansion has been brought about largely through the pillage of the Third World, through under-payment for raw materials, including oil, until 1971. This pillage has made possible our unparalleled wastage of all these resources. The famine is due to the breaking down of the traditional customs, grain reserves, and irresponsible export of cultures. It is also caused by the extravagant spending of the élite who want to live in western style at the expense of the agricultural and industrial equipment of their countries.

So when we consider our apostolic task we cannot but be conscious that this is the base we start from: this gap, that widens every moment, between our ‘over-developed’ and the so-called ‘developing’ societies (whichever euphemism we adopt) is also the credibility gap that divides the preacher from the preached-to.

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The recent energy-crisis has high-lighted both the frustrations and sicknesses of our own society and our desperate search for alternatives. Wherever we look: in the fields of housing, transport, schools, health, prison, the family — we feel caught up in the scrambled complexities of our western technology. If you want a reason for the search, look around you! And if you want a portmanteau word for it all, it is 'alienation', with its general malaise, loss of vision, sense of purposelessness. We feel we have lost out in human values, and long for security again. This may lead to the authoritarian embrace (of left or right) or to the 'politics of envy', the agonies of a divided society (Us and Them). Or to experiments in other ways of living, moving, governing, punishing and reforming.

Clearly this search is sending many of the young down the various highways and (some rather improbable) byways of spirituality: and even leading some to question the Followers in the Way. If the world is as it is, it is because we are all *against* each other; it cannot be different until we live *for* each other, they say. Somehow, co-operation has to replace competition as the driving-force in human affairs. Does the Kingdom as taught and lived by Jesus provide the clue? And does the Church, as it seeks, however ineptly and halfheartedly, to build the Kingdom? Ah, there's the rub! I believe there are vitally important insights buried in the concept of the Kingdom; and we do well to acknowledge them for ourselves, and then go out and share them with others. I summarize these under three headings:

1. *The idea of 'Community'*

The concepts of 'Spirit' and 'Community' are deeply embedded in the Old Testament and closely linked. The individual does not exist 'by himself', but as part of God's chosen *laos*, a member of the community of Israel. So the sins which destroy those delicate relationships that bind the people together are the objects of the fiercest prophetic denunciation: greed (*betsa*), in 'adding house to house', injustice, exploitation. These are all sources of alienation.

The early christians seem almost obsessed by the dangers of greed (*pleonexia*) and the need to live by grace and not by grab. Their alternative society was based first and foremost on sharing; and those who, like Ananias and Sapphira, 'held back', were a threat to the *koinonia* of love and received the harshest of punishments.

The contemporary Church finds itself once again being taken seriously as the focus of local community. We have found that there are important norms for community: not too large, lest it be distorted and people

find they have lost significance, nor too small, lest we find ourselves suffocated and over-domesticated by the nuclear family. Either can lead to loss of creativity and true communication/meeting. House-churches, face-to-face groups (even committees!), action-orientated groups, can all bring their own refreshing insights into the meaning of community. Shorn of pretension and pseudo-sociological jargon, they become places where we live for each other.

2. *The theology of 'Enough'*

The phrase is John Taylor's, from his book *Enough is Enough*. Again, the seeds lie in the Old Testament with its injunctions to practise tithing and stewardship. To its lasting credit, the medieval Church attempted to grapple with the whole question of usury, wages, credit and the *justum pretium*. St Thomas laid it down that 'a contract is fair when both the parties benefit equally', a maxim which might be writ large over the offices of the Board of Trade and the OPEC nations!

Our over-developed society may draw its lesson from the mystical manna of the desert: 'each of you is to gather as much as he can eat'. Not a call to apostolic poverty or extravagant asceticism: but a demand for a balance and restraint which are necessary for the continuance of life: 'those who had gathered more had not too much, and those who had gathered less had not too little'. But those who tried to hoard it found it bred maggots and stank. 'It is that stink which rises today', comments John Taylor, 'from all over our despoiled environment'.

It is also corroding the atmosphere of our local communities: and it is forcing us to pay close attention to the question of size. As St Thomas wrestled with the just price, so Dr Schumacher in our day is wrestling with the Apollyon of giantism and forcing us to examine the 'right size' of any enterprise. As we know to our cost, our gods are too small and our units usually too large. If we wish to nourish the seeds of self-help and 'people's power', we must pay close attention to the question of scale. Whether it be the social services, industrial management or (God help us!) ecclesiastical bureaucracy, people can feel frustrated and ineffective, over-awed by complexity, when the scale is too large. But on a small enough scale their resources can be mobilized; and this discovery may be 'nothing less than the condition of survival', says Dr Schumacher, for the hitherto affluent societies of the West. I am reminded of the classical definition of sin as 'matter out of place', and of the kingdom of grace growing small and beautiful in the human heart. Christians have never been over-impressed by size; and if we are true

to the principle of Incarnation, we of all people should be concerned with simplifying ('any fool can make things more complex, it takes a genius to simplify') and returning to the human scale.

3. *A Eucharistic life-style*

All these considerations are *prolegomena* for a style of life which is free, apostolic and 'credible'. Its key-notes must be grace, gratitude, self-giving: the sharing of resources which lies at the heart of the breaking of bread. As Dan Berrigan remarks, to read the Bible and to celebrate the Eucharist, if properly understood, are subversive acts: they strike at the spirit of grab and greed, ambition and competitiveness, that marks secular society. In this sense, any 'alternative society' is subversive, in that it threatens established values of bourgeois economics and dethrones the idol of growth.

It was with the object of giving flesh to these bones that a group of us at the Hampstead Christian Study Centre organized a course on 'Alternatives', asking ourselves what we could learn from the varied and exotic options presented to us, and where they could realistically be applied to our corporate and personal christian life. What follows is a summary of my own findings and a comment on work in progress, if only to invite constructive criticism and wider participation in our 'exploration into choice'.

(a) We are called, perhaps compelled, to work towards a society that is both ascetic and (in Illich's phrase) convivial. 'To live more simply that others may simply live'. If we are to be credible in local terms we cannot ignore the demands of the universal. Similarly, we cannot wring our hands over global deprivation and human diminishment without this making some difference to the way we live now. Our perspective has to be bi-focal to be credible to ourselves, as much as to the world.

As befits a community centred on the Common Meal, this involves paying close attention to the kind as well as the quantity of food we eat. Not that vegetarianism becomes a dogma, any more than pacifism does in our search for the non-violent alternative. But any group conscious of the need to respond sensitively and intelligently to world crisis will try to develop alternative patterns of eating (as well as living and working), creating and consuming food resources, in a way consistent with the known facts of world-deprivation and the warnings of future shortage which can no longer be ignored or left to Doomwatchers.

(b) *Scale* is of vital importance. Much of our malaise stems from over-dependence on central government in areas where we could more rationally become independent and inter-dependent at the local level. The energy crisis (the cost of transporting materials and 'shifting stuff about') is already forcing us to use local resources more economically. Followers of Dr Schumacher and the Intermediate Technology Development Group are familiar with his warnings and proposals, which have now gone far past the experimental stage. Briefly, it means that only what cannot be done at local level — or regional level — must be referred to national centralized executives. The aim of the 'Small is beautiful' movement is to turn back the tide of mass migration to the cities; re-establish rural communities which are threatened with elimination; diversify, simplify, scale down our technology, and wherever possible use people and resources where they are to be found.

(c) *History* can teach us much, if only of the dangers of utopian dreams and illusions. No one can expect such a subversive approach to be accepted without opposition, though it is remarkable how much more open and receptive industrialists are to new approaches since the emergence of OPEC. A Church which believes in original sin will avoid the pitfalls of Robert Owne's *Harmony Hall*, and beware of new forms of despotism and authoritarianism under the guise of rational democracy. Even benevolent social engineering has a sinister ring as we approach the dreaded date of 1984.

(d) Nevertheless, any real re-orientation must pay urgent attention to our *educational* institutions and curricula. The Church may no longer be in any position to shape educational policy: but in its own life does it not largely perpetuate the hidden assumptions of school? 'We have the goodies — here they are — consume them!' Have we listened closely to the demands of Illich: 'Get at the facts, get access to the tools and bear the responsibility for the limits within which either can be used'? Or, in our desire to take education out of school, have we simply passed the buck to so-called Free Schools, which may only create a mirage of freedom, and render their graduates 'impotent for life in a society that bears little resemblance to the protected gardens in which they have been cultivated'?

(e) The shadow of *violence* dominates the social as much as the international scene. Much of it is concealed in institutional forms, as we hide away the perpetrators and indirect victims of social violence in prisons and mental institutions. Some of it takes more overt forms in class-struggle, pornographic exploitation of the weaker and more vulnerable, generation-conflict and the sex war. Christians have meekly

submitted to a society enriched by the arms trade, fragmented by the flag-wavers, frozen in cold-war attitudes. And yet, in the Way of the Cross, we have a unique insight into the nature of conflict and its resolution, its creative as well as destructive potential. For all that, we have connived at a natural timidity which pretends that conflict will simply go away or get lost in the safe, soft under-belly of moderation and liberal attitudes.

There are, of course, magnificent exceptions to prove the rule: the patient witness of pressure-groups from the Society of Friends to Radical Alternatives to Prison and *Pax Christi*, from the Iona Community in Scotland to the Community of l'Arche in France — and many others. But it is largely because the mainstream christian communities down the ages have ducked the issues of conflict and violence that we have shown ourselves criminally impotent materially to affect the scene in Northern Ireland. One common denominator that marks the wide variety of groups pressing for alternatives is their search for non-violent methods: a *technology* that respects the environment and pays proper attention to the effect of work (and the absence of work) on people; a transport-system that is not self-defeating, respects privacy and the pedestrian, conserves fuel and does not add suffocatingly to the sprawl and scramble of urban chaos.

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Some of the proposals put forward by groups operating under the general umbrella of 'alternative society' are more viable and credible than others. It can only be by experiment, sifting with constructive and critical care the inspired from the merely dotty, that we can find for ourselves a life-style that is more 'viable and credible' than the one we generally regard as 'normal' in the post-christian West. We may feel encouraged that emphasis is shifting from the giantism of the 'sixties to the resources of local communities being belatedly rediscovered in the 'seventies. The day of the parish pump is not over — it may not have properly arrived. It is also encouraging to recall, in Aldous Huxley's words, that 'for anyone who is interested in human beings and their so largely unrealized potentialities, even the silliest experiment has value, if only as demonstrating what ought to be done'.

A response to

'THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES'

GRAHAM DOWELL began his paper with a quotation from Dr Fuller. I would like to begin by offering a parallel quotation: 'When you see a cloud looming up in the west, you say at once that rain is coming, and so it does; and when the wind is from the south, you say it will be hot, and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the face of the earth and the sky. How is it that you do not know how to interpret these times?' (Lk 12, 54-56)

For several years now I have felt very concerned about the issues raised in this paper. I have felt concerned not just within the ivory-tower situation of a university chaplaincy, but in the experience of working in a city with a wide variety of groups, ranging from students to ex-prisoners. Much of the time I am trying to find alternative styles of living for these people. And it is not unduly dramatic to say that one is concerned here with the whole quality of human life in the future, with the question of whether or not we shall be able 'to build houses of peace for our children'. We are involved in crisis, and in every critical moment there are positive elements: promise, hope, challenge. The question I wish to raise is how we begin to act positively in these critical moments so that we can become a sign-community: that is, a community which responds to the problems of our time and which speaks to our world.

First of all we have to take the world as it really is and not the world as we would like it to be. Anything we do will have to be very simple, very small, and to start from where we are. As Dan Berrigan has pointed out, it is useless to try to solve the world's problems on a global scale or 'out there'. We must try to alter the situation where we are at the moment: to make of our communities, our theology, our eucharist-centred lives, instruments of change.

Secondly, we have to clarify in our minds how we see the Church. Do we think of a 'Church of the masses' where the important thing is to keep everybody in? Or do we see the Church as a distinctive leaven in society? In other words, do we see Christ's work of salvation as something that has happened for everyone, and the Church as the 'sign-community' that celebrates this great truth? On the latter view, whether a person is a card-carrying member or not becomes a secondary consideration. As Karl Rahner observes in *The shape of the Church to come*: 'Maybe for one person to move ahead we have to leave twenty people behind'. Coming from Rahner, that is a staggering sentence. Yet if we recoil from its implications, perhaps it is because we are unwilling to think of the Church as a prophetic community at all.

Another consideration which regularly troubles me is that Christ, and in particular the Jesus of John's gospel, is one who shines out. He is self-authenticating. He is able to say of himself: 'I am the light of the world; here I am; I do not judge you; it is you who put yourselves in darkness'. Somehow, the Church must embody and show forth the presence of this Jesus in our world. Now I see Jesus, not as a social reformer, but nevertheless very

much on the edge of ecclesiastical society and of the establishment, critical of the society around him and ultimately crucified because of his criticism. He does not conform to the world. This troubles me when I look around and ask about myself and about the Christian Church in western Europe, especially in England, which I see as wholly retrogressive. I think that we often fight against shadows and usually the wrong shadows, whilst the real darkness passes us by or we become embedded in it.

If we are to find alternative life-styles, we need constant co-operative endeavour. A sign-community is something other than a middle-class theological trip. There is more to it than freaking out, doing one's own thing on country farms, or living macro-biotically. There has to be a political dimension, and I use the word 'political' in the widest sense. We have to do with the political wherever there are communities reconciling and resisting all the dehumanization in society: exploitation of people, the war machine in which we are glibly involved, imprisonment in high-rise flats where futile lives inevitably erupt out of sheer frustration into vandalism and violence. So the sign-community will have to be prepared for tension and conflict. We fool ourselves if we think otherwise. Against all the forces that deny the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man in Christ, contemplation and the Eucharist are, as Berrigan says, subversive activities. This means that our Eucharistic celebration sets us free and is hostile to the *status quo* of the establishment. We do have examples of such groups: the Catholic Worker Group in America, which had a real influence in changing the lay conscience about war. Many are being affected by Taizé; not the people who just go to Taizé, but those who form Taizé cells scattered all over the country. They are, in fact, living religious lives in the traditional sense, though in mixed communities: living extremely simply and prayerfully, sensitive about how they spend money, with the Eucharist at the centre of their lives, true missionaries of an impressive kind. These are the young people of whom we so often despair.

Over against such movements is the general sense of inertia: people will not change their life-styles until they are forced to do so. The media are choked with examples of injustices, of economic crises, the threat of starvation in twenty or thirty years. But we don't do anything about it. There is talk of total chaos in my part of the world on account of prolonged drought last summer, but no positive remedies are being sought. That is the way people seem to be. At the same time it would be a denial of the resurrection to say that people are completely cynical, or completely conditioned by environment. More accurately, if I can borrow from Saul Alinski, I think that most people act out of self-interest. That is not the same as saying that they act selfishly. Alinski's method for changing society is to try to find out what is in each person's interest and to tune into that. The gospel is, in this sense, an appeal to self-interest. We are appealing to the self-interest of radical communities when we say that they have to be not only austere, but convivial. They have to make it clear

that they are signs of life. Their role is not to serve as a continual reprimand, but rather to show what the joy and freedom of the gospel is really like.

Finally I want to say that as I move around different groups — not merely student groups — I am always amazed by the potential there is among the very people who are saying: 'How can we change things?' They are not just talking about the Church or inciting each other to bishop-bashing; they are asking 'how can we change the society in which we live?' And yet most of these people are waiting for 'them' to do it, whoever, 'they' may happen to be. I feel more and more that we must take personal responsibility for our own integrity as human beings and not let our lives drift, waiting for change to happen 'out there'; that we need to be responsible for our own living, for our own response to the gospel, and to act accordingly, whether we are members of a religious community or not.

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