CHRISTIAN FAITH AND COUNTER-CULTURE: THE APPEAL OF THE COMMUNES

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There is a popular superstition, carefully cultivated by some spokesmen for large corporations, that the genius of the American way of life has been the relentless devotion of individuals to self-interest. The slogans carved above this ideology are "individual enterprise," "rugged individualism," "private enterprise," etc. In recent years, with the rise of clerical fascism, journals such as *Christian Beacon* and *Christian Economics* have even perjured the ethics of Jesus to glorify individual selfishness. We may perhaps forgive Ayn Rand, an avowed atheist, for her latterday Nietzschean philosophy: it is hard to forgive the false prophets who try to recast the figure of the Great Shepherd in the form of a 19th century Robber Baron.

Whatever the usefulness of such constructs may be to screen the activities of the financial/military/industrial complex from public inspection and control, and however much revenue its purveyance may bring in for the prophets of the Baals, this Common Myth has little basis in history. For one thing, the economic development of the entire continent west of the Alleghenies has been one vast public works project. When the Articles of Confederation broke down, proving that a loose alliance of sovereign states spelled the death of America, and the Constitution of the USA replaced the feeble Confederation, all western lands came under the control of Congress. All major economic expansion thereafter – canals, railroad building, schools and land grant colleges, homesteading, lumber and cattle and oil industries, veterans' bonuses, wheat and corn and hogs – was heavily subsidized by grants of public property. Bail-out bills for mismanaged corporations and governmental subsidies for non-competitive industry are not new to our history. Quite the contrary: they are expressions of government support, of "state socialism" if you will, which has dominated and controlled our national economy from the beginning of the Federal union.

More than that, at the level that most of us live, the rule of survival and development has been not "dog-eat-dog" but mutual aid. The loners – with the possible exception of the more lucky of the mountain men – perished. The survivers were those who practiced cooperation and collective responsibility. Those who crossed the "Great American Desert" to the West Coast, and those who came after them to settle the

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"Great Plains" (as this area of which Denver is a major center came later to be called), often travelled from the east as organized companies or even congregations. They practiced mutual aid, or they perished. Moreover the societies they established were a unique development in human collective effort. The great University of Texas historian, Walter Prescott Webb, has built upon and added a new level of understanding to the frontier hypothesis of Frederick Jackson Turner: as soon as the settlers moved out of the forests of the eastern highlands onto the plains, they laid the foundations of what is to this day essentially an "oasis civilization".[1] Two of the important consequences of the cooperative style of life on the Great Plains were these: 1) women acquired political rights much earlier than in the east, and 2) significant inter-faith tolerance and even cooperation came earlier to the great universities of the "heartland."

Beyond the socializatioin which has been built into the real (if sometimes suppressed) pages of American history, there is a substantial record of social planning. Not only has the government been actively engaged in subsidizing all phases and levels of economic and social development but the citizens themselves have developed an extraordinary variety of voluntary communities. Earlier Americans not only *talked* about "covenants": they founded societies upon that concept and practice, from Natick to Deseret . Earlier Americans not only *talked* about "brotherhood": they gathered themselves into orders, some of them secret, which controlled legislatures, founded universities, launched corporations and otherwise shaped society.

The story of American history is not a story of rampant individualism, but a story of government subsidy matched by voluntary associations. And in no period of our history has the emphasis upon voluntary community been so strong as today. Contrary to the fabricated myth, today's communes are legitimate expressions of a motif that has been central to the American way of life since the beginning of the republic.

As Benjamin Zablocki has put it in the first sentences of his extensive study of the *Bruderhof*, "Community is an idea whose time has come. America is experiencing a flowering of communitarian experiments unequalled even by the great utopian movements of the early nineteenth century."[2] To a Karl Marx, such "utopian socialism" is retrogressive: the problem is to gain power and to use it. To a member of the *Bruderhof*, the problem lies within: to turn men's hearts to mutual aid, by example to render the vision of the Good Society credible. A recent survey reports that there are today in America over

[1]Webb, Walter Prescott, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1931).
[2]Zablocki, Benjamin D., *The Joyful Community* (Balto.: Penguin Bks., 1971), p. 17.

30,000 communes, most of them of much more recent vintage than the *Bruderhof* movement and most of them more clearly experimental.

The sheer numbers alone indicate a substantial bloc of discontent with the direction of the society as a whole, even if there is still disagreement as to how to live out the alternative. Most of today's communes have moved beyond the problems of settling a continent sometimes in optimistic cooperation with government subsidization, to overt alienation from the direction America is going.

Yet certain lessons can still be learned by study of communes of a simpler and happier America. When we study the intentional communities of the 19th century, we find certain generalizations can be made as to what builds up a successful and continuing community and what virtually guarantees a short life.[3] For one thing, the communities like Mount Lebanon and Economy and Amana and Zion that shared a clear religious commitment lasted far longer than those based on social experimentation alone. And before we agree to harsh judgments against some of today's more exotic manifestations – "hippie communes" and the like – we would do well to remember how many generations of sometimes bizarre experiment were required before Christian monastics finally learned the necessary lessons and developed the essential rules of community life. Once that was achieved, the communes of that time were able to carry culture across nearly a thousand years of general barbarism in Europe.

The young people of contemporary communes have time, for they have generally thrown out the clock along with other parts of the Machine which they feel to be dehumanizing 20th century man. They are not the first to elaborate such counter-culture, but they are by far the most numerous and the most impressive constructive protest yet to appear.

Some of us here can remember the beginnings of a communal movement during our own student years. In the 1930s – in the face of the Great Depression and the rise of great military machines – there was a remarkable upsurge of fellowships and brotherhoods and intentional communities. Much of the development in Britain rotated around the Student Christian Movement. There was a handbook by Spencer and Hewish which contains much still useful material;[4] and the most thoroughly worked out in-church program was prepared by a Commission of the Church Assembly and called *Towards the Conver-*

[3]Cf. my Prefatory Essay to the Schocken edition of Charles Nordhoff's *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York, 1965), pp. ix-xxix.

[4]Spencer, Malcolm, and Hewish, H. S., *Fellowship Principles and Practice* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930).

sion of England.[5] In the meantime, many persons of no religious conviction but strong humanistic bent turned toward intentional community. The fullest reports from various experiments were put out by the Community Service Committee – in occasional newsletters and in three paperback books: *Community in a Changing World, Community in Britain* and *Community Overseas.* Members of a number of the communities limited their incomes to the National Average, using all surplus for altruistic purposes.

Probably the most significant single development, combining Christian concern and economic program, was Iona. Iona, founded in 1938 by George F. MacLeod, combines disciplined Christian fellowship with a strong critique of the religious, political and economic establishments. At the heart of the fellowship is an Order, with fairly strong commitment to mutual aid and a common work discipline. The Iona program has been published in a book by MacLeod: *We Shall Re-build,* with an American edition issued by John Oliver Nelson for Kirkridge in 1945. Several additional books by George MacLeod, T. Ralph Morton and Mark Gibbs have subsequently appeared, telling the Iona story and applying these insights to the contemporary thrust for church renewal and reform. I think especially of the two books by Morton and Gibbs: *God's Frozen People* and *God's Lively People,* both in paperback from Westminster Press.

In this country, too, intentional community was cultivated. No one contributed more to expounding the role of small communities to the health of the general society than Arthur Morgan.[6] His leadership as a college president and as first head of the TVA, and his writings and consultancies gave strong initial impulse to communities of the most varied forms: rural cooperatives, communal farms, village planning, voluntary communities with a strong foundation in mutual aid.

Nor was a parallel initiative lacking in the churches. Looking back over three decades, it is informative to be reminded of the way the United Christian Youth Movement of the 1930s also produced a strong emphasis upon Christian cell groups and intentional communities. Many went from the movement to join the Bruderhof in the USA or Paraguay, and many more experimented with coop houses, rural collectives, third orders. Among the better-known programs which have survived and developed are Pendle Hill, Yokefellow, and Koinonia Farm. From 1939 to 1949 an annual conference was held under the auspices of the Conference on Disciplined Life and Service, which

[5] *Towards the Conversion of England* (London: Church Assembly, 1945), Canadian edition, 1946.

[6] Cf. Morgan, Arthur E., *The Community: Primary View of Society* (Yellow Springs, Ohio: Community Service, Inc. 1942).

produced a Newsletter and several flyers and pamphlets as well as annual conference reports. It is instructive to check one such pamphlet, published first in 1940. War and violence are condemned, along with the success-oriented philosophy and "assertive egocentricity of modern man," and it is argued that both the church and the democratic society in general need a rebirth of community and mutual aid.[7] It was taken for granted that a truly Christian people could not float with the current, belly up like a dead fish, but must swim vigorously – in a world of violence and de-humanization – against the stream. Although we knew too little about it at the time – and were virtually unaware of the larger tragedy which was to be played out in the Death Camps of Nazi Europe – the witness of the men of the Confessing Church (especially Martin Niemoeller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth) was prominent in our thinking about the style and stance of a renewed church.

After the war, the tremendously impressive work of the Kirchentag and the Evangelical Academies arose like a phoenix out of the ashes of Europe. Those men who survived the Hitler time, remembering the re-affirmation of Reformation confessions of faith at Barmen (1934) and the ecumenical act of repentance at Stuttgart (1946), with their younger colleagues took the lead in putting Germany back on the track of "the other Germany" – the Germany of humane tradition, and in overcoming the naked weaknesses of the old *Pastorenkirche*. In partnership with centers in other countries – like Kerk en Wereld in the Netherlands, Sigtuna in Sweden, Boldern in Switzerland – the academies have affected the style of adult Christian education throughout the ecumenical world. Within the specialized sectors of an intricate society, at least, they have helped to shape the direction of events.

Yet I cannot escape the feeling that somehow or another the churches in America were passed by. Our laymen's boards and evangelistic agencies still articulate the work of the laity in terms of jobs fit for non-clergy – in conventional language and in conventional designs. Those programs which have had striking success in developing new, experimental patterns of life and work among the whole people of God have done so with the support of some local congregations or schools but virtually independent of denominational structures. The most effective new centers – East Harlem Protestant Parish, the Community Renewal Society, the Chicago Ecumenical Institute, Glide Memorial – are in some sense "products of the church." But the denominations themselves have not changed. They have not developed models. Neither have they shaped the direction of events here as have

[7] "Tens"; published at Central Methodist Church, Detroit, Michigan.

the centers in Europe and Africa. Since 1939 the churches have been urged and petitioned to break open, to create new life-styles, to give a home to especially dedicated voluntary communities of lay life and work. A number of articles a generation ago referred to that time of crises, centuries ago, when the church figured out how to house and support and keep in effective connection the "third orders." That recurring appeal went unheeded: today there may be 30,000 communes in America, and very few of them have any use for "organized religion."

In this stance, most of our American communes are very different from the European and African centers. They seem rather to share in a general religious ferment evident in many traditional religions during the last century, most of which have departed from earlier instiutional loyalties. Professor Ernst Benz of Marburg has dealt with a considerable number of such movements toward new forms of religious community in a recent book.[8] He discusses the new religions of Japan, Cao-Dai in Vietnam, the Aurobindo Ashram in Hinduism, the Native American Church, the Black Muslims, the messianic cults of the Bantus and other African peoples. Arising out of Islam, Confucianism, Christianity, Shinto, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, the new religions show a striking agreement as to what is true religion. The four most common emphases are these:

1. A new divine revelation, usually centered in the person or teaching of a charismatic person;

2. A strong emphasis upon personal wholeness, with spiritual well-being and physical health combined;

3. A strong social ethic, affirming the importance of the world even in those that come out of Hinduism and Buddhism;

4. A dynamic based upon the spontaneous and voluntary activity of all lay members.

Professor Benz then asks what the extraordinary and rapid growth of these new religions implies for the religious establishments.

In his massive history and analysis of the pentecostal movement—which in less than a hundred years has grown to the point where it can count the largest Christian congregation in Scandanavia, the largest Protestant Church in Brazil, the most extensive missionary work in several Central American and African nations — Professor Walter Hollenweger puts a like question to the conventional Christian churches.[9] He sees three powerful components in the movement:

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[8]Benz, Ernst, *Neue Religionen* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1971), pp. 18-22.

[9]Hollenweger, Walter J., *Enthusiastiches Christentum* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1969), pp. 244f, 465f, 517f.

1. emphasis upon the role of the laity, with women equal to men;

2. a world wide, ecumenical scope overcoming both racial and national divisions;

3. a strong eschatology – a lively confidence in the final realization of righteousness and mercy, justice and peace.

The pentecostal movement has had considerable influence in Catholic, Lutheran and Episcopalian circles, but most of its current has been channeled into new denominations and missions. The new religions discussed by Professor Benz have plainly broken the bonds of the traditional faiths. Yet in both sets of evidence we find that truths are being stressed which are fundamental to Christianity when Christianity has been in earnest.

When we turn to the communes, we find the same generalization can be made. They are ecumenical, breaking racial and national lines. They have charismatic leaders, but run by consensus. They are ecology buffs, frequently featuring organic foods. They have rediscovered hope. There have been, of course, aberrations – although all observers agree that such motifs as drug-cult and sexual promiscuity have been blown up by sensational journalism beyond their true significance. Much more significant, much more central to their convictions and life style – and certainly running more powerfully counter to the American way of life than dope or free sex – are *non-violence* and *mutual aid.*

Opposition to war and violence is in fact one of the oldest grounds for conscious efforts at articulating counter-culture. While Christianity and Roman imperialism were being amalgamated at the time of Constantine, Theodosius, and Justinian, men and women of sensitive conscience exited from the religious establishment to found the movement we now call "monasticism." Protestantism also had its communal protests. The oldest continuing Protestant communal tradition in North America, the Hutterites, began in 1528 in deliberate protest against war and violence in Christendom. They were convinced that the so-called Christian governments, then emerging into their modern phase as nation-states, were so overwhelmingly devoted to the technical skills of violence that no true Christian should breathe their atmosphere, cultivate their arts and inventions, support their power structures, fight their battles. The Hutterites were one of the four major wings of the Anabaptist movement in the Radical Reformation, and other lineal descendents – notably the Mennonites – still evidence the same devotion to the peace testimony and the common life.

Since there is a geological fault-line, still evident, between the

magisterial Reformation[10] – which carried on the parochial and ethnic patterns of the medieval church while reforming cultus and creed, and the radical Reformation – devoted to the restoration of the church at Jerusalem (Acts 2:44, 4:32) and the recovery of the lost Paradise, some attention to the historical record is justified. It is amply clear that on the Protestant record of four and a half centuries the state-churches have on rare occasions produced individual martyrs and confessors, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Helmuth von Moltke, but the development of total alternatives ("models") has come from the religious left wing.

Up until the rapid spawning of communes in the last five years, the major sources of Christian counter-culture in America were three: Radical Puritanism, Pietism and Utopian Socialism. There are important intentional communities of other origin – kibbutzim, Black Muslims, Hutterites, and so on – but the generalization still holds for the large number.

Out of radical Puritanism came communities like John Eliot's Christian Indian villages, the Shaker colonies, Brook Farm, Oneida, and a host of less intensely disciplined ventures from Plymouth to New Ark, Marietta and Walla Walla. Out of Pietism came communities like Ephrata, Bethlehem and Nazareth (under Graf Zinzendorf), Economy and Harmony, the Indian *Gnadenhütten,* Bishop Hill, Amana, Bethel and Aurora. Out of Utopian Socialism came several dozen short-lived ventures: Etienne Cabet's Icarias, Charles Fourier's phalanxes, New Harmony and many more. Oneida silverplate and Amana freezers and New Llano's tabasco sauce serve to remind us that evidence of these experiments is still with us in some form. Looking over the record, at least one generalization is possible: the communities which lasted and prospered were those sustained by a strong religious – indeed eschatological – set of convictions, and those that were ephemeral were more humanistic and sometimes anti-clerical. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that Cabet – no churchman! – called his program for the Utopian communities *Le vrai Christianisme.* Most of the intentional communities of our past have reflected, either intensely or dimly, the conflict between the religious aspirations of western civilization and the actual ways in which our social and political energies are directed and the response of persons of conscience to this dissonance.

The same thing can be said of the communes today, once we get behind the journalistic fixation on sex and dope – unfair in any case to the majority of experiments, the somewhat sensational fad of sensitivity training ("touching"), and the like. What can be learned from

[10] Williams, George H., *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946), Introduction.

the appeal of the communes and from what they do? (We have just made official announcement at Temple University of the first University Center for the Study of Communes.) Shall we refer quickly to a few examples where coherence has been attained?

1. Koinonia Farm, founded in 1942 in Georgia by Clarence Jordan and Stanley England, is a radical Christian community. In addition to economic sharing, where they verbally and practically oppose "materialism, competitiveness, and self-interest,"[11] they have a strong bent toward pacifism. They have suffered a good deal of mob violence because of their witness to inter-racial cooperation and because the law-enforcement agencies in Georgia are unreliable.

2. Reba Place Fellowship began in Evanston in the 1950s. Now numbering over 100 persons, they are an Order strongly conscious of the Anabaptist/Mennonite heritage. They practice a spartan shared economy, non-violence, group confession.

3. The Bruderhof,[12] with major centers at Woodcrest, Oak Lake and Evergreen, numbers about 750 men, women and children holding all goods and property in common. Founded in 1920 in Germany by Eberhard Arnold, a leader in the Student Christian movement of the Weimar period, they have consciously identified themselves with the Anabaptist/Hutterite tradition. They are non-resistants, honor work with the hands, cultivate plain living and high thought. For a time the movement was extensively committed to developing settlements in the back country in Paraguay. Scholars know them because they have translated and published classics as well as contemporary writings extolling the life of the True Church. Parents know them for their manufacture of Community Playthings – educational toys for children.

4. The Lama Foundation[13] in New Mexico started in 1967 and has already numbered some 300 participants. Although counted a "hippie commune" in the public eye, the community discipline is rigorous. No decisions are made without a general consensus. A vegetarian living is scratched from the topsoilless mountains, and the day begins at 5:30 A.M. Since the religious orientation is primarily eastern mysticism, the day begins with meditation. Yoga exercises, chanting and fasting all have their frequent uses. There is a waiting list for membership.

5. Esalen is a commune in California, about a decade old, which from the beginning has emphasized the cure of alcoholics and drug-

[11]Roberts, Rone E., *The New Communes* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), PB, p. 71.
[12]*Op cit.*, Zablocki, Benjamin D., *passim*.
[13]*Op cit.*, Roberts, Ron. E., pp. 63-65.

addicts. Gathered about a charismatic personality, Esalen is now the largest and wealthiest commune in the USA – owning motels, hotels, country clubs, and schools. Liquor and drugs and even tobacco are strictly forbidden. The program is now aimed not only at healing the addicted but curing the alienation of moderns whose masks and shells prevent communication and inter-dependence between human persons.

6. The Ecumenical Institute[14] in Chicago derives from the blending of two earlier programs – the North American Ecumenical Institute in Evanston and the Faith-and-Life Community in Austin, Texas. The latter was founded by Jack Lewis (now at Cornell University) in the late 1950s, the former by Walter Leibrecht (now head of Schiller College near Stuttgart) about the time of the WCC Assembly meeting in Evanston. EI in its present form emerged under the leadership of Joseph Matthews. There are now nearly 500 members of the Order, with a thorough sharing of all economic resources and a very extensive program of lay education and social revolution through the USA, Asia and Latin America.

Both historically and on the present scene, then, the intentional communities are based on a foundation of counter-culture. The values which they cultivate are preeminantly these: mutual aid, non-violence, work with the hands, appreciation of nature, simplicity of food and clothing and dwelling, liturgical discipline, worth of each human life, resistance to political and economic coersion, love of music and good books. Many in the movements have also inclined from time to time toward "modern" and/or "scientific" experiments in the education of children and in relationship between the sexes. Every one of these themes has been of importance to the church in times of reformation and renewal, and the critical question for us churchmen is why almost all of the half million or more communalists today have found it necessary to leave organized religion to find the common life, self-sacrifice, and discipline.

It is symbolic that – as all observers agree – the chief liturgical event of the communes is the common meal.[15] The common meal was also the heart of the Christian liturgy, and out of that event was elaborated a whole ethic of interpersonal and social responsibility. Supremely, the Christian re-enacted an event which reminded him that he had no right to eat cake if his brother lacked bread, that the test of his authenticity was his relationship to the hungry and the wretched of the earth. To the meal the members of the community brought their

[14]Littell, Franklin H., *The Church and the Body Politic* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 154f.

[15]Cf. Raymond Sokolov's report on "The Food at the Heart of the Commune Life," *The New York Times*, 12/2/71.

concern for the other, in the "offering," and the representative persons not only served the tables but made distribution to the poor. Today the symbolic national service is an individualistic, "spiritual" social in the White House, with "everything but the offering."

From this mad world – of corporate power called "private initiative," of militarism and imperialism called "the maintenance of peace," of conspicuous consumption called "consumer demand," of unemployment called "reserve labor force," not to mention a devaluated dollar and spiraling national debt called "sound economy" – the communards have made their exit.

A few years ago these were the young people who marched at Selma and Montgomery, confronted university authorities to challenge the service of the campuses to the war effort, and were crushed when the corrupt political machines rolled Hubert Humphrey to victory over Eugene McCarthy. Today they believe that the Establishment, both political and religious, is so bent on destruction that it cannot be turned around. There is nothing left for persons of conscience to do but to go out and establish communities, to develop models, to live not at the verbal level of consciousness but at the level of real life – of the earth, earthy.

The Christians once believed in the Incarnation, too – that the Word consists not of speculative propositions but of the Truth made flesh. What evidence can we bring forward from the churches today that the things which we state so gallantly in our pulpits and resolutions at Annual Conference are actually our living Torah? That is the level on which the communes put us to the question. Our very credibility is at stake.

Who will answer?