

Postmodern, Postchristian Britain and Shapes of Church to Come

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Introduction

According to Andrew Walls¹, the advance of Christianity in the world is not expansionist, as has so often been proposed², but serial. The tide flows but also ebbs and once vibrant, living Christian lands become barren deserts of the faith. Thus, with some irony, in roughly the same period of time that we mark the advance of western globalisation, we also mark the move from Christianity being a predominantly western religion to it being, and becoming increasingly, a non-western religion. Indeed, a symptom of 'Globalisation warming' may be that the tide seems to ebb and flow with ever increasing speed, as the recession of Christianity in Europe is the fastest recorded in history, just as is the growth of Christianity in Africa.

In relation to the forces of globalisation and Christian recession, Britain finds itself in a position of 'inbetweenness'. It belongs to the west and therefore shares responsibility for the advance of globalisation, yet it is not in any respect, even allowing for the 'special relationship' with the US, the 'lead horse'. Like all Western Europe, Britain has experienced and continues to experience the recession of formal Christian faith, but in raw statistical terms not to the extent of some other European countries.³ The 'People called Methodist' in Britain have not been exempt from this general recession. Formal membership (which may or may not be a good criterion of assessing the health and strength of a church) continues to decline. The most recent figures, presented to the Methodist Conference in June 2002, show that 70 years after Methodist Union – the average life span of a human being - membership is less than one third of the 817,000 souls forming The Methodist Church in 1932.⁴

Beyond these general traits of Western European culture, and its long association with the Christian faith, each country has quirks and idiosyncrasies that effectively make it a special case⁵ and these must be taken with utmost seriousness if any form

¹ At a lecture at Emory University in Atlanta, GA, at the 'Great Commission' Conference, April 2002.

² E.g. Kenneth S Latourette's, seven volume *History of the Expansion of Christianity*.

³ See, for example, the figures given in the *UK Missions Handbook*, or produced by *Christian Research*.

⁴ 1932 figures in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol 3. Epworth Press, 1983, p363.

⁵ For first class work recently undertaken on religion in Europe, generically and peculiarly, see Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe* (Oxford UP, 2000), and, *Europe: the exceptional case. Parameters of faith in the modern world* (DLT, 2002).

of Christian reengagement is to take place. This demands a commitment to the local, to contextuality, to 'glocalisation' alongside the macrocultural, global environment in which any Western European community or society is set.⁶ This is true of Britain where a host of complicated and interdependent historical, cultural, economic, social, philanthropic and religious factors combine to make it what it is: a culturally and religiously pluralist, secularised western democracy.⁷ Or, to use shorthand: postmodern, postchristian Britain.

Given these macro and 'local' contexts, this paper seeks to explore what it might mean for the British Methodist Church, with its own particular history, identity, doctrinal themes and proclivities, to listen, learn and respond to what it hears and sees, and reshape itself in the light of that process.

Assumptions

I make a number of assumptions and commitments that can only be briefly stated here (but perhaps in a gathering of missiologists that is all that is required?).

- I assume that the church – in terms of 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic', 'Denominational', and 'local congregation' – is caught up in the *missio Dei*. That is, whether in 'classic' Barthian thinking⁸, or the variations such as *missio humanitatis*⁹, church is essentially the 'sent' thing of a missionary, Trinitarian God.

⁶ Following Liberation Theology, most expressions of contemporary theology and ecclesiology in Britain are local and contextual. See, for example, John Reader, *Local Theology: Church and Community in Dialogue* (SPCK, 1994).

⁷ For more specific input on the religious nature of contemporary Britain see, for examples of material on the nature of secularisation: Steve Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford UP, 1995) and *Religion in the Modern world: from cathedrals to cults* (Oxford UP, 1996); Callum G Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (Routledge 2001); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging* (Blackwell, 1994); Robin Gill, *A vision for growth* (SPCK, 1994); Rosalie Osmond, *Changing perspectives: Christian culture and morals in England today* (SPCK, 1993). Helpful sources dealing with the philosophical and cultural context in which Christianity now exists in Britain include, Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: the Gospel and Western Culture* (WCC/SPCK 1986), *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK, 1989), *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Gracewing, 1996); Lawrence Osborn, *Restoring the Vision: the Gospel and Modern Culture* (Mowbray, 1995).

⁸ H H Rosin, 'Missio Dei': an examination of the origin, contents and function of the term in Protestant missiological discussion, (Interuniversitair Instituut voor Missiologie en Oecumenica Afdeling Missiologie, Boerhaavelaan 43, Leiden Nederland.) provides a good overview of the 'classic' doctrine.

⁹ See M Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission* (Abingdon, 1999)

- Consequently, and more contentiously, church is defined primarily missiologically rather than ecclesiologically, though of course the two are related.¹⁰
- Therefore, church always engages its context as an expression of its true nature. It is, like its Lord, inherently incarnational, and that 'translatability' of Christian faith in a multiplicity of times, places and contexts is its God-given genius.¹¹ In each culture and sub-culture, the Christian church will manifest itself in both culture friendly and counter cultural ways.¹² To use Andrew Walls' categories the church will always be committed to both The Indigenous Principle and The Pilgrim Principle at the same time.¹³
- Because of this continuous engagement with its cultural context, the dominant expression or 'shape' of 'church' changes over time.¹⁴ For our purposes here, and taking a western perspective, three broad historic paradigms can be said to have shaped church: the preConstantinian era of the early and Patristic church; the Christendom (or Constantinian) era; and the emerging postconstantinian (or postchristian) era.¹⁵
- As Britain goes through an emerging postmodern, postchristian cultural sea-change, we can expect that the Christian church, as the sent instrument of a missionary God, will engage that cultural context in various ways, and be changed in the process.

Living between the 'posts'

¹⁰ The writer of this paper is currently working on a book that includes an overview of changes to ecclesiological images. A clear development from H Richard Niebuhr's 'Christ and Culture' typology, and A Dulles 'Models of the church' to more recent images which show clear signs of a greater missiological awareness in relation to imaging church can be discerned. Ecclesiology, possibly more than any other area of theology, changes and develops in relation to its macro and local cultural contexts.

¹¹ See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the missionary impact on culture* (Orbis, 1989)

¹² This is outlined more fully in M D Atkins, *Preaching in a Cultural Context* (Foundery Press, 2001)

¹³ See Andrew F Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (T & T Clark, 1997) p3ff.

¹⁴ Paradigm shift theory makes plain, among other things, the evolving nature of Christian faith.

¹⁵ Loren Mead uses these three broad paradigms in *The Once and Future Church* (Alban, 1991)

The terms postmodernity and postchristianity require a little unpacking.

Postmodernity is already a 'boo' word for many westerners, even before clear definitions of its meaning, or even usage, are agreed.¹⁶ Books on philosophical postmodernism and cultural postmodernity are already legion and account for more tree-felling every year.¹⁷ Among themes repeatedly identified in sources are:

- a recognition of the exhaustion of modernity, particularly its verification processes and restrictive epistemology
- a tiredness with literate-bound communication, of knowledge-based, text based authorities
- a distrust of 'authorities' generally and a fright from deference
- a commitment to plurality – religious, cultural, moral - and either exultation or bewilderment in difference and diversity and relativism
- a rejection of narratives or ideologies that answer everything, that close down options and (consumer) choice
- a contentedness to live in a state of perpetual provisionality, what Bauman calls a 'contingent' life, with few fixed points
- a need for immediacy, for things to happen or 'work' right away
- a tacit reliance on pragmatism as the gauge of what works or what is right
- a tacit adoption of what Graham Cray calls 'constructivism'¹⁸
- an uncertainty and ambiguity about the nature, value and rights of the individual, particularly in relation to community and society
- an openness to spirituality as a means of finding self meaning
- a welcome to authenticity and integrity
- an acceptance of globalisation as the way postmodern society operates, alongside an ambivalent uneasiness about domination and ecological and cultural imperialism etc.

16 One British newspaper wrote of the word 'Postmodern' 'this word has no meaning, use it as often as possible!' (*The Independent*, 1991)

17 Books which helpfully outline some of the contours of popular cultural postmodernity with implications for Christians and the Christian mission are M P Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols* (DLT, 1997); S Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Eerdmans, 1995); D Hilborn, *Picking up the pieces* (Hodder & Stourton, 1997; P Lakeland, *Postmodernity* (Augsberg, 1997); T Sine, *Mustard seed versus McWorld* (Monarch, 1999); H Snyder, *Earthcurrents* (Abingdon, 1995).

18 G Cray 'Postmodernity – under construction' in *The Gospel and our Culture Network Newsletter*, Spring 2000, published by Bible Society. Cray claims that constructivism proceeds from an unquestioned acceptance of pluralism and relativism, leaving the consumer free to construct their own worldviews and personal identities.

Postchristianity, in the way it is used here, has two related applications.

First, it refers to the processes of 'secularisation' which have taken place, and continues to take place, in British society. It is not wedded to any version of the secularisation hypothesis, but recognises that such processes are resulting in a 'postchristian' society. That is, a society that was in some social, cultural and religious ways 'Christian' or 'Christianised', and has now moved on from or out of that identity implicitly, explicitly, or both. Postchristianity clearly shares *some* aspects of cultural postmodernity, but equally remains distinguishable from it and is therefore not synonymous with it.

Second, postchristianity refers to the postconstantinian mode in which the Christian church in Britain now increasingly operates. Postconstantinianism is a term alluding to the passing of the Christendom mode of Christianity in Europe; a shorthand phrase referring to the demise of various examples of church-state interrelatedness that have largely characterised Catholic and Protestant Christianity alike in Europe for the last 1600 years.¹⁹

Thus Christians (and all others) in Britain might be described as 'living between the posts', the posts of postmodernity and postchristianity. It is in this broad, pervasive cultural context which the Christian church in Britain today finds itself and is called to engage and respond in sensitive and positive ways. The cultural context must be taken seriously. Postmodernity and postchristianity are neither the pit of hell nor the New Jerusalem, but simply the emerging contexts in which Christian people are called to be disciples of Jesus. Christians in Britain can't opt out, and mustn't fall in. Positively, it might be said that 'church' that listens, learns, and changes is presented with opportunities for witness, mission and service that have not existed since the times of John Wesley.

With these missiological assumptions and religious-cultural analyses in mind, I want to explore the possible shapes of church to come in Britain. What shapes of church are likely to emerge in this postmodern, postchristian context? What happens when a denomination, or local church, takes seriously the process of listening, learning and changing? Do certain aspects of Methodist tradition shape church in certain ways and resist certain shapes?

I start the discussion by outlining, in deliberately polemic terms, three hints about the future which, taken together, give shape, somewhat optimistically, to church to come in Britain. As a British Methodist myself, the use of 'we' locates my identity with and closeness to these issues.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive discussion on the passing of Christendom and the arrival of a postchristian context see Douglas John Hall, *The end of Christendom and the future of Christianity* (Gracewing, 1997)

Shapes of Church to come?

1. In a culture where institutions and hierarchies are acutely problematic to increasing numbers of people, the visible shape and internal ethos of church will be a crucial factor

Wilbert Shenk writes: 'Organisations or groups that insist on hierarchical structures in late modern culture are communicating a clear message: they put a premium on protecting and preserving authority and maintaining control. In a culture where these values are suspect, such a group is likely to attract and hold only the minority who share these values.'²⁰ Or again, Alice Mann: '..another major factor distinguishing our period of change [is] a lack of trust in authority generally and a particular disenchantment with groups formerly regarded as authoritative. These include government, politicians and the political process, civic leaders, educational institutions, law enforcement, the justice system, and institutional religion.'²¹ The organisation called church, and its hierarchies, do not escape this general antipathy and distrust. Given its long love affair with power and privilege in Britain²², how could it?

There is a more serious, even sinister point rumbling in the minds of some people in Britain today, graphically articulated by Zygmunt Bauman, and becoming even more incisive when you realise his past, his escaping from Eastern Europe as Nazi tanks rumbled through the streets. He states hauntingly, 'Everyone who says they have the truth, always goes on to say, in one way or another, therefore I must be obeyed.'²³ In all situations but especially today, the church is required to strive to become an incarnational exception to this charge, and in doing so, become more - not less – like its Servant Lord. As Avery Dulles comments: 'The Church, if it is to be like Christ, must renounce all claims to power, honors, and

20 *IBMR*, 1997. p.157

21 Alice Mann, *Can our Church Live?* (Alban institute, 1999), p128

22 The nature of Established religion runs deep in England, and is found in variant forms in Wales and Scotland and Ireland. It is significant that the recent appointment of Dr Rowan Williams as the next Archbishop of Canterbury was ultimately a decision made not only by the designated officials of the Church of England, who merely proposed the preferred name(s), but also constitutionally by the Queen of England and, most essentially of all, by the sitting Prime Minister.

23 'Postmodernity, or Living with Ambivalence' in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Blackwell, 1991)

the like; it must not rule by power but attract by love.²⁴

The British church is too often associated with power, compulsion, colonialism and imperialism²⁵. Also, it is often perceived as obsessed by a deep self-interest. Robert Warren comments, 'For the majority of people in this country our churches are irrelevant, peripheral and seemingly only concerned with their own trivial pursuits.'²⁶ Such associations and perceptions are deeply damaging to the mission and ministry of church today. The shape of church to come must not be automatically associated with such. If it is, it surely hastens its death in a much more profound way than merely numerically. This sober reality requires the British church to seek to transcend patriarchy and denominational bureaucracy, and possess a sincere desire to learn to exercise internal power powerlessly and any remaining external power with great grace and humility. Equally, any rejection of modernity by the church that is not accompanied by a confession of complicity with it will ring hollow. It needs a loss of arrogance in all it does, which, after centuries of Christendom power and influence, will not come easy. But the fact remains that authenticity more than authority or arrogance is a positive, powerful shaper of church to come.

Not only what might be called 'the outside shape' of church, but also what might be called the internal 'body language' of church is required to be addressed. Vicky Cosstick, a lay Roman Catholic writer and researcher, challenges those of us in church to realise that church body language – like all body language – speaks louder than words.²⁷ In shaping church to come, the unquestioned and unarticulated assumptions of what we do must be explored. We must ask, as much as we are able to, (being blinded and deafened by familiarity) what do our

24 *Models of the Church* (second edition), (Gill & Macmillan, 1987) p.90.

25 Some recent work by Rt Revd. John Finney, one-time Archbishop's Advisor for Evangelism indicates that these charges against the church remain common and deep among the general population of Britain.

26 Robert Warren, *Being human, being church* (Zondervan, 1995) p.16.

27 Lectures at Cliff College, January 2002 on the Master of Arts degree course in Consultancy, Mission and Ministry.

symbols and gestures declare?²⁸ Often what we say is one thing and what we declare something else and different. The shapers of church to come will be aware of the power – both positive and negative - of unarticulated assumptions and gestures of what we do, and will work to make them positive, authentic and humble, rather than, as they are so often encountered, as patriarchal, arrogant and haughty.

This is a severe challenge. As Douglas John Hall comments, 'What is lacking in nearly all of the formally prominent bodies of the West is just this awareness and acceptance of their changed relation to power. Rather, they cling to their *accustomed modus operandi*, their imagined status vis a vis the powerful, and in doing so they forfeit the opportunities for truth telling and justice that historical providence is affording them.'²⁹

Consequently, to inform the British church that christendom is dying, some would even say it is dead, is a required act of charity. If the death of christendom sounds implausible, remember the Berlin Wall! For sure, the dying is a long process, just as the birth was a long birth.³⁰ And deep vested interests ensure that the church in Britain snatches every crumb of comfort that comes its way suggesting that there may yet be new life in the old dog. It makes believe that christendom remains intact, but this is always contrived - and especially so where the economic conditions of churches are relatively sound. The closure and selling of so many Methodist chapels over recent years, a clear sign of *one* sort of decline, actually provides the finance which cushions many other churches from the icy winds of another, deeper kind of decline. It may be that British Methodism will not see how far down the road to death it has travelled until that comforting, blinding money is gone.

The 4th century witnessed the 'Constantinian Reversal'; today we are witnessing the reversal of Constantinianism. For the first time in almost 1700 years in Britain,

28 Op cit Mann, who states 'The forces of familiarity are considerable, and often connected with our perception of the holy. Repetition is important. But ritual (formal and informal, ceremonial and simple) which is both familiar and repetitive is a bane as well as a blessing. They grow stilted. They usually become more elaborate but less lucid and transparent and thereby shed less not more light on to the original faith experience they symbolize or represent. They, like all things, need renewal....When we lose confidence in our most ancient and central faith rituals, when they become insipid or inconstant, we will invest our religious energies in the repetition of other patterns (innocuous enough in themselves) that contain little power to transform human lives or human communities.' p24

29 *The end of Christendom and the future of Christianity* (Gracewing, 1997), p2)

30 Some, of course, say that Christian Europe never really arrived. See Anton Wessels, *Europe: was it ever really Christian?* (SCM press, 1994)

there is no serious social, moral, or religious compulsion upon people to enter the life of the Christian church. As a Methodist circuit minister, I was stationed in Saltaire Village in the North of England. The Victorian Christian industrialist and philanthropist, Titus Salt, built the whole village. Promotion in his huge mill meant a move into a bigger, better house in the village. Attendance at the palatial Congregational church he built in Victoria Park was 'strongly encouraged'. Christianity and social progress were inextricably joined. Today, stripped of almost all cultural dominance, no longer possessing any means of compulsion, British Christianity today can offer contemporary culture nothing but Christ. And in the end what is so bad about that?

2 In a culture where 'identity' is a key category, the desired and chosen self-identity of church will be crucial

Although I am convinced that national churches can have a corporate identity³¹, church to come will probably be shaped by a multitude of *local* models, all with challenging repercussions for the role of the 'core' or 'headquarters' of such churches. For a denomination such as British Methodism, organised Connexionally, this will pose profound challenges.

However, the shape of *local* church itself is under debate. The notion of parish church – that is, church shaped by the social geography of agrarian, pre-Industrial Revolution Britain, together with various assumptions about the nature of 'Christian England', and a shape of church stoutly defended by the Church of England – must be reassessed.

In a recent paper³² my colleague at the University of Sheffield, Martyn Percy does just this, arguing for a reappraisal in his own Anglican Church system. He suggests that rather than simply accepting the common bifurcation of the *parochia* and the *ecclesia*, new ways must be sought whereby 'local' (rather than necessarily 'parish') churches engage afresh with people and contexts on many different levels. The aim and intent of the parish system, that is, 'incarnating the life of God within a given community'³³, remains desirable. *Ecclesia* must find and can find its rightful *parochia*. But this will entail moving beyond geography. Present, let alone

31 The matter of 'identity' is a crucial theme in all good-quality congregational studies. 'Who we are' is a basic requirement of church and the loss of identity, and therefore role, is often said to be at the heart of the malaise of western denominations.

32 'Losing our space, finding our place: the changing identity of the English Parish Church?'

33 *Ibid.*

future patterns of ministry, are no longer shaped solely by geographical space. The shape of the church to come will, increasingly, not be.

I want to suggest that *people*, their networks and relationships, will be a better shaper of church to come than mere territory, with all its connotations of ownership and privilege. Future mission and ecclesiology will be less about geography and more about people.

In a recent article³⁴ Heather Wraight talked of the importance of *relationships* for churchgoing women. The notion of church as safe community, family, a place where loyalty is generated, sufficiently valid to invite friends along, open enough to return to after dropping out, and a place where relationship with God – rather than *knowledge about God* – was paramount. For these women these were the most important features of church and they are all fundamentally relational.

The church in Britain requires different models of local church other than those driven by idealistic views about local communities and nuclear families. That is the lasting value of youth congregations, recovery groups and the like. They create genuine communities minus traditional dogmas about parish. But we will need to become more creative and nuanced still. Sensitive, responsive, locally earthed diversity will be the order of the day. Methodists, whose founder rode roughshod over parish boundaries and protested that 'all the world was his parish', should feel more comfortable with this broader notion of ecclesial community than many Christian groupings!

Modest and obvious though this may sound, this suggestion severely questions the generic 'all things to all people' neighbourhood model of church that has dominated British Methodism both ideologically and practically for the last 60 years. The neighbourhood church in a geographically defined Circuit is the Methodist version of the parish model, and like the Anglican model must be recast for today's society and its communities. Like it or not the 'all things to all people' model of Church is not only increasingly unattainable but also undesirable. As the manager of the Tate Modern commented recently 'people now neither want nor expect everything to be found in one place.'³⁵ In this respect, a Methodist *Circuit* can be a strategically valuable entity for working out area policy, in relation to non- replication, but cannot serve at every level of local delivery.

The shape of church to come, with its emphasis upon relationality, will tend to be *smaller* rather than *larger*, whether through the continued application of cell church principles, division into discrete groupings within a larger congregation, or

34 *Quadrant*, January 2002, p1.

35 BBC Radio 4 Interview February 2000.

through the continuing decline of average congregational size. British Christians need now to be thinking small and real rather than big and real estate! But not too small – there comes a point at which no missionary strategy except closure can be operated when the active congregation reaches a certain nadir in size.

As to *ecumenism*, in spite of the continuance of ‘top down’ schema, local congregations in postmodern postchristian Britain will probably continue to be committed to and shaped by pragmatic, local ecumenism, or, if you like, ‘natural’ ecumenism. Dynamic, contextual ecumenism - that is, ecumenism which stands loose to traditional dogma and denominationalism but finds unity through shared visions and local projects - will grow from strength to strength. Denominational identity is now not a major concern of many congregations, and less and less so to the under 40’s still in church. Therefore the growth in the number of Christians who cannot relate solely and easily to any one mainline denomination with its various practices and polity will increase, no doubt causing those committed to maintaining ‘Faith and Order’ in any particular denominational structure, great frustration and anguish!

Finally in this section of local characteristics, the shape of church to come is likely to be *thick skinned*. Such church will tolerate – nay, recognise as inevitable, be open to and welcome - the in out sampling of seekers and tasters. Such church will not assume, as is so often assumed today, that a sporadic visit by a stranger signals fully paid up membership of the Christian metanarrative and will ensure that repeated and varied points of entry and engagement into itself are provided. And all without noses being put out of joint!

None of this means that church to come will cease the social, educational, ethical, just and philanthropic work it undertakes as an expression of the *missio Dei*. But it does mean this will be undertaken with a different body language. And it probably does mean, as Ann Morisy contends, that Christians should not do anything that merely duplicates what the social, educational or medical services can do. That there must be what she calls ‘added value’ whether in content, witness to Christ or attitude.³⁶

Second millennium denominationalism will become more Third millennium monasticism, holding together worship, service and witness within lifestyle. A nameless early Christian commented, ‘Beauty of life causes strangers to join the ranks... we do not talk about great things; we live them’³⁷ Such church will be a refuge for the seeking, the battered, the infuriating and the bewildered, a

36 see Chapter 4 of Ann Morisy, *Beyond the Good Samaritan*, (Mowbrays, 1997)

37 cit Alan Kreider, *Evangelism and Worship in PreChristendom* (Grove Books, 1995) p.19

relational context where experientially, on their part, offers of grace always exceed demands. Methodists, with their stress on prevenient grace and a prevenient Spirit abroad in the world (not simply in the church) should be able to manage that!

The shape of church to come is church as 'an event among people' rather than an authority or an institution. That is why such church groups are and will continue to be so important.

3. In a culture that is rediscovering 'spirituality', the owning and embodying of an authentic and open Christian spirituality will be crucial

I take up here John Drane's challenge that many contemporary models of church are simply not spiritual enough³⁸, and suggest that the shape of church to come will rediscover and exude an authentic, contemporary *Christian* spirituality.

Is it only 25 years ago that my theological training was largely filled with 'death of God' secularism? How things have changed! It is one thing for Christianity to be rejected by those whose scientific materialism and logical positivism meant that they had no time for God at all. It is quite another to be rejected today by a generation which, every poll suggests, is seeking meaning, mystery and transcendence, and, more importantly, often considers that such is not to be adequately found in the Christian church.³⁹ Philip Sheldrake comments, 'Despite frequent comments about secularization in Western society and a decrease in church membership, there is widespread evidence of a hunger for the spiritual... The interest in spirituality is certainly not confined to church-goers or those commonly identified as religious people.'⁴⁰ We must note a certain irony in the fact that certain Christian commentators were busy demythologising the world at just about the same time as increasing numbers of western people began to remythologise their lives!

It is important to make the distinction between spirituality and religion. Religion usually connotes formal, institutionalised structures, rituals and beliefs which belong to an official religious system, whereas spirituality is often associated more

³⁸ Drane makes this point in several of his recent books on evangelism, e.g. *Faith in a Changing Culture* (Marshall Pickering, 1997) and *The McDonaldization of the Church* (DLT, 2000)

³⁹ The work of David Hay on 'The Spirituality of the unchurched' is important here, as is, though less rigorous, several articles published in the Bible Society magazine *Transmission*.

⁴⁰ Cit. Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality* (Gill & Macmillan, 1997), p21)

with the ancient and primal search for meaning, and is therefore more central to human experience than religion. It is no surprise then that very many contemporary people in Britain claim a personal spirituality but do not attend church or have no regular or formal connection with official religious systems. The shape of church to come will rediscover an authentically Christian spirituality, rather than 'religion'.

The lack of arrogance already noted means that despite our deep commitment to Christ and the Christian way, we will opt in rather than opt out of our varied weird and wonderful spiritual environment. We must take our lead from St Paul in Athens (Acts 17). Paul was a Jew, a Pharisee no less. Pharisees, walking law machines. Experts who knew the core statutes of Judaism backwards and inside out, who knew that monotheism and a rejection of idolatry are the bulwarks of Jewish faith. Yet Paul, such a Jew, walks into an unclean Gentile environment, sees a graven image to an unknown God and comments to his hearers how they share much in common! Make no mistake, today's equivalent is a Methodist minister walking into a witch's coven and declaring 'I see we share an interest in spiritual things then?'

I recall an old Nun being interviewed on television. She talked of Church as 'Godbearing'. That is, the vessel both bearing and bringing forth God to people. Yet only some people. For others, it is a fact that church has not been Godbearing in that sense at all. The nun argued that the first Christian response should be thanksgiving that Church is Godbearing for some, and the second response penitence that it hasn't been Godbearing for many others.

The commitment to authentic Christian spirituality on the one hand, and engagement with others on the other also means that church to come will explore new boundaries of worship, and sacrament, and participation and reflection and tactility and response. Worship will connect heaven and earth – this earth, now. There will be space to encounter God. Consequently, the myopia and self-serving of so much traditional and contemporary worship in Britain will increasingly become regarded as too lightweight, flimsy and marginal to life and everyday living for the purpose. A greater hope lies in the retrieval of the notion as church as sharing in and bringer of the Reign (of Kingdom) of God. O'Murdhu writes, 'Modern spirituality confronts the Christian community with the urgent need to retrieve the subverted vision of God's New Reign. The challenge arises not just from within Christianity itself as its increasingly disillusioned membership voice their discontent about the role of Christian witness in today's world. It is in fact the world itself that is seeking to reclaim the vision of the Basileia, because that vision speaks so cogently to the critical questions of our time. Foremost among such questions is the call to a new quality of relatedness at every level of life.... Many Christians today – perhaps, the disillusioned more than anyone else – yearn afresh for the vision of the Basileia. Christendom carries the dead weight of

a sacred tradition, but one that has outlived its usefulness, and in its decline and disintegration, confronts the Christian community with some fundamental questions of meaning. Foremost among these is the retrieval of the Basileia as the heart and centre of our Christian faith.⁴¹

I suspect it may well prove that talk about Christian *faith* in the new cultural context in Britain will become indistinguishable from talk about the pursuit of the Christian *life*. There will be a stress on participation rather than doctrine. Increasingly believing and belonging – whichever way round – will *follow* friendship and proceed from acceptance. David Augsburger writes, ‘Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable’. Church to come will be shaped by listening before speaking, and when it speaks, it will be crucial that its life and its lips agree

The shape of church to come will take this seriously in terms of authentic Christian contemporary spirituality.

Conclusion

All the above involves risk and change for the church in Britain, which for an institution that believes God has led its evolution, history, teaching and character, is challenging and disturbing. And yet risky faith is not a contradiction. Too often faith is understood in terms of security and non-risk, whereas true faith is to trust God while engaging in risk-taking for the gospel. Rudolph Bahro has noted that ‘When the forms of an old culture are dying the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.’

In multiracial, multicultural and multifaith Britain, Christians must have faith in the power of the gospel itself, rather than seeking to banish its rivals. In our religiously pluralistic context this is of crucial importance and must be our focus and expression rather than the confrontational tendency to make ideological comparisons that so often currently characterises Christian faithfulness.

Michael Jinkins has written recently ‘The church cannot imagine its future unless it can face death.’⁴² But we can go further back, to our source. Jesus said, ‘whoever keeps their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will find it.’ I believe this teaching is as much for the

⁴¹ O’ Murdhu, *op cit* p.162-4.

⁴² See *Invitation to Theology* (IVP, 2001).

church in Britain as it is for the individuals which make it up.

Such is my view of the shape of church to come: An exciting vision or a nightmare scenario? Together, and over the next few years we will decide. But I believe the extent to which such images of 'church to come' excites or appals will go a long way to determining whether such developments happen with us, or without us.

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