



RAPID RESPONSE TO 'ARE WE POST-COMMUNITY' BY ASH BARKER

It is with appreciation that I read this article asking a tantalizing, perhaps rhetorical question: 'Are we post-community?' While I don't believe this is the case (the devil is in the question of what is meant by 'community'). Barker is asking a critical question not just in terms of Christian formation, identity and practice within the modern Western imagination but about the very ways we are being human together in a world terribly fractured economically. Questions of what modernity in its Western, consumerist, expressive individualist forms are doing to Christian identity and how to address them are vital areas for investigation. Barker's instincts and experience push him in helpful directions - away from the

abstract and ideational into the local, material and everyday as well as into a recovery of practices for the 're-founding' (Arbuckle's language) of Christian identity in common life.

That being said, I find implicit assumptions about the nature and forms of community to be limiting. It appears to represent an ideal that, while important as an example of 'community', is limiting and runs counter to those well-expressed instincts of embracing the local, ordinary and everyday. The vast majority of human beings on this earth, even those who name the name of Christ, are NOT counted into the possibility of refounding community by the implicit definition of community which seems to press into what might be called 'intentional' community or even forms of the new monasticism. Isn't the larger question, in an exploding urban world, more about how to refound a common life shaped together for the other in the common, everyday life of most people? Can the harrowing grasp of radical individualism and consumerism be broken through the cultivation of 'community' (?) in the ordinary, everyday lives of citizens in their neighborhoods - where we in fact dwell and practice life with others? If so, this calls for a much broader understanding of 'community' than that represented in this paper.

Part of the essay mentions briefly some of the potential sources (postmodern and globalization) of this consumerist individualization that is leading toward a 'post-community' world. The postmodern in some of its forms is a reaction to the breakdown of 'community' and attempts to offer ways of reframing what it means to be human. Globalization is a major contributing reason for the rapid diffusion of consumerism and individualism around the world but is also an important element in the search for 'community'. Elements of the postmodern turn seek to deconstruct the forces driving consumerist individualization. Both represent epiphenomenon pointing toward the deeper issues at stake in the crisis of Christian and human identity in our time. It is interesting that in this brief list there is no mention of free-market capitalism. There is important work to be done in framing an archeology that gets to the underlying structures and values erasing community. Similar work needs to be done in identifying those forces pushing toward a remaking of community.

Barker's observation that our interconnected world means these dynamics of Western individualization, consumerism and entitlement point toward a global crisis of aspiration, resentment and meaning that can only result in massive disruptions is important. Much at stake! There is an imperative to discern ways of rebuilding the sinews of a common life in which we live for the other (the communitarian movements of the 90's in North America are important connect points here). Further, the observation that any turn toward refounding of community (whatever is meant by this term) must be about engaging in local, concrete, everyday practices (neither ideal nor abstract) is a key instinct requiring our focused engagement.

In seeking to engage these questions the author references Arbuckle and Van Gennep. Both are representative of important anthropological insights relative to issues of culture change. They offer practical insight into questions of community formation. It is at this point that the essay seems to change quite dramatically in style and substance. The section beginning with Jesus and his practices reads like a different kind of essay from what has gone before. Several comments for consideration: first, this turn to proposed descriptions of Jesus' actions moves away from the concrete and into the

ideal. They are a reading back into the stories, finding liminal frameworks and, to some extent, utopian notions of what Jesus was doing. This expression of Jesus and his work in community formation seems to be ideational and, therefore, returns us to the abstract. The application of Van Gennep's liminality principles to the way Jesus shaped disciples into community is problematic. I'm not convinced the liminal model in this case is a sustainable argument. The parallelisms between the 'steps' Jesus took and the forming of contemporary communities of practice are questionable.

The focus on practices is important. It points us in the right direction in terms of addressing the refounding an interdependent life directed toward the other. What, therefore, might be the ways of engaging grounded practices of everyday life shaped by the agency of the Trinitarian God? What are the contours of community that take the ordinary, everyday life of people seriously? Are there ways of imagining the refounding of community within the contours, however fragmented, of existing neighborhoods? Does the agency of God in Jesus Christ provide us with concrete, earthed practices for such refounding or must there be always an appeal to ideals, and hence, abstractions?



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