

Living the Questions



How then shall we live? No Alternative?



No Alternative by Charles Hope

“There is no alternative” was a favourite phrase of Margaret Thatcher’s in the 1980s. No alternative to free markets, free trade and capitalist

globalisation. No matter what the cost to communities or to individuals, she argued, there was no alternative to free market economics.

In my last post I began to explore the question posed by the Northumbria Community, “how then shall we live?” In particular, how shall we live a faithful life when we are living in thrall to a system of global free-market capitalism that is tantamount to living under the control of an empire? This empire, as all empires do, maintains its control by the constant assertion ‘there is no alternative’ and by the suppression of all attempts to propose alternatives.

The problem for those living under an empire is that in some ways there is no alternative. No matter what we think about global capitalism, each of us is part of the system. The simple fact of having a pension or a mortgage and of being a consumer of products and brands means that we are enmeshed in the system and in some ways dependent upon it. And let’s be honest, no matter how we feel about it, those of us living in the west benefit from this system at the expense of most of the world’s population.

This economic system we inhabit is something that we as human beings have created. Yet it seems not to be under our control – it controls us. And, we are told, there is no

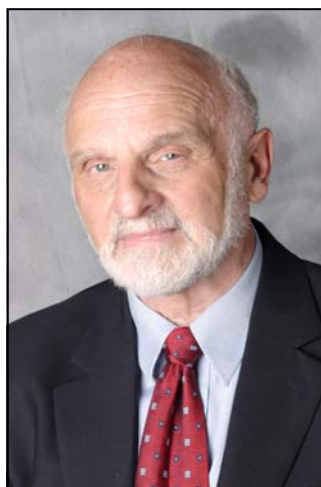
alternative.

It seems to me that Jesus’ declaration of the Kingdom of God is a declaration that there **is** an alternative. The Kingdom is a new and alternative reality, with strikingly attractive values at odds with the economic empire. As Jesus teaches and embodies it, the Kingdom is hidden and it is pitifully small. It is elusive, something that we search for. Yet when it is found, selling everything in order to possess it is no sacrifice. It is not immediately apparent that this Kingdom and its values are viable alternatives to the reigning system. In fact Jesus teaches and demonstrates that the Kingdom only comes through weakness, suffering and even death at the hands of the dominant system.

If the Kingdom is a response to the imperialistic claim ‘there is no alternative’ a faithful life cannot simply be one of protest against things I do not like in the system. The proper response is to live as if this alternative reality is in fact true.

The shape of the faithful life must be worked out for each context. The desert fathers and mothers, St Francis of Assisi and the great evangelical social reformers all sought to give shape to the alternative reality of the Kingdom in ways appropriate for their time.

In developing my response, I do not claim to grasp all of the complexities of economic theory and the various arguments for and against globalisation, free trade etc. (I would be very interested to hear responses from people who are experts.)



But I cannot let lack of expert knowledge prevent me trying to live faithfully. So I start from some general principles. One of the assumptions underlying economics is what Walter Brueggemann calls the myth of scarcity. The assumption is that there are limited resources available and there is therefore competition between people for the resources. Brueggemann points out that this inevitably leads to competition and to fearful hoarding. The myth of scarcity says:



Stop Shopping - Edittrix

*'There is not enough to go around. There will not be enough to go around. Keep what you have. Get more. Protect, seize, guard.'*¹

This, Brueggemann argues, is an act of atheism, of unfaith. It is a denial of the Biblical 'lyric of abundance'. The lyric of abundance asserts that

*'because the world is held in the hand of the generative, generous God, scarcity is not true.'*²

God has created a world in which there is enough. This is not mere religious sentiment but is a claim, which if taken seriously, has implications for individual life, society and the economy.

I find the contrast between the myth of scarcity and the lyric of abundance provides me with a way of assessing what I hear of national and international economic policy (think of the response to migrants arriving in Europe). But it also provides a framework for me personally as I seek to be faithful to the reality of the Kingdom whilst living in the midst of the economic empire.

Over the past few years Åsa and I have deliberately sought to live as if there is an alternative to the economic empire. We have not totally disengaged and gone 'off grid'. We have not sold all our possessions and given to the poor. But we have made specific decisions based on the fact we believe that there is an alternative and, perhaps, to test whether or not it is true.



Without Money—Toban B

For us it has involved decisions about mortgages and property, about jobs and career. In particular it was a large factor in Åsa setting up a small business. Many other people have made similar or equivalent choices, some from a Christian faith perspective others for different reasons. So we are in no way unique or special.

Some of the issues that we are facing on this journey are:

Balancing prudent planning for the future with asking for 'daily bread'. There is undoubted (even Biblical) wisdom in setting aside for the future in the form of pensions, property etc. These things provide a sense of security. Yet Jesus warns against putting too much reliance on such security, seeming to advocate a day-by-day approach. He tells us to ask only for bread enough for today and not to worry about tomorrow. Are decisions that go against the norms of 'having a mortgage paid off before you retire' acts of faith or acts of foolishness?

Coming to terms with financial vulnerability. Anyone starting a business knows the risks of investing your assets and the subsequent vulnerability to cash flows. Every person starting a new venture knows what it is to live by faith; be that faith in God, your own abilities or faith in the market (or a mixture of them all). Human nature likes security, and our culture values independence, particularly financial independence. It is humbling to accept gifts and interest free loans from friends when the cash flow works against you. Yet it is also a chance to experience the reality of Christian community, and to learn the truth of inter-dependence.

I remember the advice of an Indian doctor when we were working in Nepal. We were concerned that our help for some desperately poor neighbours was causing them to become dependent. His comment was that we were assuming dependency was a bad thing. People becoming dependent on us was definitely a bad thing. But, he said, becoming dependent on God was not.

Talk of depending on God can sound twee. But our experience of financial vulnerability has shown me how illusory our culture's obsession with independence and security really is.

Alone and together. Each person is responsible for their own walk of faith. We have made specific choices in trying to live as if the Kingdom of God is a viable alternative to the economic empire. We alone are responsible for our discipleship.

Yet we can only live this way together with others. We have found that we need the support, encouragement and wisdom of others who also believe in the lyric of abundance. Often the dominant narrative saying, 'There is no alternative' sounds very loud in our ears. Without a Community of people who remind us of the alternative, and call us back to it, we would be overwhelmed by the dominant narrative. The faithful life is truly one of 'alone together.' *Peter McDowell*



1W. Brueggemann and P. D. Miller, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p 87.

2Ibid., p 113.