

Community as expression of the Kingdom of God

Three historic examples of a theology and practice of community

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Theology of Community: Theologically Rethinking Post-Modern Societies

Summary

Medieval societies have seen spectacular change and in some way, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, adapted to it. The same is true for contemporary societies. This paper will look at how three different religious and spiritual movements have responded to drastic change in regard to community: 16th century Anabaptists embodying radical reformation, and the 20th century Bokor and Hizmet movements, embodying unconditional love and self-giving service for humanity. These examples, I will suggest, demonstrate not only the possibility of faithfulness in drastic change but also how God's creative ways open (unexpected) doors to salvation - and that community has a prominent place in this.

While Reformation aimed at renewing the church (and society) by freeing it from papal dependence and from the practice of indulgences, Anabaptists wanted to go further by making faith and church membership a free choice and therefore insisted on the separation of church and state. Furthermore and in the same vein, they saw the community of believers as an expression of God's kingdom, where different rules and a different order apply, such as believer's baptism, universal priesthood, refusal to carry the sword and sharing of material goods. Thus the anabaptist movement came to be labelled *the left wing* of reformation. Clearly such radicalism posed a threat not only to the existing order, but to the emerging and struggling reformation of church and society itself. By the 21st century, many if not most of the principles affirmed by 16th centuries Anabaptists and seen as radical and dangerous then have become standard today, at least in theory: freedom of religion and conscience, separation of church and state and, to a limited degree yet increasingly, nonviolence.

This paper will sketch the main aspects of a theology of community in the anabaptist movement since reformation in Europe and beyond. Particular attention will be given to the aspects of education, service, decentralisation (bottom-up strategy) and nonviolence as markers of a community embodying or at least pointing to God's reign.

I will dare to draw some parallels to similar elements in two other movements in Europe during the second half of the 20th Century: The catholic Bokor movement in Hungary (if time allows) and the Sufi-Muslim Hizmet movement in Turkey. Both of these movements hold strong convictions and consistent practice in the area of the aspects mentioned above. The conviction that nonviolent community is key to living out God's will for peace and justice, coupled with a commitment to community accountability is striking in both the Anabaptist movement as well as in Bokor and Hizmet.

In conclusion, the paper will suggest some perspectives for view today's challenges based on the three historical examples.

Preliminary remarks:

In this presentation I sketch a portrait of three religious communities - communities I personally know - which have a strong emphasis on community and aim to promote community and cultivate in the individual a sense of community and belonging. They may or may not have a theology of community per se, yet they surely put community at the core and in the center of their reflections and practice.

What I present is not an analysis of these movements and communities nor the result of scientific research, but rather I aim to briefly sketch their story as a communities and movements and draw some concluding comparisons. These I hope may be inspiring and helpful in our troubled time where communities and their sense of its conditions and implications are easily disturbed and shaken.

The fact that I include a muslim community here may seem daring. I suggest to consider the fact that the community movement in question is being accused of betraying Islam (not to speak of the accusation of terrorism) and I joyfully suspect that Gods spirit is moving in the community as a diverse body rich in love and imagination, as well as in the hearts of its members who are in these times under most serious pressure from persecution. To me, discussing their existence and considering their testimony also is an intercession on their behalf.

1. The Anabaptist movement

Note: I grew up in this spiritual and church tradition. Today's Mennonite churches are descendants from the Anabaptist movement. Not all Anabaptist churches are called Mennonites and there is a tendency today to reclaim the term *Anabaptist* as a common historic reference, implying some specific theological and ecclesial characteristics or marks.

1. The 16th century Anabaptist movement is part of the early Swiss - and Dutch - Reformation. It grows out of an ever deeper and wider dissent with the Reformation, as it wants to move further than the main protagonists of Reformation, Luther and Zwingli. Anabaptists want reformation, which they consider as urgent as the Reformers, but they don't want it imposed and enforced through state power and by violence. They believe that Church and State are to be separated and that faith is not a matter to be handled by the state, but a matter of personal choice and freedom of conscience.
2. Thus the movement is referred to as the « radical reformation" or the « left wing of reformation ». This latter terminology expresses its social dimension and orientation toward the stakes of the individual and the vulnerable parts of society - of which they are many at the time. It is a grassroots movement and thus naturally awakens suspicion among authorities who fear further upheaval among the population and loss of control over the public order.
3. The movement had multiple variations, it was not uniform. Mainly and with the exception of the Münster movement, partly inspired by Thomas Müntzer and which was put to an end in 1535, anabaptist non-conformism manifested itself in the refusal to completely adhere to the official church by infant baptism, to swear the oath and to do military service, but also in innovative acts of community action and solidarity.
4. It is necessary to point out the fact that for the Anabaptists the Gospels take precedence over other biblical texts. They insist that the Bible can only be correctly understood and interpreted in light of the Gospels, and more specifically of the words of Jesus. Eventually they do begin to practise discipline which consists not of physical violence, but of shunning. Matthew 18 is a key

reference in anabaptist social teaching: you approach the one who you think is doing you wrong before taking the matter to a third party. The community thus is being given a stake and role in clarification of conflict and in steps toward reconciliation.

5. Furthermore, Anabaptists believe in community discernment and practise small group Bible study. In fact, early anabaptism thrives on small community gatherings. In the beginning they still attend the mandatory church services, but they regularly meet in small groups. Such meetings are brutally suppressed by the authorities. Up until the end of the 18th century, meetings are held in living rooms and occasionally in barns or, at least in Switzerland, in clandestine places outdoors, such as caves or under bridges. The principle of meetings is the pauline rule, which calls for every member to speak up and to talk about his or her understanding of a biblical text. What is later referred to as the priesthood of all believers (men and women) is the basic and common notion of how to read the bible and apply its ethical mandates in every day life of the believers. In anabaptist understanding, the spirit of God is at work in the individual's heart, but just as well in the community through common reading of the Bible and discerning its meaning together. In this regard, the movement has similarities with the bible study groups in Latin America in the 70s and 80s and shares the character of « hermeneutical community » known in the framework of liberation theology.
6. Although the term *community* appears to have no unified definition, two approaches seem to be common in Anabaptist-Mennonite history: the normative approach and the descriptive approach. This is rather well illustrated by the fact that one may well be a member of the Mennonite community (which is sometimes called a « family" even on an international level) but not necessarily an active member of a Mennonite church. I quote from Gameo (Global Anabaptist-Mennonite Encyclopedia Online) gameo.org: *The Mennonite society has been interpreted by social scientists as a prototype of community usually from the normative point of view. Hence Loomis and Beegle, John C. Bennett, E. K. Francis, and [John A. Hostetler](#), to name a few recent scientists, have studied the Mennonites and described them as retaining the traits of an authentic community, meaning thereby some type of achievement of "primary" type relationships, with mutual support and having a common bond, goals, and history. [Driedger](#) and Redekop describe the "Community Study Approach" as one of the major ways that has been used in studying Mennonites in recent years (1983). ... Mennonites have been defined (even accused) as having been [communistic](#), socialistic, communitarian, and utopian (Klassen, Clasen, Goertz). Consequently, the [Münsterites](#) are now considered a part of the [Anabaptist](#) movement, along with other revolutionary groups. These terms, and others described above, all attempt to point to, and explicate, the essential nature of the Anabaptist-Mennonite phenomenon. How is community helpful as a term to help define it? As indicated above, the scientific definition of community has been a cripple from birth. Thus community must be seen more as a metaphor than an exact description.*
7. Education is being given high priority in all anabaptist groups surviving into the 19th and 20th century. Some have migrated in order to be able to have schools for their children. In Switzerland, schooling had become standard among Anabaptists before public education was made mandatory and free in the late 19th century.
8. On an international level, it is recognised by researchers and leaders of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement that the poverty gap between North and South grows wider and deeper. While churches in the South are generally considered being recipients or beneficiaries and those in the North as donors, there is an increased emphasis on sharing and on jointly considering biblical models of sharing and solidarity. (*See Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church's Experiment; Good books*)
9. In summary, these are the main theological and spiritual characteristics of the anabaptist movement in the 16th century and beyond:
 - Life in community and membership, belonging (different levels or common goods)

- Community discernment (based in particular on the Gospels)
- Voluntary base of belief and church membership, e.g. free and personal choice
- Quest for a life of integrity and authenticity in accordance with the Gospel
- Critical distance to worldly authority and the world
- Refusal of violence, sword, military service.

2. The BOKOR movement in Hungary

I begin with a description of BOKOR in 2000 by one of its leading members, Gyula Simonyi:

The Bokor (bush) is a Hungarian Base Community, founded by György Bulányi, a catholic priest, in 1945. From the very beginning our main idea was the love of enemies and the love of the poor. Some members were sentenced to 7-15 years of imprisonment, György Bulányi was sentenced for life in 1952 by the communist dictatorship because of community work. The second flowering of the Bokor started after his release in the latter half of 1960s. We began to support Christian care and education projects in the third world. From the end of the 1970s until 1989 there were about thirty members in prison for 1-3 years because of conscientious objection. Now about two hundred little groups belong to Bokor all over Hungary. (György Bulányi; Gyula Simonyi p.212).

Bulányi, who firmly held on to a sociological principle according to which *a good macrostructure is built from microstructures (p 41)* gives a rationale for this simple structure:

Since humanity can progress in love, and it has received no finer task from God than such progress, so it is the church's permanent task and challenge to perfect it's own order, whilst individual members can work continually towards their own sanctification. In the course of history this task has appeared as a duty, and it is still seen as such today. If the church begins to decline, the treatment for this decline often demands change at structural level. (p.13)

Bulányi writes that there are three conditions for community to be possible:

- *the sharing of a common aim,*
- *the will to remain together,*
- *and the wish to know each other well.*

Love, in order to be real, implies knowing the beloved one. That, Bulányi argues, is impossible in the anonymous crowd of a church of the masses. He writes:

There are three persons of the Holy Trinity, two partners in a marriage, and even a family with seven children has only nine members. If people who do not know each other cannot form a community, then units other than Holy Trinity or a family - units such as the parish, the diocese and the conference of Bishops - can only form « communities » in a sociological sense of the world if they are formed through a network of base community center open with an unbroken chain of communication. (p.43)

A little later, he writes: *It is worth noting that Jesus led only one small community.*

Bulányi, who calls this community an *order of love*, names four « unconditional elements»: Jesus, Love, Community and Autonomy. For our purpose here and because of limited time, I will close in on community only: The objective of such community where the sanctuary and the offices are less relevant than mutual encounter and service, is essentially twofold:

- it secures personal development (69)
- It prepares for tomorrow's order (74)

I quote again: *No transformation is possible without conflict, but such conflict will always be resolved, as far as the prophets are concerned, by love. We must all be full of hope. Who could have expected prior to Vatican II that it would produce such results? Hope pervades every line of this study that it will be received and accepted. According to Congar, this reception is the path of the church's historical development. What shocks today will be preached tomorrow by the true representatives of the established order. The dreams of this study can only become reality if the apostolic-successors say: « this is the teaching of the church ».* (p.74) (Ives-Marie Congar, 1904 - 1995, Cardinal and precursor of Vatican II « Nouvelle Théologie », for instance God's presence in non-Christian movements)

Thus this vocation takes precedence over the currently existing institution which, according to Bulányi, is compromised by its hierarchical and centralized structure and its top-down ecclesial approach. The community envisioned is described by Father Bulányi as follows:

In the historical past we knew that we had to begin the small community where way of life even at the risk of persecution. Today we know that we must say no to power, to wealth and to the actual and the promised threats of violence. And we also know that in the near future we must work for the cost of the church order that is in harmony with the Kingdom outlined by Jesus. We do not yet know how this church order will come into existence. All we know is that, however it does occur, the base community must build within its own bounds this other ecclesiastical order in harmony with the Kingdom ... naturally not in opposition to the present church order. The base community loves. The base community prays, learns, teaches and performs works of charity. Through these, it creates more and more new communities. ... Loving is permitted, as are learning and teaching, praying, doing good, and the creation of communities, too. None of these are forbidden in the present church order. p.83-84

András Jobbágy writes in an article published in the Journal of Religion in Europe (8, 2015):

Besides political theology, ecclesiology was the main area of the Bokor's ideology to become a central issue in the discourse on the movement. This ecclesiology had three elements with explicit or implicit political aspects, namely a vision of a Church which is decentralized, a Church that is democratized, and a Church which all of the faithful can judge according to their conscience. The principles of the Bokor's ecclesiology are based on the theological concept which considers the Kingdom of God not as a condition or status, but as a project to be realized by active community building.

3. Hizmet

The Hizmet movement has its roots in Sufi-Islam and before 2016 was supposedly the largest spiritual and civil society movement in Turkey. Fetullah Gülen is its key instigator but is not its formal operational leader, for Hizmet does not have a centralised organisational structure nor it is a structured organisation. Rather, it is a spiritual movement with multiple initiatives and associations, which all are rooted in the conviction that education, respectively the overcoming of ignorance, is essential for the advancement of the individual and of society. Fetullah Gülen's early and primary inspiration was the Islamic Mystic Said Nursi (1876-1960 Founder Nurculuk movement, author *Risale-i-Nur*, exégèse du Coran, 6000 pages), who at the beginning of the 20th century insisted that ignorance was the biggest enemy of society and that places of learning needed to be set up all over the country. For Nursi, and thus for Gülen, such places of learning in community constitute *houses of light* and illumination for people.

According to Jon Pahl, Professor of History of Christianity at United Lutheran Seminary, Philadelphia/Gettysburg and author of a detailed biography of Gülen, Gülen is an *Islamic humanist*. Pahl cites Philosopher Jill Carroll, who had studied Western influences on Gülen, as grouping Gülen with these other humanistic thinkers because his work, like theirs, focuses on central issues of hu-

man existence that have long been part of humanistic discourse in both its religious and non-religious forms. In other words, these thinkers are concerned with basic questions about the nature of human reality, the good human life, the state, and morality. Moreover, they reach similar conclusions regarding many of these issues and questions after deliberating about them from within their own traditions and cultural context. (Pahl p.66)

However, while education is the key activity and objective of the Hizmet movement, its most remarkable and consistent mark are the *Sohbets* - circles of discussion and debated, which since 2010 are being listed as part of the UNESCO World Heritage. *Sohbets* are Hizmet's main base communities through which members cultivate relationships, dialogue, study and individual as well as community discipline.

In Turkey, the movement was often simply referred to as *cemaat* - the community. Members of the movement, education is not an end in itself but serves the community and the wider society. Jon Pahl says a good analogy for outsiders to understand Hizmet and Gülen might be 19th century Protestant revivalist Charles Grandison Finney, founder of the Oberlin College. Pahl writes: *In ways akin to how Christian revivalists like Finney ... helped democratise nineteenth-century America and Europe, Gülen put into words the sufferings of ordinary people and encouraged them to participate faithfully in an emerging liberal economic and political order. (Pahl p.15)*

Pahl describes Gülen's aspirations and the foundation of Hizmet in the following five terms: 1) a commitment to spiritual and scientific literacy, 2) integrity of participation in the nonviolent practices of Islam; 3) engaged empathy; 4) principled pluralism; 5) a business model of social enterprise. (p 19-209).

While *hizmet* literally translated means « service », Pahl suggests that *in the life of Fetulla Gülen, hizmet points to the way spiritual power translates into practical action: into peace building through discernible and consistent practices. (p.21)*

One cannot discuss Hizmet however without referring to the accusations and persecutions against its instigator early on - Gülen was under arrest and put in prison multiple times - and against the entire movement since 2016, when the Turkish president blamed Hizmet for the attempted coup d'état. I remember that in 2011, when I first met Hizmet members in Switzerland, they said Hizmet was not a political movement. However, already then, some of the members were being seriously harassed by authorities. Before 2016, Hizmet ran over 1200 schools in 160 countries. These schools enjoy very high esteem, not only for the quality of their education, but also because they made higher education accessible for children and youth from the country side and from background of poverty and exclusion. In Turkey during the 20th century, higher education was only accessible to an urban or socio-cultural elite. Through tutoring communities and later through boarding schools, youth from every social class and every geographic area had access. Fetullah Gülen insisted that society, in order to progress and become inclusive and just, needed to build schools rather than mosques. Pahl cites a Journalist reporting what Gülen told him he had said to some friends, business men who had financed the construction of Mosques and wanted to open Qur'an courses next to them: *Mosques are wonderful, we have the greatest respect for them. However, it would be better if you open a school. (Pahl p.275)*

Erkan Karakoyun writes in his book « Die Gülen-Bewegung », that Sufi-Islam is in sharp contradiction with the Islamic premise about the unity of state and religion. A state cannot be religious. Nor can religious obedience be sanctioned by the state without undermining the very sense of religion. (p.122) According to Karakoyun, people of the movement believe that Islam protects and promote human rights and individual freedom of belief and conscience. Education and Dialogue are key in that process. (p.124). Thus in a way, for Hizmet, true religion is religion without dogma.

4. Conclusion: Common characteristics

According to Phyllis E. Bernard, the Quakers, another historic and community-based peace church, formally known as the Religious Society of Friends, are a keen analogy of the Hizmet. Pahl writes: *(Quakers) also drew the ire of the authorities and merged a peaceful spirituality with a pragmatic and business-minded rationality. And just as Quakers and Christian revivalists (emotional in their own idioms) pave the way for missionary movements that spread Christianity, markets, and democracy around the globe, so too has Gülen motivated Muslim activists to carry high ideals - which he would of course call God's work, around the world.* (Pahl p.16)

I would add to this that Anabaptists, while being reformers as much as revivalists, embarked, one hundred years before Quaker founder George Fox, on a path to reshape both religion and society as well as their relationship. In doing so, community was the key vehicle and they also drew the ire of authorities and its utmost violence against dissidents.

In conclusion, let me list some striking commonalities between 16th century anabaptism, the catholic BOKOR and Sufi-Islam Hizmet movements of the late 20th century.

1. They all insist on individual freedom of religious belief, membership and practise. - While supposedly normal in 20th century Europe, this is under threat today in many places.
2. They practise regular dialogue and discernment in small groups (mutual consultation in a base-community). - The covid-crisis may well revive such practises.
3. Dogma has a lesser role in these communities than in many established religious orders or confessions.
4. Education is fundamental for society's advance and for building peace and thus a priority.
5. Reference is commonly made to the divine as ultimate compass for one's personal decision.
6. Critique of the existing religious-political order is part of the motivation to join the movement.
7. Separation of state and religious powers is at the core.
8. Scepticism toward human power in general and state authority in particular.
9. Members refuse to bear arms and to engage in military action.
10. The community suffers under pressure, threats or persecution, individual and collective, by state or religious authorities.

I recall how when I discovered BOKOR in the mid-nineties I felt they were a 20th century anabaptist movement of sorts. And I felt the same 10 years later when I got to know members of Hizmet and the movement itself. The notion of Anabaptism to me has little to do with baptism, although the term has that root. It has primarily to do with a non-conformism that points to renewal of the heart through the spirit that moves where it wills, being ahead of one's time in terms of social issues, scepticism toward human power and a commitment to nonviolence. God's reign is better expressed in authentic community of love than by extension of worldly power which too often resorts to violence and results in patterns of injustice.

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