

# BOTTON: A QUESTION OF IDEAS

There has been a great deal of public debate in recent weeks about the future of the Botton community, much of it hinging on such practical considerations as to how the village is best managed, and in what ways the residents are to be housed. Important as these matters are, there may be a danger of losing sight of what really is at the heart of the issue: namely, the question, 'in what kind of environment do human beings flourish?' This lies in the realm of ideas and principles, and if we are not clear about where we stand on these, then the rest of our thinking can become confused and incoherent.

It seems to me that there are two radically different answers being proposed to this question of human flourishing, although I am not sure how far the executive officers of the Camphill Village Trust (CVT) have thought through the philosophical basis of their position. More likely, they have simply adopted the current assumptions which underlie what they would call 'the care industry'.

The first approach, which might reasonably be argued to be that of CVT, is to say that the tenets of consumerism provide the best way for people to live. Choice is the key. Each person has the right to decide what is best for him or herself. It is a highly individualistic matter. People are to be treated as discrete consumers of products. If they are allowed to choose freely from among these, that is the most satisfactory way for them to flourish. In terms of Botton, this would mean the ability of villagers to choose, for example, whether or not they would like to work; the extent to which they can spend time watching TV in their own rooms; the kinds of food they eat, including fast food and sweets; and the receipt of specific amounts of 'care' from employees who tailor the nature of that commodity according to the express wishes of each resident. It is a highly atomised kind of living, somewhat similar to that of wider society as a whole. The extent to which there are others in the same locality who are also receiving 'care' is largely incidental. Each 'beneficiary' is, insofar as the providers are concerned, an 'island' sufficient unto themselves. It is also an essentially passive process. The very term 'beneficiary', which is that favoured by CVT, implies someone who is on the receiving end of a 'good' done to and for them. He or she is a consumer of care.

Of course, there are limits to this freedom. Among these are the host of regulations which have been set up to limit the possibility of risk. In a culture which has become dominated by the fear of incurring blame, fuelled by the inflated number of compensation lawyers, there is a natural reluctance to allow any potentially litigious situation to develop. Again, in the case of Botton, this includes the need to remove the children of present co-workers from unsupervised contact with the residents. Under the heading of 'safeguarding', it is felt best not to allow the free access of residents to

the young families of others in case there might be inappropriate contact. Human choice does have restrictions.

The other approach to human flourishing, which has been enshrined in the philosophical basis on which Botton has hitherto operated, and which derives from an essentially Christian anthropology, is that which sees human beings as finding their deepest meaning within the context of community.

Unfortunately, 'community' is one of those words which has largely lost its meaning in a society which uses the term indiscriminately. We now speak of 'communities' of train-spotters and taxidermists, jazz enthusiasts and those who believe they have been abducted by aliens, even though these categories of people may in fact have no physical interaction with each other. They do not meet, or live in proximity to each other. They merely share a certain set of interests. You Tube, Facebook and other internet sites host millions of such 'communities' of individuals who are linked electronically but who never share the same geographical space or see each other's faces. 'Community' has become detached from neighbourhood.

The Christian understanding of community, however, has little in common with this, somewhat impoverished notion. The New Testament idea of 'koinonia' is a rich and profound one. It certainly implies physical proximity, but is much more than simple neighbourliness. Among its many facets, which include the concepts of communion, 'the breaking of bread', the holding of goods in common, and intimate companionship, are three elements which seem to me to constitute the fundamentals of living in community, namely, participation, commitment and consensus.

In contrast to the passive consumerism of the first approach, the Christian perspective sees that community hinges on the active participation of its members, each person making a contribution to the whole to the extent to which he or she is capable. This has been the understanding of Botton in its emphasis on the importance of work. There is great spiritual insight here. In his encyclical, 'Laborem Exercens' (1981), Pope John Paul II spoke of the value of work as a means whereby humans find purpose for their lives. 'Work is a good thing for man....because through work he...achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes more a human being.....Labour is a participation in the work of the Creator and the Redeemer.' In performing some kind of work, whether it be on the farms or in the workshops or in the store, the residents of Botton have a dignity which comes from an active role both in the building up of their own identity and in developing the community as a whole. To use a tedious and over-worked term, everyone is a 'stakeholder' by virtue of their participation in making community, rather than in receiving 'benefits' from others.

Commitment functions as an adjunct to this participation. Karl Konig, the founder of Botton, famously remarked that what made his vision of community different was his

emphasis on the voluntary nature of the work undertaken by the co-workers who came there. They came, not for money, but for the sheer value of the work itself. There was an intrinsic importance in the giving of one's time and skills for the service of others, often over a period of many years, and this long-term service was rewarded by the living alongside of a whole range of different people with different gifts and skills which they in turn shared. This, of course, was not to denigrate the contribution of paid employees, who have always formed a numerically small part of the life of Botton. Rather, it was to highlight that commitment to ideals and principles was to be the distinguishing feature of the community. Ideas are important in Botton. Co-workers are there, not to provide 'units of care' on a contractual basis, keeping their private lives separate from their work, but because they believe the founding ideas of Karl Konig and the Christian concepts which they contain are essential: indeed, they are the 'raison d'être' of the whole enterprise. That is the nature of commitment: holding fast to a set of ideals, even in the face of opposition.

The notion of consumerism implies a good deal of structure. In order to deliver care to the 'beneficiaries', there needs to be a hierarchy of management in place: professionals who can oversee the employees and ensure that the right levels of support are given, that appropriate safeguarding takes place, risks are minimised, and government regulations are followed. Hence, in Botton, the employment of managers who, at considerable cost to the charity, are now seen as essential for the smooth running of an increased level of bureaucracy.

One of the distinguishing features of the Botton which has existed up to now, is the complete absence of hierarchy. There were no managers. Instead, the community appeared to function perfectly adequately, and at less cost, on the basis of consensus. Decisions were reached through discussion. And whilst this no doubt led to a sometimes frustrating slowness, it nonetheless created a sense of belonging. Everyone could identify with the outcome. To use another tired expression, they 'owned' the decisions which were made. This reliance on consensus is yet another example of the closeness of the Botton model to that of the New Testament. The early church was noted for its absence of hierarchical structure which was so unlike that of the culture surrounding it. Everyone was seen to be of equal importance, and the Holy Spirit might alight upon whomsoever he chose. Christians waited for enlightenment when a decision was needed, and they came to conclusions together. A bureaucratic nightmare, no doubt, but a system which grew out of an awareness of the contribution which every Christian was called upon to make to the building up of the Church.

The Botton approach to human flourishing, which has operated for so many years with extraordinary success, and which has drawn so extensively on the New Testament for its inspiration, is a coherent and philosophically sound system. It has, of course,

needed adjustment for it to function in a changing environment. There is a profound difference, however, between adjustment and radical dismantling. At the present time, Botton is facing a management structure within the current CVT which is based upon an entirely different understanding of what makes human beings more fully human. It is, I have suggested, a consumerist mentality, which has grown out of the enormous advances in prosperity and material comfort which this country has witnessed since the Second World War, but which has proven itself to be spiritually bankrupt. The management of CVT appear to find what Botton represents to be quite literally incomprehensible. Despite the blandishments of their letters to residents and families, promising that nothing fundamental will change in Botton, the fact is that what they are doing is nothing less than the replacement of community by consumerist individualism.

What environment is best for human flourishing? I suggest that Botton has an answer which is far closer to the ideal than anything which CVT represents.

Michael Hazelton, Vicar of Danby