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Alpha – the McDonaldization of Religion?

The Alpha Course provokes discussion and comment amongst Christians of all kinds on these islands. Some are passionate advocates of its method of evangelism, others critical of its method or its theology. How are we to think about it? Pete Ward borrows models of analysis from the world of cultural criticism and finds that Alpha fits convincingly within 'late capitalism'. This gives it strengths – but it may point to weaknesses that deserve attention.

Introduction

The success of the Alpha course makes it one of the religious phenomena of the generation. At the present moment around 7,500 courses are running world wide.¹ Behind these quite staggering numbers are individual clergy, congregations and Christian people who, perhaps for the first time, have found in Alpha a hope of realistic and achievable evangelism in their local communities. For these reasons alone it seems fairly clear that God is at work in and through Alpha. At the same time it would be foolish to ignore the cultural and social organisation which gives shape to this activity. To say that 'God is at work' does not preclude the possibility of cultural analysis of religious phenomena. Indeed a theology of Incarnation would demand both theological and social scientific perspectives. This paper is an attempt to describe the cultural characteristics of Alpha, the social 'enfleshment' within which the Spirit of God is currently at work. This is where comparisons with McDonalds start to make sense.

The McDonaldization of society

'McDonaldization', according to George Ritzer, is a process of rationalisation associated with the American fast food company McDonalds.² Ritzer's 'The McDonaldization of Society' describes how the principles which lie behind McDonalds are spreading throughout the world and into every area of life.³ Thus,

1 *Alpha News* 15, March-June 1998.

2 G. Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of society: an investigation into the changing character of contemporary social life*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks 1996.

3 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, p xvii.

Note that the American convention of spelling 'ize' with a z is applied to 'McDonaldization', but reverts to English usage for the remainder of the article.

McDonaldization affects not only the restaurant business, but also education, work, health care, travel, leisure, dieting, politics, the family, and virtually every other aspect of society. McDonaldization has shown every sign of being an inexorable process by sweeping through seemingly impervious institutions and parts of the world.⁴

The similarities between Alpha and McDonalds extend a good way beyond the serving of meals. Both have achieved success by operating a franchising system. Each McDonalds is an individually owned franchise and central control is maintained by the close regulation of individual franchisees. A similar relationship operates between churches who buy the Alpha materials and register as an official course. Alpha is a recognisable 'product' with a strong brand label. Whilst not running actual courses around the country the central organisation of Alpha maintains a fairly tight control over their product.⁵ Alpha, like McDonalds, has ambitions to spread all around the world. Ritzer makes it clear that McDonalds aims at domination of the global fast food market. The much trumpeted arrival of McDonalds in Russia is paralleled by recent opening of the Moscow Alpha office.⁶ Both have been influential in the development of imitations. McDonalds, with the spread of other fast food outlets such as Burger King and KFC, Alpha with the emergence of similar courses such as Emmaus and Credo.

McDonalds is successful, argues Ritzer, because it,

...offers consumers, workers and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability and control.⁷

It is the argument of this paper that the social and cultural understanding of the successful working of God in Alpha can be similarly understood and that such an analysis offers a helpful and positive critique for the Church.

Efficiency

Rationalisation is the process whereby social and economic organisation is structured by the pursuit of the optimum means to an end. Building on Weberian analysis of bureaucratisation Ritzer argues that McDonaldization is characterised by a mind set within which individuals rarely seek to establish these means on their own. Rather they rely upon already discovered processes which have been institutionalised. Rationalisation is driven by the pursuit of efficiency.⁸ In McDonalds efficiency is achieved by the simplification of menus to offer a limited range of products – compare the choice offered by McDonalds to the average menu in a restaurant. Tasks undertaken by the work force are similarly simplified. All processes associated with the production and serving of fast food have been separated into easy to follow steps and structured much like an assembly line. The net result is that the cost of producing food is reduced. McDonalds is a brand with every McDonalds outlet benefiting from a common look, product list and advertising strategy.

4 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, p 1.

5 see Alpha Copyright Statement, *Alpha News* 15, p 4.

6 *Alpha News* 15, March-June 1998.

7 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, p 1.

8 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, p 35.

Alpha presents itself as a process of evangelism which has been tried and tested and shown to be successful.⁹ Churches have no need to develop their own evangelism courses. Alpha comes pre-packaged and with guarantees. In short, Alpha has done for evangelism what McDonalds has done for fast food.

The 15 talks which form the basis of Alpha are set out in full in *Questions of Life*.¹⁰ In the Alpha manual, which is designed to be given to all those participating in a course, each of the talks has been summarised under headings leaving room for notes. In *Telling Others*, Nicky Gumbel sets out in great detail exactly how the Alpha Course should be run.¹¹ This material is really quite remarkable. It includes the way that talks should be structured, the pattern for each evening of the course and even sample timetables for the weekend away.¹² Tasks associated with the course are also defined; the roles of welcomers, group leaders, helpers, runners, administrator and caterers are all set out clearly.

Alpha has embraced what Jameson calls 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'. This an economic and cultural arena structured around relationships of production and consumption.¹³ Alpha is the production company which develops and markets the materials needed to run and Alpha Course. The products offered by Alpha include; The Alpha Course on video and tape, The Alpha Cookbook, worship resources, publicity material, t-shirts and bumper stickers.¹⁴ These products are bought by local churches because they are a means to develop evangelism. At the same time they help to foster the franchising relationship between the locally run courses and the Alpha organisation by keeping the Alpha brand to the fore.

Part of the success of Alpha is almost certainly the way that the resources and materials offer a well thought out means whereby individuals and churches can get going in evangelism. The McDonalidization of evangelism in this sense has enabled many congregations to fulfil a call to share the gospel. Of course, the other draw of the Alpha course is the promise that it works. The term 'efficiency' is hardly ever used by Alpha. In its place is the repeated assertion that Alpha is 'effective evangelism'. This is not only used frequently by Sandy Millar and Nicky Gumbel, it is also characteristic of the endorsements from leading Churchmen and women.¹⁵ Alpha is spreading because it is 'effective evangelism'. In other words, the local congregation can do this sort of evangelism and people are coming to faith as a result of the courses.

The search for efficiency, however has also affected the content of the Alpha course. As Sandy Millar says,

This I think is one of the reasons why the Alpha course has proved to be so popular in such a wide variety of countries and cultures. The issues are clearly put and the claims of Christ examined – all in the company of other searchers. By taking account of literally thousands of questionnaires, the Alpha course has been adapted and improved so that it is truly moulded to the perceived

9 *Alpha: God Changing Lives*, Alpha pamphlet, np, nd.

10 N. Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, Kingsway, Eastbourne 1993.

11 N. Gumbel, *Telling Others*, Kingsway, Eastbourne 1994.

12 Gumbel *Telling Others*, p 155.

13 F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke UP, Durham NC 1991.

14 see HTB Publications with Alpha resources.

15 *Alpha: God Changing Lives*, p 9 and p 20f.

and experienced needs of this generation. Stripping the gospel down to its bare essentials, it makes Christianity accessible to men and women of today's culture.¹⁶

This is the McDonaldization of Religion. Convenience, speed of service, fast food, Alpha shares a great deal in common with McDonalds. That is not to say, however that the Christian gospel is necessarily misrepresented or offered cheaply (for, in my view, on the whole it is not). The point is that the success of Alpha can be seen to lie in a measure of simplification of religion. For the non-church-goer in pursuit of answers to questions the Alpha course has considerable advantages over regular church. Church can be, to say the least, incomprehensible to the uninitiated. Alpha cuts through ritual and theological complexity which characterises Sunday worship and delivers to the non-church-goer exactly what they are looking for. It is precisely this skill at giving the people what they want that most churches lack. What Alpha offers is off the peg solutions. Of course, along the way the nature of religion and the structure of religious organisations undergo significant change.

Calculability

McDonaldization is driven by numbers. Efficiency is assessed by counting. At McDonalds, Ritzer points out, this relates to both the production of the food and to the end results. In production what is assessed is speed – how many burgers cooked in numbers of minutes. For the consumer the end is quantity – thus, 'Big Mac and large Fries' and all for what is perceived to be a very cheap price. Quantity, however does not necessarily mean quality. Indeed Ritzer points out that most people eating fast food know that this is not the best food they have ever tasted, but they console themselves by emphasising the size of portions relative to price and the speed of service.¹⁷

Alpha also exhibits a predilection for numbers. 'Thousands of people around the world are now taking part in Alpha Courses', says Gumbel.¹⁸ 'From 5,000 churches in Britain. An invitation to the nation', says the front page headline in Alpha News.¹⁹ The figures charting the steady growth in the numbers of Alpha Courses held world-wide are unfailingly displayed on Alpha publicity 1991 – 4, 1992 – 5, 1993 – 200, 1994 – 750, 1995 – 2,500, 1996 – 5,000, 1997 – 6,500, 1998 – 7,500 (so far).²⁰ Alpha measures its success and present itself for approval primarily on the basis of numerical success. Quantity matters but not entirely at the expense of quality. The many testimonies and stories which are patterned throughout the Alpha material give witness to a change in the 'quality' of peoples lives. That said, Alpha has internalised the values of McDonaldization where quantity is a self-evident proof of significance and where numbers sell.

Calculability is also seen in the content of the Alpha talks and materials. Alpha does not just present itself in terms of numbers, it also assesses the outside world in a similar fashion. The numbers of declining churches are a motivating force for Sandy Millar.²¹ The Church of England has been losing members at the rate of

16 *Alpha: God Changing Lives*,
17 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, p 60f.
18 Gumbel, *Telling Others*, p 15.

19 *Alpha News* 15, March-June 1998.
20 *Alpha News* 15, March-June 1998.
21 Gumbel, *Telling Others*, p 13.

1,000 a week, we are told, and 80% of these are under the age of twenty.²² The truth of these claims is not really the point, what is interesting is the extent to which religious discourse is expressed in calculable terms. In fact it is quite remarkable how often Nicky Gumbel uses numbers as part of his material. *Searching Issues* is particularly prone to lists of figures. Here we learn that 2.5% of the population are adherents of other faiths, 80% would probably go to a Christian church if they went anywhere, the new age movement is based on ages lasting 2000 years and in 1987 the number of marriages ending in divorce had risen to 151,000.²³ Religion affected by McDonaldization measures both sin and salvation by numbers.

Predictability

McDonalds aims to offer a consistent product in a familiar environment. For the consumer there is the reassurance that wherever you are in the world you can enter a McDonalds and know where you are.²⁴ The look of McDonalds reproduced in signs the world over is a promise of this predictability. In McDonalds predictability even extends to the scripting of interactions between workers and customers. All of this is backed up by the training offered at the Hamburger University.²⁵

Alpha in a similar way offers a predictable experience of evangelism. This is particularly valuable to Church leaders. The pre-packaged material, including videoed evangelistic talks, means that the uncertainties associated with Christian outreach are minimised. The uniform 'branding' of Alpha products, in particular the colourful cartoons of Charlie Mackesy, seek to reassure. These images lend a bright, clean, fun and perhaps childlike image to the Alpha Course. Ronald McDonald is not far away when we look at the Alpha logo of the figure carrying a question mark. For the non-church-goer this is experienced as non-threatening religion.

Whilst there is no attempt to script evangelistic interactions on Alpha courses, the material does routinise significant aspects of the course. The material in *Telling Others* establishes set patterns with exact timings given for each evening and also the weekend away. For those involved in evangelistic outreach for the first time this introduces a measure of what is expected. Encounters with non-church-goers can be unpredictable. What Alpha does is offer a context where this can be managed in a reassuringly predictable way. One example of this is seen in *Searching Issues* where Nicky Gumbel offers answers to the questions most commonly raised by non-church-goers on Alpha courses. Predictability is also seen in the ongoing training developed in the various conferences offered around the world by Alpha. Not quite Hamburger University, but perhaps that is to come.

Control

McDonaldization, according to Ritzer is finally characterised by the exercise of control. The chief means by which this is achieved is the introduction of non-human technology, machines.

22 Gumbel, *Questions*, p 7.

23 N. Gumbel, *Searching Issues*, Kingsway Eastbourne 1994, pp 7, 25f, 71, 93, 183.

24 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, p 85.

25 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, p 86.

The basic idea, historically, is for organisations to gain control over people gradually and progressively through the development and deployment of increasingly effective technologies.²⁶

Eventually the routinised behaviour of workers is replaced by computers and robots. Whilst nowhere near to McDonalds in the use of non-human technologies and the control of behaviours, Alpha does exhibit some of these characteristics of McDonaldisation. The Alpha material is evidence of a significant level of control over the process of evangelism in the local Church. The availability of the talks on video mean that a good many Churches bypass the need for a live speaker. Where talks are given by a local person Nicky Gumbel sets out in some detail how talks should be given, including of course the expected content in detail in *Questions of Life*. With worship material, training manuals, cookbook and all the other resources all made available through the central Alpha organisation, a pattern not only of enabling the local church to do evangelism can be seen to be taking shape, but also a pattern of control. To buy into Alpha is to do it the Alpha way. Alpha thus becomes the cultural producer and creative force.

The development of Alpha has involved the transformation of an Anglican parish church into a new kind of religious entity. Alpha is a centre for religious cultural production. It is a cultural industry operating much like any other cultural industry. Thus it develops a relationship of production and consumption between itself and a network of local outlets who buy and use its products.

Much like the music industry, Alpha has a copyright problem. In all of its material a carefully worded legal statement of the ownership and use of rights is presented. Like McDonalds, Alpha has experienced problems in maintaining control over its product and brand name. Sandy Millar makes this clear,

We have always been keen to allow individuals who are running an Alpha Course the flexibility to adapt where it was felt necessary to allow for locally-felt needs and where there was a desire to retain the essential elements, nature and identity of the course. Experience has shown that this has been misunderstood and the resulting loss of integrity in some courses has given rise to considerable confusion. Now that Alpha is running around the world we have reluctantly had to draw up a copyright statement more tightly in order to preserve confidence and quality control. I am sure you will understand.²⁷

The Alpha copyright statement defines the exact nature of the course very closely. Whilst it accepts that talks may be of different lengths and the exact number of sessions may vary the statement is clear that the essential nature of the course must be maintained. Alpha, it says, is a series of fifteen talks given over a period of time which includes a weekend or day away. The material presented in talks must be based upon all of the material in Nicky Gumbel's book *Questions of Life*. Any adaptation can only be used in the local setting and must not be marketed in any way.

26 Ritzer, *McDonaldisation*, p 101.

27 *Alpha News* 15, March-June 1998.

McDonalidization and the Incarnation

An incarnational theology takes seriously not only the work of the Spirit of God in mission, but also the cultural forms which the Church adopts. Alpha is a remarkable success and is clearly being used by God in significant ways all around the world. At a cultural level there are significant aspects of McDonalidization, which, when incorporated into religious culture, are very effective. Not the least of these is the way that the Alpha course has offered a way for local Churches to gain a confidence about sharing the faith. For the non-church-goer Alpha is a recognisable religious product which can answer questions about the nature of the Christian faith. McDonalidization has been central to this model. Of course this is not to suggest that Nicky Gumbel and Sandy Millar and the others involved in the development of Alpha have self consciously adopted a programme of McDonalidization. I suspect that they have simply done what they found to be most 'effective', and in the current context that has led them to McDonalidization. This dynamic of cultural production and consumption is characteristic of many aspects of late capitalism. Alpha has stumbled across, or maybe they have been led, to use this dynamic to generate a movement of the people of God. Whilst some may feel that the mere comparison with McDonalds implies criticism, I must say that in my mind this is far from the case. McDonalidization is a significant and not entirely unwelcome aspect of cultural life in late capitalism. Alpha can therefore be seen as a significant contextualisation of the methods of evangelism and maybe of the gospel itself. Culture however is never neutral, it is always good and bad. The humanity of Christ may have been perfect but the cultural activities of the Church are rarely so.

The Church has bought what Alpha is selling in a big way but perhaps a little uncritically. Of course there has been a good deal of debate in the Church press about the theology of Alpha, but to my mind the more interesting and perhaps significant questions arise from the analysis of culture. After all, the theology offered by Nicky Gumbel and Sandy Millar is hardly new, the means by which their vision is enacted most certainly is. McDonalidization affects not only the ability of Alpha to communicate, it also conditions the content and nature of that communication. In addition, the social and economic relationships which result from McDonalidization have a significant impact upon the nature of the Church itself. The following are a number of points for concern which arise from an analysis of the culture of Alpha in terms of McDonalidization.

1. Simplification of religion

Whilst Alpha presents the good news of Jesus in a very clear and coherent way it does simplify religious life. Christian theology is to say the least complex and varied. Alpha tends to flatten this reality. Just as the Big Mac and Fries are filling, they are also somewhat uniform and bland and on their own hardly a wholesome diet. The same could be said of Alpha, if it leads no further than its own version of the faith.

2. The iron cage of Alpha

The classic critique of rationalisation is that it tends to create systems that bind people, stifle creativity and from which they eventually try to escape. For many Christians the gospel is experienced as a call to creativity and quirky endeavour in the power of the Spirit. The McDonalidization of religion is in danger of suppressing this.

3. Religious imperialism

Alpha's very positive desire to see everyone in the country reached by the gospel also contains within it a measure of domination. The spread of Alpha brings with it the spread of a uniform spirituality. With some aspects of this I have no problem, e.g. the importance of the Holy Spirit. The problem is that in ignoring cultural and social distinctions true contextualisation is possibly suppressed. Alpha is to religion what a McDonalds is to American cultural imperialism.

4. The illusion of religion

McDonaldization leads to an illusion of neatness and cleanness. Disneyworld is a good example of a McDonaldised total experience; glitzy, exciting, but essentially fake. What Baudrillard calls simulacrum, the copy of a copy for which there is no original. Alpha offers those from outside of the Church an experience of the faith which has a measure of unreality. Membership of a local church, regular Sunday worship and so on are simply not like Alpha.

5. Convenience mission

Alpha has helped us rediscover mission in the English Church and for this we must thank God. Individual Christians are enabled by Alpha to play again a part in reaching out to their neighbours and friends. The argument of this paper is that analysed at a cultural level Alpha is successful in this because it has 'simplified' evangelism to a predictable process. McDonaldization is designed for individuals on the move who are concerned to minimise commitments. Commitment to Christ, the Church and to the evangelistic process is key to everything offered by the Alpha course, but Christian mission is a much broader and probably a significantly more costly endeavour than participation in an Alpha course. Whatever is in the mind of Nicky Gumbel or of Sandy Millar in a relationship of production and consumption people make of the product what they want. Given this fact it is not terribly hard to see how evangelism and mission can so easily become reduced to running Alpha. In this scenario it has to be said that McDonaldized evangelism lacks a significant theology of the cross.

In conclusion

Alpha's exploitation of the culture of late capitalism is extremely important. Alpha is a work of God, but it is also a religious cultural industry offering product to consumers. Such an arrangement introduces significant new elements into the life of the Church of England. This is a dynamic where power has shifted away from episcopal hierarchies and bureaucratic synodical government towards the market. In the process the nature of religious life has been changed. McDonaldization is not by any means all bad, but it should not be baptised uncritically. The structures of the Church were not set up to deal with a dynamic of production and consumption. The movement to a market economy of religious life is a revolution of immense importance and it one which by passes all currently understood structural and ecclesiastical authority. The cultural significance of Alpha for the life of the Church is only just being realised.

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