

The Alpha Course and Its Critics: An Overview of the Debates

Stephen Hunt
Department of Sociology
University of the West of England

Abstract

This paper considers the theology and praxis that is discernible in the highly successful Alpha evangelising programme and the debates surrounding it. Alpha has a global dimension, impacting in churches in dozens of countries, while the accompanying literature is translated into several dozen languages. While there are few accounts of its significance as a contemporary form of Christian evangelism, little has been explored in terms of Alpha's theological content - the doctrines which constitute its 'basic Christianity'. This paper overviews the charismatic theology of Alpha, observing a number of fundamentalist tendencies on the one hand, and more liberal or at least more tolerant teachings on the other. The paper, moreover, overviews the theological critics of Alpha offered by those who see Alpha as too cultural-compromising at best or heretical at worse, while a more liberal critique is inclined to interpret it as conservative in nature. The paper will conclude that the theology of Alpha at least partly accounts for its success as an attractive package of Christianity but may, at the same time, set some of its limitations.

Introduction

The Alpha course can be succinctly described as a contemporary proselytising programme which has been designed for the contemporary post-Christian age. The UK church which instigated the programme, Holy Trinity, Brompton (HTB), has widely advertised Alpha as 'a ten week practical introduction to Christianity'. The working philosophy is to advance the principles and 'basics' of the faith in an informal environment to unchurched 'seekers' in an exploratory and non-threatening way. In true evangelising tradition, the aim is to win converts in an age of non-belief, or at least set people off on a spiritual voyage for which the fruit, in terms of conversion, may occur at a later date. The broad base of Alpha also allows its role as a refresher course for those who are already committed Christians. These various aims are addressed by Alpha through a discernible charismatically orientated culture and theology with the possible net affect of further spreading charismatic Christianity through the established churches.

For liberal critics, Alpha's theological position is frequently interpreted as conservative or even fundamentalist in nature. The principal objection is that it focuses on a distinct form of atonement-salvationist dogma at the expense of other themes pertinent to the Christian message. Hence, liberal critics bemoan the absence of a social gospel and other dimensions of the faith such as the historical sacraments. On the other hand, conservative Christians, particularly evangelicals, have found Alpha to be culturally too world-accommodating, inadequate in some area of the Christian 'basics'; that it fails to adequately advance dogma such as 'sin' and, for some of the more severe critics of this persuasion, Alpha borders on heresy in its ecumenical teaching. All in all,

then, Alpha has a wide appeal but in attempting to find common ground for all Christian denominations, at least in terms of Holy Trinity's appraisal, it has encountered a certain degree of hostility. This paper seeks to explore the debate, but does not endeavour to stir up the controversy surrounding the Alpha programme. Rather, it seeks to consider Alpha's theological input, while unpacking the arguments of its critics in a constructive way which may spur further future discussion.

The discussion in this paper is derived from my research findings related to the Alpha programme in the UK. A pilot study initiated in 1999 led to the publication of *Anyone for Alpha?* (Hunt 2001a). This was followed by a nation-wide study (2001-3) which has resulted in further publications and academic papers (Hunt 2003; 2004).¹ Besides a perusal of Alpha's accompanying literature and explicit and implicit doctrinal statements, I will call upon some of the findings of field research where pertinent to an understanding of Alpha's theology and the cultural milieu in which it is embedded. Likewise I will utilise findings regarding the objections to Alpha advanced by its critics. Personally speaking, I have few personal comments regarding Alpha's theology, either in support or by way of offering a critique. Partly this is because I am a sociologist of religion rather than a theologian, and to some extent because I would at least seek a balanced appraisal. In exploring the key issues I will examine the principal role of Holy Trinity, Brompton, in forming the central theology of Alpha, consider the programme in more detail in relation to its theological teachings, and explore the contention that Alpha is a kind of evangelical McDonald's (with reference to George Ritzer's work on the phenomenon of McDonaldisation) before addressing the subject of theological critiques more systematically.

The Scale of Alpha

Alpha advertises itself for academic study because of its sheer scale and penetration of churches of so many different traditions; Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, and both established denominational and independent churches. Beyond its initial boundaries of the UK where it was first initiated, the international impact is also considerable. The first so-called Alpha national initiative of 1998 set the course firmly on the map in the UK.¹ It was the last and by far the most successful evangelising initiative which came out of the so-called Decade of Evangelism in the UK. Spurred on by the decline in church attendance and membership over several generations, as well as other evidence such as the decline in the Sunday School Movement, the mainline Christian churches collectively vowed to reverse their fortunes through various means but largely through widespread evangelising campaigns.

As might be expected, some of the proselytising initiatives of the 1990s came from the more evangelically minded churches in the UK. Hence, those such as the *Jesus in Me* and *Minus to Plus* campaigns of the early/mid 1990s originated from Pentecostal circles. In terms of winning converts, they proved to be monumental failures largely because of the archaic language supporting the poster advertising and the strategy of merely expecting potential converts to attend their local church without any prior contact. This was a strategy partly rectified by Alpha, although the broader reasons for its success lie in the structure and culture itself as well as, arguably, its theological content.

Those who put Alpha together were well aware from the onset (as clear in a good deal of the programme's supportive literature) that people outside of social networks which

fed into the churches through friends, relatives, neighbours and work associates was the primary way that people could find their way into the churches. This applied working philosophy inherent in Alpha supplemented the advertising campaigns that accompanied the various national initiatives. The poster campaign epitomised a fresh strategy and way of communicating with the public. There were no scriptural verses or theological statements. Rather, eye-catching and 'trendy' slogans in the form of questions have been utilised such as

'Job, Flat, Car, Girlfriend, Season ticket to United. Still not satisfied.'

The latest poster initiative in 2004 shows a mobile phone which displays the message 'Is there more to life than this?' Although the message varies, the underlying concern is to employ eye-catching jargons which advertise 'wares' in today's spiritual marketplace.

Alpha has not just been aimed at the adult population. Its successful formula has also been applied to prisons in several countries in the world. There is also Student Alpha, Youth Alpha, and Alpha for the Armed Forces. The idea behind the appeal to particular social groups is ultimately derived from church-growth strategies that 'like attracts like' - a working philosophy perhaps associated most closely with Fuller seminary through Peter Wagner and the late John Wimber who founded the Vineyard movement with which HTB has always enjoyed close connections. While Wimber advocated the 'signs and wonders' of so-called 'power evangelism' he was also aware that church growth came through networking and close channels of communication. This strategy has proved to be the building block of the Alpha programme (Hunt 1997).

Alpha grew slowly at first in the UK. Only four churches, including its instigator, Holy Trinity, were running Alpha in 1991. Two years later, largely due to HTB's own efforts as well as its high profile as a 'mega' charismatic church, the figure had risen to 200. In 1995, 2,500 churches were running Alpha in the UK, rising to 10,500 (almost one in three churches in the UK) during the national initiative of 1998.² Since late 1999 the number of churches subscribing may have declined slightly to just over 7,000 - suggesting that Alpha's impact in the UK may well have reached its apogee. This has not affected its wide recognition in the population at large since another indication of Alpha's profile is that, according to a Mori opinion poll in late 2003, approximately 20 percent of the UK population had heard of the Alpha course and just under that percentage recognised the distinctive Alpha logo which can be seen on church notice boards, billboards, and on adverts given prominent position on public transport of various kinds.

Alpha's International Scope

In mid 1999, Alpha organisers at HTB claimed that there were nearly 12,000 courses established internationally. In total, so it was asserted in the Alpha accompanying literature, over one million people across the world had passed through the programme since 1995, a further half a million by 1999, doubling to three million by 2002. At the end of 2003 the figure of those graduating through Alpha may well have been nearer four million. By 2004 there were allegedly some 28,000 courses running world-wide in over 140 countries.³

Outside of the UK, Alpha courses were set up initially in Western Europe and then Eastern Europe including Albania, Romania, and other former Soviet bloc countries. The

list of countries further a field now subscribing to Alpha is impressive: Australia, Brazil, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Nepal, Singapore and Zambia among them. Where the programme has performed especially well however is, perhaps predictably, in the USA where Alpha has enjoyed its greatest growth. At first its spread was largely through the highly successful global network of USA churches, the Association of Vineyard Churches, with which HTB and other major evangelical churches in the UK had developed a close working relationship since the early 1980s and throughout the Toronto Blessing of the mid 1990s (1995a).

Over 3,500 American churches were registered in early 2002 as running Alpha courses compared to 2,300 in September 2001. According to the Alpha web site this figure had increased to 5,000 churches by the end of 2003, with over a million people having graduated through the programme. In spring of 2004 there were 7,003 registered Alpha courses in the USA. The country has held the largest-ever Alpha conference with 1,500 church leaders gathered in Boston. It was just one of the 40 Alpha conferences which took place throughout North America during 2001. According to the Alpha web site, leaders of some of the largest churches and ministries in the USA, along with respected theologians, are increasingly endorsing Alpha. Hence, the Alpha site boasts complimentary quotes about the programme from a variety of Christian celebrities including Bill Hybels, J.I. Packer, Luis Palau and Jack Hayford. Given the scope of Alpha questions related to its theology, its 'basic Christianity', become imperative.

The Significance of Holy Trinity, Brompton

As we have already noted, Holy Trinity, Brompton, which is situated in a salubrious part of central London, is the centre of Alpha activity. HTB is presently the wealthiest Anglican church in England with an annual income of £3 million, much of which is derived from the business side of Alpha. The church is part of an evangelical network which criss-crosses the globe although, as noted above, a special link has been established with the Vineyard movement. It was such a connection that was to lead, in the mid 1990s, to HTB's involvement in the so-called Toronto Blessing which, as I shall argue below, has some bearing on Alpha's development. Today, besides catering for the 'guests' who subscribe to the Alpha course, thousands of people attend regular international conferences related to the programme.

HTB is one of the largest charismatic churches in the UK with its team of leaders constituting some of the best-known figures on the Church 'scene'. The church embraces the state-of-the-art Christian culture through its various evangelising activities and bookshop which sells all the accompanying paraphernalia of the Alpha course. While the programme itself has long been established at HTB, the resources and energy now put into the programme marks an important departure from earlier activities perhaps exemplified by its involvement in the Toronto Blessing. Now HTB has become practically synonymous with Alpha, and a large notice board situated at the front of the church proudly announces 'Welcome to HTB - the Home of Alpha'.

Alpha became the fresh focus of interest for many charismatic churches in the late 1990s. The timing is significant. In fact, the spectacular rise of Alpha is intrinsically related to the experiences of the charismatic movement in recent years and not only in terms of its theological content. It might cynically be suggested that Alpha gave church members something to do following the excitement of the Toronto Blessing with its

display of often curious ecstatic phenomena.⁴ In point of fact, it appears that the Alpha national initiative in the UK was set in operation in 1998 at almost precisely the time that the Toronto Blessing began to rapidly fade out. The continuity between the Toronto Blessing and the Alpha programme is perhaps the expectation of a world revival. Such a prophecy was an essential part of the narrative accompanying the Toronto Blessing; a revival was imminent and this coming revival was expected to be global. At this point in time Alpha would seem to be a principal means of instigating it. The link between the initiation and spread of Alpha and the expectation of revival is however merely my speculation. It is not advanced in any of HTB's literature.

Alpha marks a substantial turn in the charismatic movement from esoteric phenomena back to Bible study and the 'basics'. The programme is very much HTB's invention. Its beginnings can be traced back to 1969 with the publication of the small book *Questions of Life* which was initially conceived as a four-week introduction into the foundations of Christianity at HTB. However, Alpha commenced as a serious enterprise in 1977 when Charles Marnham, a clergyman at the church, sought a means of presenting the principles of the Christian faith in a relaxed and informal setting. Initially, Alpha was aimed at educating new converts into the foundations of the faith and only later extended to non-converts who were friends or associates of HTB's church members. In 1981 John Irvine took over the reigns of the programme. It was Irvine who extended the course to its ten-week duration and added on a weekend retreat based on the theme of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. When Nicky Lee assumed command in 1985 there were about thirty-five people on each course held exclusively at HTB. Under Lee the attendance of Alpha proliferated in excess of one hundred 'guests'.

Even before Nicky Gumbel took command, in 1990, Alpha was a central aspect of HTB's church life. It was then substantially developed by Gumbel in 1992 and has evolved from that date. Under his leadership Alpha has become longer in length and more informal in the way that it is applied. HTB, encouraged by Gumbel, has continued to refine Alpha by applying the findings of questionnaires administered to those who have completed the course and by welcoming comments from participating churches related to the structure of the course and perhaps its teachings. It may well be then (although this is difficult to discern), that Alpha's theological content, as well as its programme structure, enjoys the input of those involved at the grass-roots level.

While this democratic element may be discernible, Nicky Gumbel's influence remains all pervasive. It was Gumbel who modified an important element of the course - the near-compulsory and controversial weekend away with its emphasis on the teachings of the Holy Spirit which now includes the important and controversial element of 'Ministry Time'. There is no doubting Gumbel's personal impact on Alpha. Much of the literature supporting the programme, its teachings and theology, is written by Gumbel. He also takes the central role in the video talk which constitutes the centre-piece of the Alpha weekly meeting. Gumbel comes across as an earnest professional, a good communicator, and effective evangelist. His polished Alpha video performances, with his friendly manner, middle-class demure, and the vital combination of anecdote, humour and gospel message is central to Alpha's success. It has also raised his person profile. A clergyman I interviewed during my survey of Alpha suggested that he was 'the second most important person in Christendom after the Pope'. This comment may not be too far off of the mark.

In the early summer of 2002, I attended a theology conference at a Danish university. Many of the theologians I conversed with told me of the increasing impact of Alpha in Denmark and some expressed concern. One academic was astonished at the lack of discussion in Danish churches regarding the content and theology of Alpha. In his view there was a serious danger of this 'introduction to Christianity' becoming, in his words, 'the gospel according to Nicky Gumbel'. This may be an over-exaggeration. Nonetheless, Gumbel, as already noted, has been central in not just the evolution of the programme but in the development of its theological content.

The Structure of Alpha

The structure of the Alpha programme is fairly standard by way of both a typical Alpha meeting and the content of the topics taught. Alpha groups (usually run in the evenings) are administered the programme for some two hours over a duration of eleven weeks (including the beginning or end-of-course meal). Ideally, it is hoped that the course will be held at the house of a church member, hence creating a conducive and less threatening environment for exploring the Christian gospel (Gumbel 1994, 47).

A typical evening on the Alpha course begins with a communal supper of a dozen or so 'guests'. This will usually be followed by a short period of worship and then the centre-piece of the Alpha evening - the video which focuses on a talk by Nicky Gumbel who discusses the weekly themes. In the forty minute talk biblical references are interspersed with moments of humour and anecdotes. This is followed by a half-hour discussion related to what has been explored in Gumbel's talk. Ideally church leaders and 'guests' will debate the key issues. Although the discussion is supposed to allow exploration, it is fairly strictly structured by the course leaders who will guide the proceedings with their *Alpha Team Training Manual*. The content of this manual not only provides answers, theological and otherwise, but also asks the questions. The lack of true critical exploration has been noted by at least some of Alpha's critics (Percy 1998). So, by way of example, the *Alpha Team Training Manual* recommends a number of themes to encourage discussion thus, for example, in week 2, in the discussion of Who Is Jesus?, the following themes are likely to be covered: the 'guest's' previous concept of Jesus; what other people think of Jesus; and if a 'guest' met Jesus, what would their feelings be?

The fifteen-topic framework is expected by HTB to be rigidly adhered to and constitutes the 'basics' of Christianity as the church perceives it. The topics, presented in the form of questions, are as follows:

1. *Christianity: boring, untrue and irrelevant?* This includes an introduction to the course which seeks to engage the interest of the 'guests' by relating little known historical facts about the faith and its relevance to the contemporary world including the family, relationships, and money. Christianity is advanced as best positioned to provide the answers to a troubled and increasingly evil world.
2. *Who is Jesus?* The historical evidence for the existence of Jesus and what the Bible has to say about who he is and what Jesus has to say about himself.
3. *Why did Jesus die?* The content expounded here includes a fairly conventional evangelical teaching on salvation and the atonement.
4. *How can I be sure of my faith?* The discussion at this point is related to the subject of faith, the relevance of the Bible, the experience of the Holy Spirit, and spiritual regeneration.

5. *Why and how should I read the Bible?* This theme relates biblical study to the matter of a Christian lifestyle, the books which comprise the Bible, and the link between the Bible and prayer.
6. *Why and how do I pray?* The emphasis here is that of how to pray and the significance of prayer and why prayer might not be answered.
7. *How does God guide us?* This question is related to the believer's relationship with God and what he expects of the believer. This weekly topic also opens up the theme of the Holy Spirit. A further three themes on the Holy Spirit follows which are ideally covered over the Holy Spirit Weekend.
8. *Who is the Holy Spirit?* Discussed at this juncture is the Holy Spirit's part in the Trinity.
9. *What does the Holy Spirit do?* The nature and function of the Holy Spirit is discussed alongside the emphasis on the spiritual gifts (charismata).
10. *How can I be filled with the Spirit?* Here is to be found teachings related to the Holy Spirit which are clearly Pentecostal/charismatic in orientation with an emphasis on glossolalia.
11. *How can I resist evil?* This theme considers the nature of the demonic and how to resist it in a spiritual war against Satan's strategy.
12. *Why and how should we tell others?* The reasons behind evangelism are expounded and the means for doing so followed up.
13. *Does God heal today?* This topic includes the teachings of healing which are popular within the charismatic movement and its function as a spiritual gift.
14. *What about the Church?* The history of the Church is overviewed alongside the various traditions.
15. *How can I make the most of the rest of my life?* The programme finishes with an elaboration of what the Christian life and spiritual growth entails.

Alpha - An Evangelical McDonaldisation

Elsewhere I have discussed the above Alpha programme in terms of McDonaldisation (Hunt 2001a, 34-5; 2004, 148-55). The possibility of this development will not be explored here in detail. Nonetheless, we can briefly note the possible repercussions in terms of Alpha's theological content.

For George Ritzer (1996), McDonaldisation suggests global dynamics of consumption and consumerism and is a process of rationalisation exemplified by the American fast-food company McDonalds. It symbolises standardisation and a near market monopoly, and erodes the assumption that a free global market brings endless variation and upholds consumer choice through competition. What McDonald produces is the same all the world over, the same items and the same image. Yet what McDonald implies is not limited to the food industry since dieting, education, health care, leisure, politics, travel, work, and increasingly other aspects of social life are exposed to the same processes.

It may well be problematic, given its nature, to believe that religion can be reduced to the dynamics of McDonaldisation. Nonetheless, the churches as bureaucratic institutions, alongside their need to communicate with the secular world and the thrust of the evangelising enterprise, are forced into certain constraints. Over the years there has been a tendency to bureaucratise and 'package' Christian lifestyle and image, to simplify

dimensions of the faith and to standardise aspects of church life and experience as almost items of consumption. This has been particularly true of the evangelical wing of the Church. Certainly, much is exemplified by many North American ministries with their mass-produced publications and visual technologies (Coleman 1991, Hunt 2000).

Where does Alpha fit into such developments? Certainly, a whole industry has built up around the Alpha course, and is based at HTB. Over £500,000 of HTB's income is derived from the sale of tapes, pamphlets and books. Gumbel's *Question of Life* has sold more than half a million copies. It is translated in over 30 countries. Subsequent books such as *Searching Issues* and *Why Jesus?* have sold 300,000 and 60,000 respectively. The Alpha course booklet and other accompanying literature have been published in over 20 languages. There are also Alpha brochures, a poster pack, sweatshirts and car stickers, and an Alpha cookbook and songbooks. There is far more to consider in Alpha's McDonaldising tendency than its business enterprise however. The need to produce simple bite-size teachings has also added to this process. The significance of Alpha's theology thus once more comes into clear relief: it is the same doctrines and dogma the world over.

There is, however, more to Alpha's tendencies towards McDonaldisation than its standardised theological content. Another way of recognising such characteristics in terms of Ritzer's identified features of McDonalds as a business enterprise, namely 'calculability', 'predictability', 'control' and 'efficiency'.

'Calculability' relates to that process which makes efficiency more attainable. Waste is eliminated, while quantity is promoted at the expense of quality (Ritzer 1996, 60). The McDonald's chain previously embraced the policy of advertising on large signs the numbers (in billions) of hamburgers it has sold. In terms of calculability, like the advertising of McDonalds, HTB is very keen on boasting of the numbers of churches embracing Alpha and the number of people graduating through the programme on a global scale. However, Alpha's critics, from different theological perspectives (as explored below), have often aimed their barbs at the over-simplistic theology of Alpha: that its popularity has been at the expense of sophisticated doctrine.

Secondly, 'predictability' suggests that McDonalds customers know with certainty what they are purchasing in advance - the same image and the same product. It is difficult to suggest that Alpha works in quite the same way. Alpha is a one-off experience for most 'guests'. However, the psychological comfort of predictability is there for the churches who adopt it and the course leaders who administer it. The same theology is espoused every time it is run, with the core teachings being largely compromising at the expense, at least according to some critics, of true discussion and exploration.

Thirdly, 'control' reduces the behaviour of those involved in the processes of McDonaldisation to a number of mechanical activities. For Ritzer, once people behave like machines they can be replaced by machines. This begins by simplifying the role of employees by reducing their tasks to a limited number of mundane functions which may be more cheaply and effectively performed by machines at a later stage. Costs are kept down and efficiency increased. In industry and commerce control is exerted over the machine and technology alongside the pre-written instructions to which the operative must strictly adhere to. By applying notions of 'control' to the Alpha programme it might be suggested that those churches who subscribed to it are obliged to cleave to HTB's recommendations. HTB is keen that the programme is followed fairly strictly. For this

reason HTB has its own copyright statement regarding its structure and content which at least implies that its theology should be adhered to. This aspect of control is also reinforced by specially organised two-day conferences held at HTB for those churches who wish to subscribe to the course. At the same time Alpha's accompanying literature and audio and video tapes further enforces standardisation. The inflexibility of the programme then, lends itself to critiques regarding its uncompromising theology - a complaint associated with Alpha's more liberally minded opponents.

Finally, 'efficiency' is implicit in all the above characteristics of McDonaldisation. It is at the heart of the profit-making process. Efficiency denotes the selection of the best methods to achieve a given end after all alternatives have been considered. In a sense, Alpha's rationale is derived from years of attempting to perfect a design for effective evangelism, the 'profit' being the number of souls 'won'. This is not merely in terms of its practical structure of meal-video-discussion, but a theological content that has popular appeal. This perhaps explains many of the complaints of Alpha's more conservative critics: that the programme may have popular appeal but this is at the expense of more challenging doctrine - teachings which have been at the historical core of Christianity, most notably sin, repentance and changed lives. 'Efficiency' then, along with 'calculability', 'predictability' and 'control', may have produced a successful Alpha 'package' but has ultimately created a distinct theology that supplements its clear charismatic tendencies.

Alpha's Charismatic Theological Content

The Charismata

The distinct dogma characterised by the speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, and baptism in the Spirit, are charismatic hallmarks which are stamped all over the 'basics' of the Christianity embraced by the Alpha programme. There is also the spiritual warfare and demonic aspect. Moreover, Gumbel, through the literature, is quite defensive of the charismatic element of the theology (Gumbel 1994, 120). While the early part of the programme does not depart significantly from historical Christianity, other aspects could be construed as majoring on theological minors. Perhaps, above all, is the emphasis on the Holy Spirit and the charismata which Gumbel sees as the 'normal' Christian experience:

'Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that these spiritual gifts will cease at the end of the apostolic age.' (Gumbel 2001a, 27)

'We should expect today to see the supernatural display of the power of the Holy Spirit as part of his kingdom activity and an authentication of the good news.' (Gumbel 2001a, 53.)

Clear there is more to Alpha's theology than the charismatic element and the question of its fundamentalist inclinations or liberal slant on some issues will be discussed through the eyes of its critics. For the moment, however, more might be said in regard of the charismatic element.

Healing

While the charismatic movement has clearly attempted to revitalise Christianity it has, from the very beginning, also constituted part of a wider cultural milieu. The movement

rapidly moved from sectarian to more world-accommodating forms typified by a whole battery of therapeutic healing techniques (Hunt 2002). *Alpha News* frequently makes reference to the healing of ‘guests’ and church leaders who have attended the course. Sometimes these are references to physical healing. More often than not references to healing are of an emotional kind, especially if they are a result of conversion. In this respect there is a strong emphasis on deliverance from the inherent dangers of occultism, as well as drug and alcohol abuse. The actual strategies of emotional healing are to be witnessed during the Holy Spirit weekend which constitutes an important element of the Alpha programme through so called ‘Ministry Time’ (see below). Implicit in all these forms of healing is a belief that ‘healing is for today’ - a teaching clearly opposed to the dispensationist doctrines of the conservative evangelicals.

Spiritual Warfare

A discussion of the demonic or the powers of evil may be an essential ingredient of any introductory course in Christianity. On the Alpha programme it forms one entire session for discussion: *How can I resist evil?* Alpha’s teaching here is quite dogmatic. Evil is personified. No other possible interpretation is advanced. Hence, evil is synonymous with Satanic activity rather than being a mere metaphor or any other interpretation. While Alpha plays down the more oppressive preoccupation with the demonic in some charismatic circles over the years (Hunt 2001b), the notion of spiritual war features strongly in the programme. In some of the accompanying literature the discussion of the impact of the demonic may be taken to surprising lengths. For example, the booklet *Caring for Ex-Offenders*, written for Alpha’s mission to the prisons, explores drug abuse within the context of spiritual attack and demonic influences (Gumbel 2001b, 57).

The Holy Spirit Weekend

Approximately one-third of the way through the Alpha course ‘guests’ will usually be invited away on what constitutes a weekend retreat (in some churches it is a one-day affair). This so-called Holy Spirit weekend is expected to occur after the talk on prayer but before that on healing and is calculated to have an affect. It is held in the company of leaders and ‘guests’ on the course and sometimes church members. The weekend is not a compulsory part of the programme, although it will usually be offered to Alpha ‘guests’. It is certainly very strongly recommended.

The weekend away is partly an attempt to create a suitably relaxed ambiance geared to further enhance the relationship between ‘guests’ and course leaders. A fairly stringent programme is recommended for the weekend that is an expanded version of the evening weekly programme. The weekend is in many respects the centrepiece of the Alpha programme. Besides the instrumental aspect of group dynamics and, in fact, supplementing it, is the further function of providing a series of teachings on the Holy Spirit. However, the two days are not limited to the instruction of doctrine since the Holy Spirit is meant to be ‘experienced’ in a profound way. The weekend is sometimes organised to coincide with later course teachings on healing (week 13) since some churches believe that it is a more relevant teaching for the occasion or that the group needs more time to bond.

By the time the ‘guests’ are invited on the Holy Spirit weekend they would have been provided with a basic introductory talk on the Holy Spirit, teachings on Christ and the

Atonement, the significance of the Bible and how to read it, how to pray, and how God guides and communicates with believers. The teachings on the Holy Spirit follow in the form of three talks on overlapping themes which are the real theological underpinnings of the weekend and are significant in terms of practical application. Talks one and two in the video presentation, 'Who is the Holy Spirit?' and 'What does the Holy Spirit do?' may not, doctrinally speaking, present too much of a difficulty to conservatives or liberals, Catholics or Protestant. The content of the third talk may be more problematic to some. 'How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit' clearly falls back on charismatic dogma and praxis.

In this final talk, the teachings on the Holy Spirit are given a unique twist by reference to His constant activity and irresistible 'power'. As the Alpha manual which accompanies the video and is followed by 'guests' puts it, 'He wants to take control'. In the manual illustrating the text there is a cartoon of a man with his hands outstretched, trying to resist an invisible force without apparent success. The manual relates that 'new languages (tongues) - new boldness - new power' is available today to every believer. In the video presentation Gumbel points out that in the 'Ministry Time' to following the talk strange phenomena may be observed. He points out that certain things *may* happen and the manifestations of which he speaks *could* occur. There might be those who will shake, fall over, cry, or feel sensations like a warm feeling proceeding up the arm. These are, according to the manual, the 'physical manifestations' of the Holy Spirit.

What has come to be known as Ministry Time is primarily associated with John Wimber's influential ministry. It has become one of the principal pastoral tools in the contemporary charismatic movement in recent years. Here, the attempts at healing have usually been of an emotional form, although physical healing is sometimes addressed. It is the healing component which has survived popularity while the rest of Wimber's 'power evangelism' is now somewhat discredited. In the context of Alpha, Ministry Time continues to offer divine 'power' and the necessary demonstration of God's presence. It also means administering to the needs of individuals. This frequently involves dealing with spiritual, emotional and psychological problems. A gathered group of believers (perhaps with non-believers), led by a team of mature Christians, evoke the Holy Spirit. After a period of time, there will be, more often than not, various supernatural phenomena to be observed - perhaps shaking, glossolalia, weeping, and claims to healing. In the more spectacular manifestations people may be released from apparent demonic oppression.

Behind this practice are Wimber's broader strategy of 'living out' the acts and commands of Christ through the experiences of the Holy Spirit, including healing the sick and casting out demons. These are the visible 'signs and wonders' which could convince non-believers. Wimber believed that supernatural phenomena could be manifest if God was given room to act through the faith of believers. This constituted 'a theology of power' that was furnished with a practical expression through 'power evangelism'. Wimber also developed the notion of the 'divine appointment' which means the appointed time at which God reveals His power to an individual or group through the spiritual gifts or other supernatural phenomena. The Holy Spirit could bring signs and wonders, healings, and miracles and other manifestations if people were open to them. The essential matter, therefore, is to create the right psychological environment for the Holy Spirit to work. This kind of strategy was very popular in charismatic churches

across the world in the 1980s. While the emphasis upon 'power evangelism' and signs and wonders has declined considerably, the pastoral and healing element remains. So has the practice of evoking the Holy Spirit in which God is asked to minister to those present. It is a practice which brings a great deal of suggestibility and anticipation.

One of the most vehement critics of Wimber's theology and praxis is Martyn Percy (1996). The principal objection advanced by Percy is that Wimber and his followers have a rather mechanistic approach to the Holy Spirit, that is, if certain procedures are followed, then God is expected to operate as if He is some intangible force at the beck and call of believers. Moreover, that in preparing the 'divine appointment' - the conditions in which the Holy Spirit works in a human environment - there are various aspects of suggestibility to be considered. This suggestibility is largely observed through the lyrics of songs and choruses (and their mantra-type form), group conformity, and the influence of the authority of church leaders which all create an atmosphere that precipitates alleged ecstatic and esoteric manifestations. In turn, these 'signs', feedback as a confirmation of the faith of believers and the authority of church leaders. Such manifestations were later to be taken to their furthest conclusion in the Toronto Blessing.

Alpha and Its Critics

Criticisms of Alpha are by no means limited to the Holy Spirit weekend; its theology and praxis. There are a number of other wide-ranging critiques too. Indeed, it has to be made clear that by no means all churches or church leaders have warmed to the programme. While it has proved to be very attractive to some, Alpha is strongly disliked by others or at least has been met with suspicion and profound reservations. Perhaps above all, according to my survey of church leaders, it is the charismatic element which has attracted most criticisms. Just as the charismatic movement divided many congregations in the 1960s and 70s, Alpha, mainly because of its doctrinal content, has not infrequently generated the same repercussions.

Exemplifying this rather mixed reception of the programme were events in a Canadian church in 1996. One of the first major Alpha training conferences was held in Canada at St. Paul's Anglican church in Toronto in September 2003. It attracted 700 participants from a variety of denominations and amounted to the largest conference on evangelism ever organised by a parish church in Canada. The event created a sharp division in the congregation. Many church members were disturbed by the so-called manifestations of the Holy Spirit observed during the conference including speaking in tongues and 'falling in the Spirit'. Others were concerned with its close ties, via Holy Trinity, Brompton, to the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, and the more questionable aspects of the Toronto Blessing that it promoted and which now seemed to be evident, albeit somewhat diluted, in the Alpha programme. In several churches I surveyed in the UK, a fair few church members would have nothing to do with the course once it was instigated, or on occasion left the church. Some elders of churches of denominations have been known to resign in opposition to the adoption of Alpha.

Critics of Alpha tend to be liberals on the one hand and traditionalists and conservatives on the other. My research interviews with a number of prominent national church leaders, as well as clergyman at the local church level, indicated that while the liberals among them tended to see Alpha as too fundamentalist in orientation, the conservatives, especially Protestant evangelicals, Anglo-Catholics and the more

traditional Roman Catholics feared its ecumenical stance and its role of bringing in all things charismatic surreptitiously.

The Concern of the Conservatives

The attempt to put together a programme on the introductory ‘basics’ of Christianity has proved a difficulty for some Christian constituencies because it attracts a number of expressions of the faith to which they have been historically opposed. This includes the objections of Protestant conservative evangelicals. Their concerns with Alpha’s ecumenical stance will be noted below. Yet, it is also this contingent which has been vehemently opposed not only to the doctrinal content of Alpha but its structure. Although this is not a point put across in evangelical tract, it was certainly evident in several of the interviews that I undertook with such evangelicals. The main objection on this score is perhaps two-fold: the purpose of the Holy Spirit weekend and a tendency for Alpha to assume conversion after ‘guests’ have experienced the weekend.

In this respect, one evangelical pastor that I interviewed described the weekend away as ‘notorious’. His objection was aimed at the doctrine and praxis of the Holy Spirit similar to that of Martyn Percy outlined above. At the same time, this pastor suggested that the contrived so-called manifestations of the Holy Spirit were little more than phenomena produced by suggestibility and which, in turn, were interpreted by those involved as the necessary ‘proofs’ of God that followed a mere seven weeks of doctrinal exposition. The rest of the programme that followed the Holy Spirit weekend, according to this pastor, seemed to assume conversion. This was evident, he suggested, in such themes as *How can I resist evil?*, *Why and how should we tell others?* And *How can I make the most of the rest of my life?* The fear of some conservatives is that although claims to conversion may have taken place, they are not earnest and no real change in lifestyle has occurred. A pastor of an independent church that I spoke to claimed that Alpha amounted to a kind of postmodernist ‘give me now theology’ of ‘I have been through the course, believe, so give me my reward.’

The objections of the conservative Protestant evangelicals to Alpha are probably entirely predictable. Many of their number have lamented the cultural concessions of Alpha in its search for a popular evangelistic programme. Some have proved to be very aggrieved of the developments. One evangelical outreach which calls itself the Cross and Word Ministries has produced a website headed The Alpha Course. Is it Bible-based or Hell’s Teachings? The focus is upon what is regarded as the connection with the Toronto Blessing, or as it is stated on the website: ‘Alpha is being used to get people to accept the teachings and phenomena associated with the Toronto Blessing’. Also on the world-wide web I came across perhaps the most damning indictment of the programme by a clergyman of a Presbyterian church which described Alpha as ‘the course from the belly of the pit of hell!’

A general feeling of even the more moderate conservatives is that Alpha undermines the basic tenets of the gospel, plays down the significance of sin and guilt and the need for redemption in favour of the ‘feel good’ factor that is part of the general cultural drift of the churches today. Another pastor I interviewed put it this way: ‘Alpha is a course for the post-modern society where practically any form of morality is acceptable. Hence, Alpha has little emphasis on sin or guilt.’ Being relevant to modern man and engaging people ‘where they are’, the conservatives argue, fails to recognise the need for genuine

repentance. The views of this quarter of Christendom are quite evident on various websites where there are constant complaints that Alpha has 'sold out' to contemporary culture. An evangelical writer Chris Hand has produced a small publication entitled *Is Alpha Leading People Astray?* in that it gives too many concession to the contemporary world and thus distorts the biblical account of Christ. He writes

'The God of Alpha is not the God of the Bible, the plight of man in Alpha is not as serious as in the Bible, and the Jesus Christ of Alpha is not the Jesus Christ of the Bible' (Hand 1999).

Similar points are made by Colin Mercer in a booklet forwarded by Dr Ian Paisley (a Presbyterian minister and for many years the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party in Northern Ireland). In *The Alpha Course Examined*, Mercer takes Alpha to account not only because of its broad ecumenicalism, but in regard to its weakness on sin, the emphasis on self, feelings instead of faith, remorse instead of repentance, and sensationalism instead of sanctification. This kind of comment, if rather shrill at times, is certainly congruent with the observation of James Hunter (1987), a long-time observer of contemporary evangelism, who argues that evangelical Christianity, even in very conservative forms, is increasingly in line with contemporary culture. There is a growing tendency not to convict people or to make them feel unduly comfortable. This is accompanied, according to Hunter, by a growing preoccupation with self and self-fulfilment, with feeling and emotion rather than traditional doctrine of repentance. While such developments may be lamented by conservative evangelicals, for Hunter this is probably the only means by which Christianity will survive in the contemporary age.

My research indicates that among Conservative Protestants in the UK, particularly of an evangelical variety, have taken the theological high ground and used Alpha as an opportunity to savage some of their long-time enemies, namely charismatics and Roman Catholics. That Alpha also appeals to Roman Catholics is a cause of lament for the conservative Protestant evangelicals. One website carries the view that Alpha is 'moving Roman Catholics into a tighter embrace of Rome's falsehoods.' Others have been concerned with the lack of stress on sin and repentance: that the broad approach is more to do with a therapeutic culture, and that no real conversion takes place. Yet another pastor I interviewed expressed such concerns in this way:

'We find it [Alpha] over-manipulative, man-centred, minimalising the sin question and over-emphasising the charismatic element, especially with the notorious Holy Spirit weekend. The fact that Roman Catholic churches can use it without any qualms demonstrates its dismal lack of doctrinal content.'

Some in the conservative Protestant camp have tried to counteract the influence of Alpha, and this is not only through web-site proclamations or suggestions about an alternative programme to that of Alpha. One Anglican minister I spoke to had put on Alpha courses at his churches only to find himself opposed by a local small Brethren assembly. He had distributed leaflets in his parish advertising the course. Later the same evening the Brethren group delivered their own leaflets warning of the perils of Alpha, specifying where it had doctrinally gone wrong and outlining the dangers of charismatic-style Christianity.

Alpha and Roman Catholic Constituency

The quarterly *Alpha News* newspaper is very keen to stress the impact of Alpha on Catholic churches and frequently stresses what this or that dignitary high up the Catholic hierarchy has to say regarding the merits of Alpha or their involvement at Alpha international conferences. For instance, it reports the attendance of fifty-five bishops and cardinals at a conference of 10,000 people where Gumbel spoke in Stuttgart, Germany, in May 2004.⁵ However, not all Roman Catholics warm to Alpha, while those who adopt it are likely to modify it at the grass-roots level in order to customise the programme for the needs of their local church specifically and the Catholic church in general.

While Protestant critics may believe that Alpha enforces traditional Catholic beliefs, it is my observation that local Catholic course leaders who negotiate their way with Alpha tend to play down the theology, history and cultural trappings of Catholicism. Partly this is because they are more concerned with the charismatic component, and partly there is the attempt to be ecumenical and appeal to a wider audience. References to Papal proclamations, Hail Mary, the Sacred Heart, the stress on the Eucharist, and all things related to the Catholic tradition, are deliberately given a low profile. The concerns of more traditional Roman Catholics are perhaps therefore understandable.

Alpha can, however, advance the Catholic cause. Certainly, a fair few of the priests that I interviewed allowed Alpha to proceed because of its potential to reverse the decline in church membership and attendance. It was thus interpreted as a proselytising tool and as a means of returning backsliders. At the same time, as many interviewees claimed, it could enforce traditional moral teachings related to sex before marriage and the virtues of family life. In many respect Alpha, as administered in the Catholic churches, does seem to consolidate a particular version of the faith. To this end the Catholic church has produced the booklet 'How to Support Alpha for Roman Catholics'. The publication does not claim to advocate a Catholic version of Alpha. Rather, it is aimed towards answering the kind of questions that Catholics ask about the course. As it declares, it is directed at 'allaying fears that Alpha is not doctrinally sound or is too evangelical'. The Catholic Alpha Office (established in 1996) has also produced two videos directed at Roman Catholics within the context of Alpha: 'Why should I listen to the Church?' and 'Why should I go to Mass?'

While Alpha has its advocates, there are elements within the Roman Catholic church who express substantial concerns but for predictably different reasons than the Protestant conservative evangelicals. Certainly there are those traditionalists who articulate concerns with the charismatic element. There are other objections too. Although they are not vehemently outspoken, several bishops in the UK and USA are believed to be extremely apprehensive about the spread of Alpha and its incursion into their diocese. For these men Alpha, because of its origin and by way of some of its Protestant teachings, constitutes 'matter out of place' - to use Mary Douglas's concept (Douglas 1966). Hence, for some Roman Catholics Alpha is not only carries ecumenical dangers but amounts to a form of 'creeping Protestantism'. Even the Pope is known to be concerned by its origins at HTB despite his more cordial communications with Alpha conferences and granting an audience with Nicky Gumbel.⁶

A number of the group leaders whom I have spoken to frequently expressed the view that Alpha was something of an anathema in their church and this did not dovetail well with Catholic traditions or ways of doing things. One leader in a parish church was

concerned that the Head of Religious Formation (responsible for Roman Catholic dogma) in his diocese had expressed grave reservations because Alpha was not sufficiently Roman Catholic in its theological component. At the same time, leading Catholic figures in the charismatic movement are discernibly more enthusiastic about the programme and not infrequently contribute to its wealth of literature.

As with the Protestant churches, the impact of Alpha has been mixed in Catholic circles. In the UK it is evident that some 400 Catholic churches are running Alpha. However, the impression I received from my national survey was that in many parishes Alpha was run as a fringe group activity which, in many cases, was only reluctantly supported. Rarely, in my findings at least, would an Alpha group in a Catholic parish church act in co-operation with Protestant churches in the area who were administering a course. Since Alpha is run twice a year, practically simultaneously in the UK, there is scope for churches to co-operate together. Rarely are Catholic churches involved. They also generally run their own Holy Spirit weekends, the teaching content of which may include a strong Catholic bias. In this way local churches would seem to undermine the McDonaldisation tendencies of Alpha.

It is certainly the case that some Catholic congregations advertise Alpha on large billboards in the front of the church. But this too is rare. The majority will pin smaller adverts advertising a forthcoming course, thus only observable to parishioners. While it is true that in Catholic churches Alpha course leaders are generally left to their own devices, it is often swamped by other activities. This has the affect of minimalising Alpha's impact, while many course leaders are apprehensive about 'going public' and often fail to invite 'guests' who are not Catholic. Subsequently the Alpha programme is frequently 'in house' and limited to church members themselves.

My broad feeling is that there exists a general confusion or at least concern among some Roman Catholics. Lively debates can be found in parish and diocese newspapers regarding the merits of Alpha. In Catholic churches, similarly to Protestant churches, it is the charismatic faction that may readily embrace and run Alpha. In this respect it is likely to be the parish priest who will be the final arbiter as to whether or not it will be offered. Other priests, however, may be adamantly opposed to its introduction. On some occasions, as my research revealed, lay people who are enthusiastic about Alpha may actually change parish church if it is not supported by the priest in the usual one attended, while other parishioners may go about church life oblivious to the fact that Alpha is running in their church.

To conclude: there may be a contradiction in the way that Alpha is run in Catholic churches. As suggested, it may well be that the priesthood is the final arbiter as to whether Alpha runs or not and that a parish priest is likely to agree only on the assumption that the course advances traditional Catholicism. However, at the grass root level, Alpha as run by parishioners, traditional aspects may be played down in favour of a more ecumenical and charismatic stance. It may follow, therefore, that the extent to which Alpha is advanced in Catholic churches in the future will be contingent on its perceived merit: should it advance traditional Catholicism or is it more an instrument in the cause of renewal and ecumenism? In Catholic circles the debate on Alpha's merit will undoubtedly continue and it is likely that it will never gain full acceptance.

The Liberal Critique

From the other end of the spectrum liberal theologians and churchman have criticised Alpha because it may be perceived as essentially fundamentalist in nature since it regards scriptural text as spiritual truths and absolute tenets of faith. At the very least liberals argue that Alpha promotes one view of Christianity at the expense of others. Evidence of this is said to be Alpha's promotion of celibacy outside of marriage and the suggestion that it generally fails to deal adequately with what are clearly sensitive topics. Examples of this are its attitude towards homosexuality and abortion of which Alpha literature are uncompromisingly critical, with little discussion of the complex issues involved (Hunt 2004, 24-6)). Another area Alpha neglects is said to be women's issues (although Alpha is tolerant of women's ordination). Mary Robins, an assistant priest at St. James's Piccadilly, London (internationally renowned because of its active campaigns against fundamentalism) conferred to me her opinion in an interview that 'Alpha courses are very black-and-white. I find them very rigid in their view of what it is like to be a woman.'⁷ Indeed, while the Alpha literature has little to say on the subject, it does tend to promote traditional female roles in the home and female sexuality.

According to liberal critics, furthermore, Alpha is selective in its 'basic' Christianity and that what is excluded in the programme, by way of exposition, is as important as what is included. The Alpha programme, so it is argued has little to say in terms of a social gospel. There is scarce attention to feeding and clothing the poor, in advancing social justice, of debates about unemployment, and the negative repercussions of globalisation. In the same interview, Mary Robins commented on the money which was spent on the first national Alpha initiative, stating that 'if my church had £1 million to spend we would use it to set up day centres and support the Jubilee campaign to get rid of Third World debt.

While there is a moral condemnation of high divorce and abortion rates, the rising number of unmarried mothers and the decline of the family, there is next to nothing said in the Alpha programme about mass unemployment, the evils of materialism, or Third World issues. Very little justice is done, so it is observed by the liberals, to the complexity of Christian ethics - the basis of a just war and similar issues. These themes may be discussed on an Alpha course if someone wishes to raise them, but are not straightaway offered as vital ingredients of Christianity. Hence in terms of its content, some liberal critics complain that Alpha has nothing inherent to it which approaches a social gospel. Perhaps the closest it comes to a social conscience is evident in Gumbel's book *Challenging Lives* which includes the brief chapter 'How to Have an Influence on Society'. The chapter is mostly based on the Sermon on the Mount and the social consequences on society of striving to be meek, pure in heart, righteous and so on. However, much is implicit, vague, and over-simplified rather than a systematic treatment of important issues. There is no coherent social programme - certainly nothing amounting to a clear political agenda.

The key question which comes out of this discussion is what has led to particular topics advanced as representing 'basic Christianity?' Who decides what is included under the rubric of each theme and what is excluded? Who is the final arbiter? It can only be surmised that it is Nicky Gumbel himself. The situation is, however, more complex since the programme is partly 'consumer' driven. To some extent its content is orientated to answering certain fundamental questions. HTB has conducted ongoing research over a number of years to find out what issues are important to Alpha guests. Hence, we might

assume that some topics on the course will take into account the ‘consumer demand’ (Hunt 2004, 145-57). Secondly, given its ecumenical and all-embracing nature, Alpha is meant to be as broad and inclusive as possible. It is not denominational specific and is intended to be user-friendly to all Christian traditions, calculated not to offend Roman Catholics or Protestants of different persuasions. It is, for its advocates, a basic and simple introduction to the Christian faith which steers clear of controversies such as infant baptism.

While it might be ecumenical, liberal critics have taken the Alpha course to task over the way they perceive it to be largely fundamentalist in tone and its tendency to simplify issues. For the theologian and sociologist, Martyn Percy, the content of the programme shows that Alpha amounts to a fairly crude form of evangelical fundamentalism (Percy 1998). Percy is concerned with what is not included in the course in terms of historical Christianity. The subjects discussed are not, crucially, the Trinity, baptism, communion or community which might, despite the claims of Alpha to be ecumenical, be more appropriate to the needs of some Christian traditions. Rather the core concerns are with the charismatic teachings of the Holy Spirit, healing, and the powers of evil. Moreover, for Percy, Alpha advances Christianity as an uncontextual project that is ‘learned’ through an over-simplified course offering certain types of (charismatic) knowledge and experience. In essence, it is sold and marketed effectively but sometimes gives the impression of offering a cheap package deal or endeavours to provide ‘a bargain-break weekend for two in eternity’ (Percy 1998, 16). Alpha does not seriously attempt to encourage any great degree of discussion. Rather, it sets and answers its own questions. It tends to over-simplify thoughtful critiques of Christianity and then destroys them in a rather brutal and unsophisticated way. This is evident in the supporting literature. There is a broad discussion throughout the programme, but not sufficiently to do justice to complicated issues. It is then, in its own way, hermetically fail safe.

Liberal critics are also concerned with Alpha’s general cultural orientation. In this respect, Martyn Percy has underlined the over-emphasis in the Alpha programme on the Holy Spirit and its link to healing and all-things therapeutic. While this alleged unbalance may result from charismatic theology, it is also, he deduces, because Alpha is a product of time and place: ‘The Spirit on offer obviously arises from a personable, therapeutic, Home counties context that is concerned with the individual’ (Percy 1998). According to Percy, this focus upon the individual as the receptacle of the Holy Spirit is at the cost of his wider work in creation, justice, peace and reconciliation. This is because, he asserts, those who put the course together reflect the elite, upper middle-class outlook of HTB which has also enculturated the gospel for the needs of a distinct clientele rather than for a wide audience. Alpha may attempt to be relevant to modern man but, as clearly seen in its theology of the Holy Spirit, it is anchored in a particular cultural environment and Christian milieu constituted largely by middle-class charismatics and is, theologically-speaking, far from ecumenical. For Percy, Alpha does not generate a broad appeal. Its intellectual level, cultural trappings and general image is more likely to be suited to what he describes as ‘middle-England’ - the relatively well-educated and at least moderately affluent.

Conclusion: Towards a Discussion of the Alpha Programme

This paper has sought to explore the influential Alpha programme in terms of its theology and praxis and, consequentially, to examine the debates emerging out of the claims of its critics. The observations of the debate are derived from a national survey in the UK which has allowed an overview of the principal debates around its theological content and course structure derived from interviews of leading church people and course leaders, as well as a review of literature and critiques offered in pamphlets and web-sites. In this respect, the fieldwork has highlighted the key objections of liberals, conservative evangelicals, and Catholic traditionalists.

The criticisms of Alpha are not widespread but they are damaging. This paper has sought to overview them without adding to the debate. Indeed, it is easy to be unduly critical of a programme which has been so successful, if not in terms of winning converts, but certainly by way of its impact on the churches. Hence, the paper has sought to examine debates surrounding Alpha in a constructive way, so that it might encourage further debate regarding perhaps the most successful evangelising initiative of recent years.

While this paper has attempted to be objective, it has also sought to put the Alpha initiative in true perspective in relation to debates regarding its theology and cultural attributes. Much of the supportive literature of Alpha is full of self-laudation regarding its growth and wide appeal. The reality is that Alpha often over-estimates its own success. I would argue that this is not only in terms of winning converts but its claim to an uncritical acceptance. Certainly, claims to its wide appeal stem from the enduring hope that the programme is ecumenical in scope. Controversial topics tend to be played down although Alpha has clear and uncompromising views on such subjects as homosexuality.

At the same time the theology which constitutes 'basic' Christianity is both explicit and implicit charismatic in orientation. If it is true that Alpha is not winning a substantial number of converts, then its net affect may be to further extend charismatic theology and practice to mainline denominational and independent churches. However, it is a diluted form of neo-Pentecostalism that has long abandoned such contentious dogma as the 'second baptism in the Spirit' and the insistence on converts speaking in tongues even though it is highlighted in Alpha as a virtue. Nonetheless, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit, healing and spiritual warfare is there for all to see, as is the Ministry Time which sits at the centre-piece of the Holy Spirit weekend away.

The significance of the topics taught on the Alpha course and how they are taught should not be underestimated. All churches embracing Alpha are by no means charismatic in orientation, but according to my findings, many appear to be. Those which are not initially charismatic will find themselves exposed to the beliefs and practices of the charismatic movement - perhaps for the first time. The significance of this is that, given the number of churches involved, the extensive use of Alpha is partly a measurement of the impact and spread of charismatic Christianity.

In terms of its theological and cultural package Alpha may have weaknesses which are perhaps ironically derived from its strength. If Alpha is a form of McDonaldisation then it travels well. It is cheap and easy to apply. Once bought, the videos and materials supporting the course can be used over and over again. Yet, it is theologically 'light', simple to understand and is unsophisticated. But McDonaldisation has certain other features as we have noted. One is that of 'control'. In the thoughts of Nicky Gumbel Alpha is like baking a cake and simply will not work without the true and tried 'recipe'

(Gumbel 2001, 22). The basic recipe of Alpha cannot be departed from. This is why the course has its own copyright and HTB firmly discourages those who would seek to refine or significantly revise the programme at a grassroots level.

It may seem that the notion of McDonaldisation amounts to a convenient and oversimplistic theoretical framework upon which to explore the Alpha programme. It does however explain why Alpha has developed in the way that it has and, subsequently, the nature of the theological debates which have followed. The appeal of Alpha to the mainline churches is clear. The programme employs a theological simplicity which is not denominational specific. It is an unsophisticated theological package which can be exported to many contexts. For that reason it exposes itself to the critics of its exponents. For the liberals its simplicity means that complex issues are not sufficiently discussed. For conservative and traditionalists it ignores conventions within the historical Church and fails to explore the richness of biblical doctrine in its rush to be culturally conforming. There is more to consider however, concerning Alpha's 'basic Christianity'. Its charismatic slant is all too evident. Perhaps this is understandable given the possibility that a much-diluted charismatic theology and praxis is observably the mainstay of many mainline denominations in Western countries. The attraction of Alpha is thus understandable: it has a 'customer' appeal. Moreover, even seasoned charismatics have lamented the paltry content of what passes as 'charismatic theology' (cf. Smail 1995). In that sense charismatic theology lends itself to the simplistic nature of Alpha which, according to many of its critics, would appear to be a spiritual 'drive-through' in true McDonalds fashion.

Notes

¹ The national survey was based on a random sample of 30 churches subscribing to Alpha in England and Wales. The research also included a survey of the Alpha programme as run in prisons, as well as Youth Alpha and Student Alpha. Interviews were also conducted of Alpha supporters and critics.

² *Alpha: God Changing Lives* (n.d).

³ *Alpha News* (2002) July-October: 31-32.

⁴ The phenomena associated with the Toronto Blessing have been described in various publications (see Richter 1995; Hunt 1995; Poloma 2002; Römer 2002).

⁵ *Alpha News* (2004) July-October: 3.

⁶ *Alpha News* (2004) March-June: 7.

⁷ Interview with Mary Robins, 8/11/2001.

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