

FAITH-BASED SUPPORT FOR THE EXCLUDED

God's Call for Justice



by Gregory Baum

From 1960s on, many people, especially in the third world, were engaged in struggles for justice and the liberation of the oppressed. They hoped that the historical conditions were such that a radical transformation of society was possible. This movement had a profound influence on the Christian Churches, or at least on a significant current within them. We reread the biblical texts of the Hebrew prophets that announced God's judgement on an unjust world and God's promises to remake the world as an expression of love, justice, and peace. We relearned the truth, so often forgotten, that God is in solidarity with the poor, the despised and the weak, and that he has sent his Son to rescue, liberate and transform humanity entrapped in injustice. We came to recognize more clearly that Jesus has called us to "an option for the poor," i.e., a double commitment to look upon society from the perspective of the poor and to support their struggle for greater freedom and justice. We then thought that we lived in a special period of history when the overcoming of liberal capitalism and a more just reconstruction of society were real possibilities. Using biblical language, we called this period a "kairos," a blessed time when rescue was available.

Yet in 1991, I wrote an article in which I said, using another biblical image, that we now lived in "the wilderness." A period of history had come into being through the arrival of monetarism, the collapse of Eastern European communism, the globalization of the unregulated market system, neo-lib-

eral ideas as the new orthodoxy, technological developments geared toward eliminating jobs, the widening gap between rich and poor, the spread of unemployment, and the growing hostility towards labour unions. The hope for socialist reconstruction faded away. Progressive politicians had few an-

swers. When in power, socialist and social democratic parties were forced by the demands of capital to support the dominant trend. Western societies came to be imprisoned in a culture that promoted hard-hearted individualism, fostered the desire for consumption, and made people insensitive to the unjust burdens inflicted upon the marginal and the excluded. There was no alternative in sight.

KARL POLANYI

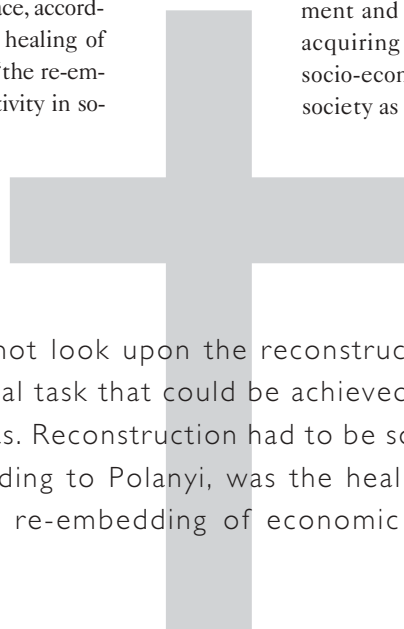
Important for me at that time was Karl Polanyi's remarkable book *The Great Transformation*, published during WW II, which, in contrast to Marx, offered a cultural and ethical critique of the unregulated market system. According to Polanyi, the human damage done by industrial capitalism is what he called "the disembedding of economic activity from community relations." In all previous civilizations, the work people did strengthened the common bonds and secured their insertion in the community. Even if poor, people were able to live dignified lives in their community. Yet industrial capitalism provides work that tears people out of their community, makes them competing individuals, eliminates their sense of interdependence, undermines their

cultural traditions, and produces a new kind of poverty: isolated individuals without a community that sustains them. Already in 1940, Polanyi recognized the human devastation produced by the imposition of our economic system on Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Karl Polanyi did not look upon the reconstruction of society as primarily a political task that could be achieved by a government with socialist ideas. Reconstruction had to be social. What had to take place, according to Polanyi, was the healing of society. He pleaded for “the re-embedding of economic activity in so-

cial relations.” He greatly admired the co-operative movement and the culture of participation and mutuality it created. At the Karl Polanyi Institute in Montreal, of which I am a member, we look upon Polanyi’s work as providing the theoretical foundation for community development (CD), especially community economic development (CED). The terms we use in Québec are “le mouvement communautaire” and “l’économie sociale.” According to Polanyi, CED is much more than a collective effort of unemployed or otherwise marginalized people to improve their economic conditions.

cedarity, it gives meaning to their daily existence, and it creates personal friendships. Since the participants are keenly aware that their economic set-up differs from the dominant capitalist economy, they become critics of society and see themselves as creators of an alternative culture. Even if CED affects only a minority of the population and has not much power at this time, one may well argue that it has a universal social significance. The wisdom of management and co-operation which it is acquiring may one day help the socio-economic reconstruction of society as a whole.



Karl Polanyi did not look upon the reconstruction of society as primarily a political task that could be achieved by a government with socialist ideas. Reconstruction had to be social. What had to take place, according to Polanyi, was the healing of society. He pleaded for “the re-embedding of economic activity in social relations.”

cial relations.” He greatly admired the co-operative movement and the culture of participation and mutuality it created. At the Karl Polanyi Institute in Montreal, of which I am a member, we look upon Polanyi’s work as providing the theoretical foundation for community development (CD), especially community economic development (CED). The terms we use in Québec are “le mouvement communautaire” and “l’économie sociale.” According to Polanyi, CED is much more than a collective effort of unemployed or otherwise marginalized people to improve their economic conditions.

The object of CED includes a social dimension. In the language of Polanyi, this type of economic activity “embeds” the participants in a community. CED rescues people from their isolation, it offers them a new sense of themselves, it allows them to move beyond self-concern, it generates soli-

The Karl Polanyi Institute was founded by two economists, Kari Levitt, the daughter of Karl Polanyi, professor at McGill University and Marguerite Mendell, professor at Concordia University. That the Institute was founded by two women may be significant. CED in Québec, North America, and Europe is one of the Institute’s special fields of research. The international Karl Polanyi Conferences, held every two years, allow us to follow the developments and debates in various parts of the world.

In Québec, these alternative models of economic development are set up in all parts of the province and have given rise to an extensive critical literature. The most recent book, co-authored by Marguerite Mendell, called *Emploi, Économie sociale, Développement local*, offers a detailed study of the various forms of CED in Québec. We learn that CED contributes \$4 billion to

Québec’s GDP, which is four times as much as the mining industries. The social economy in Québec is made up of 4,800 enterprises, 2,300 of which are co-operatives and 2,500 nonprofit organizations, and provides 50,000 jobs.

CHRISTIAN SUPPORT

Christians politicized through the liberation movements in the ‘60s and ‘70s have shared the puzzlement and defeatism of the secular Left. Living “in the wilderness” and yet not wanting to give up hope, we have searched society for signs of vitality and creativity. People who believe that God’s rescuing power is present in human history are always on the lookout for healing, transforming, and reconstructing developments. Where are new things happening? Where do people transcend the conditions produced by the contradictions of society? With many Christians I have felt that exciting things were happening at the grassroots. What impressed us was that CD and CED summoned forth a dedicated life, offered rescue from individualism, and produced a critical stance toward the dominant culture. Alas, our own parishes and congregations are hardly ever able to do this.

When I read the papers written by Karl Polanyi in the ‘20s and ‘30s, I discovered that he was critical of social science indifferent to the ethical dimension and that he repeatedly referred to the teaching of Jesus, the call to mutuality, and the concern for the common good. When he lived in England, he became a member of a group that called itself the Christian Left, engaged in conversation with social theologians, and contributed an article to their book, *Christianity and the Social Revolution* (1937).

The reasons why people join community development in its various forms differ greatly. Some people stumble into it. They are attracted to it because it promises to help them, and then discover that in helping themselves they also help others. Thus a new horizon opens for them. Others commit themselves, urged by their conscience. Since neither government nor the market system offer help for people in trouble, men and women driven by conscience want to involve themselves in self-

help movements that create community. Because they love justice, they become critical of the established powers in government and in economic and financial institutions.

For some of these men and women the voice of conscience is purely secular; it has nothing to do with God or the Bible. But for others, conscience has a religious dimension. Let me offer a quotation from a Roman Catholic statement.

“Conscience is the secret core and sanctuary of human beings where they are alone with the God whose voice echoes in their depth. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals the law which is fulfilled by love of God and love of neighbour.”

The inner call for love, justice, and peace addresses every human being, even if most of us do not want to listen to it. Jews and Christians also hear this call in the Bible and Muslims in the Koran; Hindus, Buddhists, and members of other religions hear it in their own Scriptures. People who have dropped out of organized religion often hear the call of conscience as a kind of inheritance of their past.

CD and CED have an ethical foundation. This does not mean that the participants are altruistic. They recognize, rather, the interdependence of human beings; they realize that they can't be well unless others are well too; they discover that forgetting themselves in a common project offers them personal fulfilment. Some of our contemporaries do not even like the word “ethics”: it suggests to them strict rules, obedience to authority, and guilt in their sexual life. But if by ethics is meant a vision of what the human community ought to be like and the desire to help realize this vision in practice, they might have fewer objections. Paul Ricoeur has defined ethics as “the good life in just institutions.”

Religions are ambiguous phenomena. One finds it right, left, and centre. Let me quote an excerpt from a letter by Ted Schmidt, published in the *Globe and Mail* (Nov. 30, 2000):

“I daresay that Mr. Stockwell Day is sincere, but I have seen little evidence that he has understood that Jesus and

the poor are inextricably connected. I have listened hard to Mr. Day, read his literature and was stunned by the party's abandonment of the poor both here and internationally, its failure to champion the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, its shameful neglect of 'creation' in its environmental policies and its amnesia on social housing. As far as I could see, the market, not Jesus, was Lord.”

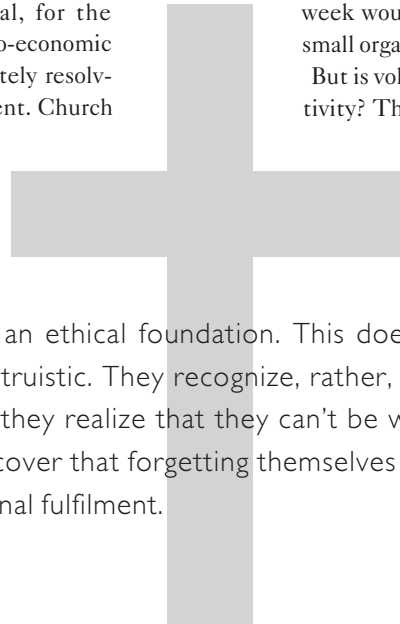
What is remarkable is that over the last decades the major Canadian Churches have recognized the close link between the Gospel and the struggle for social justice. Two recent examples are the *Consultation on Faith and the Economy* held in the year 2000 by the Moderator of the United Church of Canada and the *Open Letter to the MPs: The Common Good or Exclusion: A Choice for Canadians* published in February 2001 by the Social Affairs Commission of the Canadian Catholic Conference of Bishops. The ethical critiques of the unregulated market system and the demands for greater economic justice deal, for the most part, with macro-economic issues that are ultimately resolvable only by government. Church

ernments could in fact do much more to guide the economy and protect society than they actually do. They are not as impotent as they pretend. Eventually national governments will have to co-operate in the creation and enforcement of international norms, regulations, and safeguards that industrial, commercial, and financial institutions must observe.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON VOLUNTEERING

Many people feel that as we are living in the wilderness there is hope above all in micro-economic transformations that foster community life. I think it is correct to say that in the good work they do, CD and even CED are in need of volunteers. I wish that Christian congregations would search out CD and CED in their neighbourhood and inquire if they are in need of volunteers. Some parishioners may wish to offer humble services. Yet a lawyer or an accountant ready to serve one afternoon a week would also be of great help to small organizations.

But is volunteering an honoured activity? The woman's movement has



CD & CED have an ethical foundation. This does not mean that the participants are altruistic. They recognize, rather, the interdependence of human beings; they realize that they can't be well unless others are well too; they discover that forgetting themselves in a common project offers them personal fulfilment.

leaders say less about micro-economic changes that could serve the well-being of society. It may be pertinent to mention in this context that at the Karl Polanyi Institute we tend to think that the globalization of the market is still only a partial phenomenon, that national economies are to a large extent still intact, and that gov-

been critical of volunteering because many institutions wanted women only as volunteers and would not assign them a place where they had responsibility and their voice was recognized. Some institutions took for granted that women would freely offer their services in doing tasks for which men were paid. The labour movement has

criticized volunteering because in many cases it allowed large institutions to reduce the number of paid jobs. More generally one can say that volunteering was regarded as a work of charity that did not challenge the existing order. Volunteering was an act of generosity, devoid of political meaning. People on the left were hesitant about it.

Yet the men and women who freely offer their services in CD and CED think of their work as a gesture critical of society and an act in support of greater justice. Their work may be an expression of love or charity, but it is not devoid of political meaning. Participating in CD and CED they acquire a critical mindset, question the dominant competitive mentality, recognize some of the damage done by transnational corporations, and entertain an alternative vision of society. Many of these

volunteers wish there was another term they could use to describe themselves. In Québec they often refer to themselves as “militants” or, in English, “activists.”

In Québec Christians who, impelled by their faith, participate in labour unions, the co-operative movement and community development tend to remain silent about their religious motivation. Because of the omnipresence of the Catholic Church in Québec society prior to 1960, most Québécois prefer to remain aloof from organized religion. That is why ardent Christians who participate in social movements prefer not to articulate their faith. I think this may be different in other Canadian provinces. But whether silent or outspoken, the dedication to a social movement aiming at greater justice has become a contemporary form of Christian discipleship.✎

GREGORY BAUM, Professor Emeritus at the Religious Studies Faculty of McGill University in Montreal, is a Catholic theologian involved in ecumenism, liberation theology, and economic justice. One of his recent publications is *Karl Polanyi: On Ethics and Economics* (McGill-Queen's University Press). He is editor of *The Ecumenist*, a review on Christian thought and social justice published by Novalis (Ottawa) and a member of the editorial board of the (francophone) review *Relations*, a progressive Catholic monthly. He can be reached by e-mail at gbaum@po-box.mcgill.ca.