

Gemeinschaft in Kibbutzim and Monasteries¹

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This presentation is part of a comparative study of communal societies, in which, using the kibbutz as a central model, I ask why people live in communes – or, more exactly, what reasons they have for doing so; for my interest is not primarily sociological or historical, but philosophical. And in such a study the comparison between kibbutzim and monasteries, though scarcely discussed by scholars up to now, seems to be a pretty good starting-point. In many respects the structure of the monastery is similar to that of the classical kibbutz: that is to say, of the kibbutz before the inception of the massive changes of the past two decades. The monks (or nuns) have no personal property; they eat in a common refectory; the monastery's property is communally owned and administered; work, allotted by the community's management, is compulsory; and the community, while not democratically administered like the kibbutz, is a dominant factor in the life of the individual. On the face of it, it would seem that here are two very similar types of community.

One of the central factors in kibbutz life is what is known in Hebrew as the *hevruta* – the closely-knit group, consisting of the kibbutz membership as a whole, or significant parts of it, which some thinkers have called the *Gemeinschaft*, others the Bund, or communion. I try to keep away from these names, with their sociological resonances, and simply call it "the communal experience".

Let me start with an ostensive definition:

There was a sort of mutual yearning, a desire to sit together far into the night, and thereby to penetrate the very depth of the vision of communal life. Soul touched soul.

We longed to become a sort of river of souls, whose tributaries would merge, and together create a fresh and mighty current of friendship and fraternity. (Likever 1947: 136-137)

This comes from a well-known description of a young kibbutz in the early twenties, and is paralleled in many other texts, from the kibbutz and elsewhere. There is a feeling of wonder at, and oneness with, nature, and with one's fellow human beings within their natural setting; and this oneness is felt so intensively that it leads to a state close to ecstasy, a sort of semi-mystic experience. This is the communal experience, which is a central factor in kibbutz thought and practice. It is a widespread occurrence, arising spontaneously from the actions and interactions of people – particularly young people – in small groups. It can be the result of working together of singing or dancing together, of the sort of discussion in which “soul touches soul”. History also shows us that it can be the result of fighting together – a phenomenon enshrined in the language as “esprit de corps”. The great majority of those who undergo it feel it to be positive, significant, and worthy of repeating if possible.

While very real, and often referred to in the ideological literature of the kibbutz, this experience is essentially transient, for nobody can live permanently with such intensity of feeling. It comes during the working day or at its end, in the heat of battle, during a songfest or dance, and may be repeated in many forms and at many times. In kibbutz life, for instance, many cultural events are arranged in such a way that “the together”, in the Hebrew phrase, is facilitated and emphasized: the Jewish festivals, the Reception of the Sabbath on a Friday evening, a wide variety of local celebrations, are not only cultural events, but also a framework in which the whole kibbutz population can be, and feel itself, together.

As I have said, this phenomenon is well-known in kibbutz life and thought. There are also many parallels from the experience of other communes, from Socialist thinkers, and elsewhere. Judging from the basic pattern of monastery life, one would have guessed that such experiences are also felt in the monastic community, and are expressed in the ways in which exponents of monasticism justify its existence. To find out whether this was as such, I began

with the body of writings that corresponds to the ideology of the kibbutz: monastic theology.

Essentially, monastic theology (though not necessarily monastic practice, which has a complex history of its own) derives from two biblical passages: first and foremost, from the description in the Book of Acts (4. 34-5):

As many as were possessed of lands or houses sold them, and laid [the proceeds] at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.

This passage is often quoted as a model for an exemplary Christian life, imitated in its essentials by the monastic community. And it is backed by a passage from the Psalms: "Behold how goodly and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together" (Ps. 133. 1).

There is a considerable literature about the monastic life, and even more written by monks about theological matters. In one of the most celebrated passages of this literature, St. Aelred of Rievaulx, an English monk of the early twelfth century, writes of his feelings when entering the monastery after a journey:

The day before yesterday, walking round the cloisters where the brethren were sitting, as it were a very garland of love, I was gazing on them as one might admire in paradise the leaves and flowers and fruit of every individual tree; and finding none there whom I did not love and by whom I did not believe myself loved, I was filled with a joy that soared above all the pleasures of the world. I felt my spirit pass out into all, and their affection flow back into me, until I found myself saying with the psalmist: Behold, how good and how pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity. (Matarasso 1993: 184-185)

No less deeply felt is a long Latin poem by Baldwin of Ford, an English bishop of the late 12th century, devoted to the subject of communal life. After detailing the provenance of the monastery from the communal life of the apostles, Baldwin praises communal life as such:

Community life is, as it were, the splendour of eternal life, a radiance of unending life, a rivulet springing from the unfailing fountain whence flow the healing waters of life everlasting. (Baldwin, 1985, v : 9)

Baldwin draws a parallel between three different Christian communities: the community of the holy trinity, the community of the angels, and the community of “those who live in community” as did the disciples mentioned in the Book of Acts. Between these communards (the monks), “the deeper the love, the stronger the bond, and the fuller the communion; and, in turn, the closer the communion the stronger is the bond, and the more complete the love...”.

And after a very long gap in time it appeared in 2004 an article by Martha E. Driscoll, the Mother Superior of a South American nunnery, emphasizing the need for *Gemeinschaft* in the monastic community.

Living in empty cells, using desks in a common room, eating together at a common table makes it possible for us as a coenobitic community to live a perpetual pilgrimage with nothing in our hands to weigh us down, a pilgrimage to another land and another life, symbolised by our daily pilgrimages together from the church to the chapter room or the refectory. (Driscoll 2004: 183)

These extracts, together with a few remarks by pseudo-Macarius, a rather obscure bishop of the fourth or fifth century, seem to confirm my original guess that the social structure of the monastery, so similar to that of the kibbutz, would be a fertile ground for the communal experience. But it would be a mistake to draw this conclusion. For the most significant thing about them is that they stand virtually alone in the monastic literature, ranging from the third century until the present day. To understand how deep are the reservations from the concept of the communal experience, let us look at two fundamental documents in the history of monastic thought: a much-quoted article by St. Basil of Caesarea (329-379), known as “the founder of oriental monasticism”, who seems to have invented the coenobitic monastery after having visited, and rejected the way of life of a whole cluster of eremitic congregations. This historical moment is of great importance to the present study, for it creates a possible version of Christian life and action based on a close-knit community, rather than an individual saint or hermit with, in the case of the eremitic monasteries, logistic support from a large number of disciples. It also initiated a model of what may be called active monasticism: the community as a whole does good works, lives in a town where it deliberately comes into contact with

moral and economic distress, establishes a hospital and orphanage, and so forth. It is to this – the social involvement of the coenobitic monastery, as against the deliberate isolation of the eremite – that one of Basil's most frequently quoted passages is thought to refer:

For, behold, the Lord for the greatness of his love of men was not content with teaching the word only, but that accurately and clearly He might give us a pattern of humility in the perfection of love. He girded Himself and washed the feet of the disciples in person. (Basil 1925: 166)

And addressing the eremitic monks:

Whose feet then will thou wash? Whom wilt thou care for? In comparison with whom wilt thou last if thou livest by thyself? How will that good and pleasant thing, the dwelling of brethren together, which the Holy Spirit likens to unguent flowing down from the High Priest's head, be accomplished by dwelling solitary? (*ibidem*)

At first sight this seems to be simply a defence of the coenobitic, involved, way of monastic life as against the deliberate isolation of the hermit. But it is more than that. It is also part of an apologia for community life as such. The whole passage concludes with a mention of the communal life of the apostles, as described in the Book of Acts (4. 32-36). And it opens with a series of reasons for living together: mutual aid as the expression of Christian love; greater ability to do good works; the benefits of mutual criticism; mutual enrichment, "when a number live together a man enjoys his own gift, multiplying it by imparting it to others"; and self-evaluation in the context of the community:

For wherewith shall a man show humility, if he has no one in comparison with whom to show himself humble? Wherewith shall he show compassion, when he is cut off from the community of the many? How can he practise himself in long-suffering, when there is none to withstand his wishes? (Basil 1925: 165)

All these are no doubt cogent arguments for communal living. But they sound more like utilitarian considerations, suited to a *Gesellschaft* type of society, than an advocacy of *Gemeinschaft*. Apart from the biblical references, there are no references to the communal experience of the sort described in the extracts quoted above.

So, at the very beginning of monastic theology, the basic motivation for communal living is not to achieve a communal experience, and to find a way to

God through that experience, but to create a substructure for the elevation of the individual, and his (or her) perfection through the doing of good deeds.

As it begins, so it goes on. The *Rule of St. Benedict*, which Western monks still have read to them three times yearly at mealtimes, speaks of the monastery as a school, whose purpose is to educate the monks in the ways of righteousness, and train them to lead the good life, under the guidance of the abbot (Fry *et al.*, 1982: 45-50). Most of this fundamental document of monasticism is devoted to technical details of monastic life, interlarded with pious exhortations intended to raise the spiritual level of the monks: all on the level of the individual, to whom the educational message of the “school” is addressed. True, the technical arrangements of the monastery include the prohibition of private ownership, and distribution of goods according to need, in a formulations reminiscent of the ideals of communes and kibbutzim (*idem*, chaps. 33, 34). But this is not said to be for the greater glory of the community, or any of the many reasons advanced by advocates of *Gemeinschaft*, except that “in this way, all the members will be at peace” (*idem*, chaps. 34, 5). The final chapters of the *Rule* deal with relationships between the brethren, and an exhortation to observe the monastic rule in order to reach “the loftier summits of the teaching and virtues we mentioned above” – all of them individual virtues such as humility, chastity and obedience – but no real mention of the community as such (*idem*, chaps. 71-73).

Perhaps this can best be illustrated by a look at the structure of life in a monastery – a structure which, with very few exceptions, has remained unchanged over the past six hundred years, if not more.

There are, of course, various types of monastery. At one end of a wide range is what may be called the outer-directed community. The monks (or nuns) live together in a communal framework, but much of their time is spent in doing good works: charitable work among the poor, educational work ranging from work with delinquent youths to the management of and teaching in a boarding-school, and many more variants. At the other end of this spectrum is the contemplative monastery. The monks or nuns are “enclosed” – that is to say, their contacts with the outside world are very limited; indeed, in the not very distant past they were completely cut off from their families and, for instance,

forbidden to take part in their parents' funerals. The communal society of the monastery is their world. Here, one would have thought, is fertile ground for the development of *Gemeinschaft*: a community focused on its own needs and development, and based on the communal principles central to the kibbutz and other forms of communal societies. Let us see how this works out in practice.

In a typical contemporary contemplative monastery, the day is built round the Liturgy of the Hours – the seven services sung and recited in the chapel by the whole monastic community. The day will usually begin at 5.30, with Vigils, and end after Compline, at about 9 p.m.; then begins the “great silence”, during which speech is forbidden until the following morning. In all, of his 16 waking hours, the monk spends some six or seven in chapel; the three meals take up about two hours, and work about four. In addition, some three to four hours are devoted to *lectio divina* – guided reading of sacred texts. Two periods of about forty-five minutes (one after lunch and one after supper) are devoted to “recreation”: free intercourse between the monks, during which they converse freely about matters secular or divine.

Thus, by far the major part of the day is devoted to what may be seen as communal activity – prayer. Of the rest, the second greatest parts are work, which may be in the kitchen, the guest-house, or the living quarters, in the monastery's farm or in one of its workshops. Since, under modern conditions, the number of workers in each branch is small, this part of the day does not contribute greatly to *Gemeinschaft* –like experience. The same applies to *Lectio Divina*, which is, in effect, individual study and/or meditation, under the supervision of the abbot or prior, or one of the priests.

Meals are indeed eaten in common. But the monks do not talk to each other at mealtimes. They listen to readings from sacred writings and the Rule of St. Benedict, read by each of them in turn according to a weekly rota.

In many respects, therefore, it seems as if the structure of the monastic day is designed almost to prevent the creation of *Gemeinschaft*. The only times in which the monks are engaged together in activities parallel to those which contribute to the communal experience in kibbutz or commune are the short periods of “recreation”; although in many contemporary monasteries

opportunities are occasionally made for informal “get-togethers”, celebrations of special events, and the like.

But does not the main monastic activity – choral prayer – create a form of *Gemeinschaft*? I shall deal with this question at greater length later. But preliminary consideration would seem to lead to the answer “No!”. True, the sight and sound of a monastic congregation, however small, singing and intoning the traditional prayers, whether in Latin or the vernacular, has a quality all its own, which makes a deep impression even on the unbeliever – and, of course, even more on the devout participant. But there are few references, if any, in the literature I am familiar with, to the value of collective prayer as such. Prayer, of course, is much discussed. But prayer is the means whereby the individual finds his way to God; and the collective background is explicitly seen as a tool for the elevation of the individual.

It is no accident, therefore, that in the considerable literature about monasteries written by travellers, writers and others who set out to discover the nature of the monastery by visiting, conversing with monks, and the like, as well as by apologists for the monastic life – writers who explain the monastery to the general public, rather than to those who are themselves committed to one – the theme of *Gemeinschaft* is virtually ignored. Here are a few examples:

Peter Levi, who gives a very sympathetic account of monastic life, emphasizing its function as a framework for relief from the troubles of the world, and opportunities for solitary contemplation, writes:

The deep desire of monasteries is personal; it is the desire for God and the need for study and meditation.... Monasticism... is a kind of love. The sense that such a quest can be communal has often been disappointed. (Levi 1987: 62)

And, somewhat surprisingly:

The worst of all religious penances is community life: it is not the penances of religion, which are private, but its communal pleasures which are hard to tolerate. (*idem*, 182)

This is a very far cry from the kibbutz, where the “communal pleasures” are a prime factor in the way of life and aspirations of the members.

There is very little sociological research on the monastic community; mainly, no doubt, because the monks are not interested in admitting outsiders

to their inner sanctuary in the physical sense, and even less to secrets of their hearts and minds, and their mutual interactions. One sociologist who has attempted such research, primarily on an American Trappist community, is George A. Hillery, Jr. He, too, speaks little of *Gemeinschaft*. One of his most revealing remarks, about an incident which occurred in the 1960s, is:

[In the sixties] two experimental houses were begun, composed of only four monks each. Neither house proved successful. In each case, the monks were “searching for community”. The monastic search is, of course, for God. (Hillery 1992: 15)

And an exhaustive reading of one of the most prominent apologists for the monastic life, Thomas Merton, shows no tendency whatsoever to see communal life as a religious or moral value; on the contrary, even within the religious order his tendency is to praise the life of the hermit – and, indeed, in his own life he did for a period live the life of a hermit within the monastery.

Esther de Waal's *Seeking God: The Benedictine Way* is a popular and widely-read introduction to monastic life and thought. Though herself neither a Catholic nor a monastic, she has a deep understanding of the monastic community. If we are looking for an appraisal of *Gemeinschaft*, we would expect to find it here. Yet there is no more than a cursory reference to it in either of the chapters which would seem to be relevant: on “people” and on “prayer”. The first concentrates on face-to-face relationships between the monks, and between them and people from outside the monastery; while in the second, prayer is presented as a “full-time occupation” for the individual. The only reference to its communal aspect reads:

[Prayer] is of course a corporate activity, and (...) it is important that I do not lose sight of the role that St. Benedict assigns to praying together and to sharing worship. Just because prayer is so personal and arises from the centre of my being it might develop into some individualistic self-indulgence unless anchored in the local community to which I belong. My praying must not become so hidden and so secret that it becomes an entirely private affair, no longer supported by others and by the mutual learning which contact with other people brings. (Waal 1984: 150-151)

In other words, communal prayer, the experience which can be overwhelming in more than one sense – quantitatively, as filling the major part of the day, aesthetically, as a result of the beauty of the singing, and socially, as an expression of the “togetherness” of the whole community – is primarily an aid

to the proper performance of individual prayer, rather than an end in itself in any of these respects.

Why does this happen? Even though most kibbutzim are not religiously observant communities, it seems to me that we are comparing two types of society based on different religious traditions and ways of thinking; and, as a result, on deeply divergent cultural and psychological patterns. In both of them the concept of salvation is very important. But Jewish salvation is essentially the salvation of the nation, the society – or, on the microcosmic level, the group (as evidenced, for instance, in the writings of the Dead Sea sects). For the Christian salvation is individual: personal belief in God and in Jesus, and personal redemption in the world to come. All Jewish synagogue prayers are couched in the plural: on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, Jews confess their sins in the first person plural: we have sinned, we have gone astray, we have slandered, etc. The central event of the Christian prayer is the mass, culminating with Holy Communion, which is a preliminary stage to the salvation of the individual. These differences reverberate throughout Jewish and Christian religious history, though there are, of course, variations and mutual borrowings.

It is not surprising, then, that despite the structural similarities between these two types of community, the differences between them are so great. The general conclusion, if one is required, is that a simple structuralist analysis is not sufficient: societies whose institutions and methods of organization are very similar can be deeply influenced by cultural and historical factors, with very dissimilar results. My knowledge of the monastery is, on the whole, quite superficial, and I would hesitate to draw far-reaching conclusions from this minor piece of research. But, as far as the kibbutz is concerned, my conclusion is that cultural factors often not consciously appreciated by the members themselves – in this case, the Jewish religion and ethos can have a deep and lasting effect on the life of a profoundly non-religious, and often even anti-religious, community.

Note

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