



Talking about...Community

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When the aliens begin to attack in Steven Spielberg's latest blockbuster *War of the Worlds*, the panicking public assume that this must be the work of terrorists. These scenes were particularly poignant for many movie goers in the summer, coming in the same week as the London bombings.

In the film we see a community torn apart in the face of devastating attacks. We watched Ray Ferrier (played by Tom Cruise) seek to protect and defend his children not only from the aliens, but also from those who want to protect themselves at his expense. This is particularly evident in the scene where someone takes his car from him at gunpoint (only to be shot himself, in the next scene, by someone else with a gun). At one point it seems that Ray finds a community that can hold together - when Harlan Ogilvy (played by Tim Robbins) calls him into the safety of his cellar. But even this little community breaks down horrifically because they don't share the same vision and goals.

This presentation of a fragile, fragmented community contrasted with July's powerful media image of the G8 leaders standing together in solidarity to express the community's outrage at the London attacks. But it was more consistent with the other powerful media images that were arising at the same time from the *Big Brother* house as, often in the series, they were a community encouraged to lie to, and cheat, each

other.

These conflicting concepts led many people this summer to talk about what we mean by community. Perhaps without realising it, many joined in a debate which has been occupying Anglo-American political philosophers for the last two decades.

For much of this time, the debate has been polarised into the social conservatives and the libertarians. In America the Social Conservatives are represented by organisations such as the Moral Majority. They essentially argue for an emphasis on individual responsibilities in a society based on order, with one normative agenda upheld by law and reliant upon the state. On the other hand, the libertarians, represented by organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union, essentially argue for an emphasis on individual rights, with the state being neutral and a reliance upon the market.

In recent years, a new voice has emerged in the form of Professor Amitai Etzioni who has sought to rebalance the social and moral focus of American society between rights and responsibilities. He argues that government and the market both have their limitations, and it is important that we recognise the social capital of communities which play a crucial role in the lives of individuals. His perspective is often called *communitarianism* – and this philosophy is particularly known in the UK as the basis for many of the policies of New Labour.

When talking about what it means to be a member of a community, whether we are referring to *Big Brother*, post-bombing London or Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*, it is interesting to note that one of the main academic commentators on communitarianism (and author of *The Political Philosophy of New Labour*, published this month) is a Christian by the name of Dr Matt Beech.

He believes that social conservatism tends towards a confrontational legalism, whilst libertarianism tends towards a licentious egoism. So, like many others, he is drawn to communitarianism. But he doesn't just think that society will work best if we recognize the value of community and behave as if we all have rights

and responsibilities. He affirms the Bible's teaching that humans are individuals that are created for community by God, who made us for relationships. So we have responsibilities for one another because everything is God's – including one another; and we have rights because of God's authority and grace. As is so often the case in discussions in our culture, the Christian gospel provides a solid answer to the questions people are asking.