

## Review Essay

*Foundations of Our Faith and Calling*. Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Publishing House. 2012. Pp. 82.

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Interest and membership in traditional religious organizations has declined steadily since the mid-twentieth century in North America. In hopes of stemming this tide, many Protestant churches have lowered their standards for belief and practice. But this move increased the impression that they had little to offer anyway, while groups stressing high commitment have tended to attract greater attention and rapid growth. These groups include intentional communities, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, the high point of countercultural experiments.

As society grew more conservative from the late 1970s through the late 1990s, many of these communities receded from public view, focused on internal issues, or even disbanded. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, as interest in traditional denominations continued to decline, alternative forms of Christianity have resurfaced. Though some are called “new,” they bear many resemblances to movements of the 1960s and 1970s and have their roots in preceding centuries.

One such intentional community, which was quite visible in the 1970s but less so through the late 1990s, is the Bruderhof (also known in English as the Society of Brothers). In 2012, a renewed Bruderhof unanimously adopted a comprehensive outline of its convictions in a document called *Foundations of Our Faith and Calling*. This statement is intended not only for Bruderhof members, but also for the wider public, including other religious bodies, with whom the Bruderhof welcomes dialogue.

In this review essay, I will seek to identify some issues that *Foundations* might raise for people who find value in traditional, even if declining, denominations, but who are also moved by the radical communal vision. Since these folks can be found in a wide range of bodies, from the very liberal to the very conservative, I will call them simply “denominational Christians.” I will raise some questions that such people might ask in response to *Foundations*. If it seems that *Foundations* might not resolve some issues sufficiently for them, I do not mean to imply that it is inadequate for its intended purpose. *Foundations* may say everything that the Bruderhof needs to say to itself, even if it does not address everything that others would like it to say.

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*Foundations* is written in clear, nontechnical language, with wide margins that cite relevant Scriptures. Its 82 pages are helpfully organized into seven sections, which contain 108 articles. However, the distribution of these articles is far from uniform. Section 1, "The Basis of Our Faith," contains only four articles, and Section 7, the "Conclusion," has none. Section 2, "Our Calling," which outlines their worldwide vision, includes eighteen articles. Section 3, "Heritage," an overview of historical influences, has nine. The remaining seventy-seven articles form Sections 4-6 ("Church Order," "Church Actions," and "Life in Community"), which describe communal practices and structures. While the overall balance may not indicate the relative importance of each section for the Bruderhof, it does give some indication of the attention that so radical and admirable a communal effort must devote to internal matters.

Section 1 briefly lists the four main sources of their faith: it is founded on Jesus; grounded in the Bible; follows early Christian teachings and examples; and stems from the Anabaptist tradition. The third source includes Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. While contributions from the first three sources pervade the document, it is hard to find anything specific from these two creeds, save that they are confessed in full at baptism (4:33; 5:65, 71).

Section 3 lists a wide range of influences on the Bruderhof distinguished from the basic sources in Section 1. *Foundations* finds "Glimpses of [God's] divine truth" in primitive religions, Socrates, Buddha, and Zoroaster; and today "wherever people strive for truth, justice, brotherhood and peace" (3:23). Elsewhere, *Foundations* affirms that Christ can be found in each person (2:10), and that there exists an "innate divine spark within each child" (6:101).

Additional historical influences in Section 3 include communities like the Desert Fathers, Celtic Christianity, Francis and Clare of Assisi, and early Quakers and Moravians; and numerous individuals, such as Meister Eckhart (who barely escaped condemnation in his own day for allegedly pantheistic teachings), Johann Sebastian Bach, John Wesley, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, and Mother Teresa. Bruderhof members have also been strongly influenced by, and continue to create, music and art.

After these broad influences come three primary "defining influences" (3:27). Two of these preceded the Bruderhof's founding in Germany in 1920. One was the theological legacy of the Blumhardts—Johann (1805-1880) and Christoph (1842-1919)—who stressed that "Jesus is Victor" over all evils and expected God's Kingdom to soon arrive on earth, redeeming all humanity. Their ministries combined pietism and spiritual deliverance with concern for all areas of life. European Youth Movements from 1896-1925 formed another defining influence. These movements rejected materialism, revered the natural world, and formed rural, egalitarian communities not unlike those of the 1960s and 1970s in North America.

However, the defining influence first mentioned in *Foundations* is the early Hutterians, the source of many features of Bruderhof communal life. The Bruderhof's leader, Eberhard Arnold, first learned of the Hutterites

several years after the community was established in 1920. In 1930, several months after meeting with their North American descendants, the Hutterites accepted the Bruderhof into membership.

Relationships between these two communities passed through several, sometimes stormy, phases.<sup>1</sup> They separated in 1955, reunited in 1974, but separated again in 1995. Some reasons trace back to the early cultural difference between the remote Hutterian colonies on the North American plains and the cosmopolitan world of the Blumhardts and the European Youth Movements. This is evident in the broad range of influences noted in Section 3, some of which, like Meister Eckhart, the Hutterians found suspect. Such ecumenical breadth, however, provides common ground with denominational Christians.

Section 2 outlines the Bruderhof's global vision and mission. Like the Blumhardts, they expect Jesus "to transform the entirety of our world, including the economic, the social, and all other aspects of life" (2:5, cf. 2:13). They are energized by a vivid sense that God's Kingdom is *already* present. This arouses a call to action that sometimes seems to imply that it soon can be entirely present. *Foundations* mentions once that this is *not yet* so, but will happen only at Jesus' return (2:5). Yet the document makes relatively few references to this eschatological climax. Amid its encouraging optimism, I also find few references to the struggles, sufferings, delays, and apparent defeats that those who follow this hope through the *not yet* often experience, perhaps because these experiences are often most intense in combating structural evil.

*Foundations* focuses far more on forming "a new society that makes justice and peace tangible" (2:6). It is "to be the city on the hill, the light on the lampstand, and the salt of the earth" (2:10). For denominational Christians who share *Foundations'* vision, this is indeed crucial. Yet many of them feel that they should also deal directly with structural evils. These nearly always are intertwined with governments. But *Foundations*, it seems, does not permit as direct an involvement with governments as many denominational Christians think necessary.

Bruderhof members refuse to take any government position that has "power over the life, liberty, or civil rights of another" (2:12). This stance would seem to include being legislators who could, for example, limit rights to own guns or expand rights to medical care and education.

*Foundations* also identifies "the power of the state," ultimately, with "the power of the sword, secured by violence" (2:12). Denominational Christians might question whether the state's function in many areas, like limiting and expanding rights, is best characterized in this way. Further, the state, according to *Foundations*, can itself also "promote peace and justice" and establish "a relative order of justice." Christian communities can serve as its

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1. For an excellent overview, see Rod Janzen, "The Hutterites and the Bruderhof: The Relationship Between an Older Religious Society and a Twentieth-Century Communal Group," *MQR* 79 (Oct. 2005), 505-544.

conscience, and help it to distinguish good from evil and keep within its boundaries (2:12). But could all this be possible if government leaders did not already have consciences, and some awareness of justice, good, and evil, and their own limits?

The task of government might be perceived, instead, as creating and maintaining some degree of order and peace—not only protecting it by the sword, but also promoting it through laws, institutions, and services to benefit its people. If so, Christians could work with, and sometimes within, governments to alter structures that perpetuate evil. They might not only make alternative ways of life tangible, but also help to modify these structures, or create new ones that could help to facilitate such lifestyles. They also might often experience the opposition, struggle, and defeat that is possible as long as God’s Kingdom is *not yet* fully present.

In suggesting another perspective on government, I do not mean to imply that the Bruderhof should change its approach. Intense focus on creating alternative communities can be all-consuming and also very effective. But since the Bruderhof welcomes responses to *Foundations*, I am trying to bring their approach into dialogue with the kind of view held by many denominational Christians.

On the current scene, Bruderhof social views might be labeled radical, or at least liberal. In God’s Kingdom, they write, “the last will be first,” which is “especially for the poor and lowly” (2:19). *Foundations* insightfully critiques “mammon—the desire for and the power of possessions” (2:18) and rejects materialism and private property. Nevertheless, other Bruderhof values are usually labeled conservative. Their “reverence for life,” for example, forbids abortion (2:11, cf. 5:78, 6:96). They “can never recognize a homosexual relationship as a marriage” (5:79, cf. 6:97). Families “form the basic unit of the church community” (6:97). Divorce is not permitted, though separation might be permissible in rare cases (5:80).

*Foundations* also upholds the Hutterian tradition that only “brothers” can be Servants of the Word (pastoral leaders), bishops, or head elders. However, if they are married, their wives share, and not only support, these roles (5:50, 52). The husband is also head of the family, and the wife the helper. She should support him, but only—notice the nuance—“in what is good.” Neither spouse should follow the other in what is wrong, but put obedience to Christ and the church above their relationship (5:81). These “conservative” values attract some Catholic leaders to Bruderhof ideas,<sup>2</sup> and also some Orthodox and conservative Protestants. Whatever one’s view on particular issues, *Foundations* challenges us to consider whether, and where, radical Christianity community might transcend current sociopolitical oppositions and include some values usually found on different sides.

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2. See Johann Christoph Arnold, “Who was Pope Benedict, and What is his Legacy?” ([www.bruderhof.com/en/news/2013/mar](http://www.bruderhof.com/en/news/2013/mar)); response of Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, archbishop of New York, to *Foundations of our Faith and Calling*, Oct. 2012 ([www.bruderhof.com/en/faith](http://www.bruderhof.com/en/faith)); Jerry and Nancy Voll, “A Call to Work Together,” ([www.bruderhof.com/en/news/2012/aug](http://www.bruderhof.com/en/news/2012/aug)).

Other elements within the document that are often considered liberal or conservative are more theological. Like many similar movements, the Bruderhof prioritizes Jesus' teachings, "especially the Sermon on the Mount" (2:5). For some liberal Christians, these teachings clash with creeds, including the Nicene Creed, which was officially formulated during Constantine's reign (in 325 A.D.). Some Christians have considered the Nicene Creed to be "a product of Constantinianism," which marked a sharp shift from early Christianity. Other Christians today, including many conservative ones, find it fully compatible with the Gospels. Its content and form developed almost entirely during the two preceding centuries among countercultural, often persecuted, Christians.

Since both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds belong to the basis of Bruderhof faith (1:3), this radical community shares, in some way, the "conservative" perspective. Yet since *Foundations* very seldom refers to the creeds' contents, I find it difficult to know how they and the Gospel imperatives are related. Are these creeds simply recited in baptism to affirm some sense of continuity with the early church and today's global church? Or are they and Jesus' teachings deeply connected in ways that would be meaningful for denominational Protestants, and also for Orthodox and Catholics?

The Bruderhof appears to be theologically conservative in other ways. *Foundations* affirms that the living word, which is Christ experienced as present, "never contradicts the Bible" (2:19), and that this includes the Old, as well as the New, Testament (1:2). Further, Jesus' saving work apparently consists, above all, in "his sacrifice on the cross." There "he atoned for our sins and the sins of the whole world," as many conservative Christians strongly emphasize. Yet his cross also "overcomes all powers of evil" (2:8), as more radical, socially concerned Christians stress. Like the Bruderhof's social perspective, its theological orientation can transcend, while also embracing some emphases of competing parties.

Turning from society and theology to the church, we have noticed how the Bruderhof has been affected by a wide variety of Christian influences. It considers itself "only a small part of the universal church" (2:9); of a stream which gave it life, and into which it will eventually pass away (3:31). It also treasures and emphasizes Christian unity. Echoing some "liberal" ecumenical movements, *Foundations* asks: "How will the world know that the gospel is true?" It answers: "through the love and unity visible through his disciples" (2:22).

Yet a paradox appears in its account of the Lord's Supper, a meal and symbol of unity. The Supper is only for those who are "baptized, tested in daily life, and united in fellowship with the church community. . ."; and who, moreover, "have received believer's baptism, who affirm the same confession of faith . . ." (5:71). This strict limitation to tiny groups, whose Hutterian ancestors were often considered sectarian, can seem poles apart from unity in the worldwide Church.

Nonetheless, this position is not too different in principle—though it certainly is in scope—from those of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Their concerns for true oneness lead them to approximately the same conclusion. Paradoxically, towards the close of many large ecumenical gatherings today, Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants celebrate this meal of unity separately.

Other Christians, then, can perhaps appreciate that Bruderhof strictness in this and many other aspects of church life does not arise from narrow, rigid sectarianism. Perhaps the Bruderhof might best be perceived not as a sect separate from other churches, but more like a monastic order within a larger, worldwide church. For many centuries, groups desiring more disciplined, biblically-formed lifestyles than most Christians practice have found these lifestyles in such orders. This enabled them and their mother churches to live out their faith differently, to disagree on some (sometimes many) things, and yet to benefit each other in various ways and to remain joined. Of course, the Bruderhof, Protestant denominations, and Catholic and Orthodox churches today are structurally separate. Still, it might be helpful to visualize the Bruderhof actually functioning, and seeking to relate to established churches, somewhat like these monastic orders.

Bruderhof strictness is evident in other ways, which dissuade many admirers from joining them. Membership is for life. It requires surrender of all property, which is not returned if anyone leaves (though transitional support is provided [4:41]). Members must live wherever they are sent (4:42) and take up any kind of work that they are asked (5:90). Church discipline, which involves mutual correction and sometimes penalties, is practiced through their lives (5:74).

Such strictness and high behavioral standards can spawn rigidity, conformity, and dictatorial authority, as their Hutterian and Anabaptists forerunners too often learned. *Foundations*, however, strives admirably to avoid these. It stresses that community members are “diverse reflections of God’s image.” Accordingly, it rejects “all attempts to make people uniform,” believing that “The more originality there is among us, the more vibrant our fellowship will be” (6:104). For example, while *Foundations* advocates a “rigorous academic education” for Bruderhof children that avoids “permissiveness and indulgence,” it also rejects “moralism and legalism” and seeks to “enable them to arrive at their own convictions” (6:101-103).

*Foundation* closes by declaring the aim of all Bruderhof processes and structures—namely, that

our life together will become not narrower but broader; not more limited but more boundless; not more regulated but more abundant; not more incapable but more creative; not more sober but more enthusiastic; not more fainthearted but more daring. (Sec. 7)

Though such ideals are extremely difficult to attain, all the Bruderhof’s denominational admirers can surely affirm them.