Social Imaginaries in Contemporary British Methodism

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1. Social Imaginaries

I want to explore the part that imagination plays in our social life. I will suggest that imagination plays a major role, and that much of our social living is shaped by the way we imagine it to be. Further, that our religious life, which is also social, is no different. And I want to raise questions about a comparison: a comparison between the way we imagine our faith communities, and specifically our Methodist communities, and the way we imagine our wider social life; questions about how these two relate to each other, and how they both contradict and support each other. I am going to do this first by exploring some social theory, drawing particularly on the work of Charles Taylor and Anthony Cohen.

There is potential for misunderstanding in the use of the word 'imaginary'. Usually, in everyday language, we think of what is imaginary as something to do with *fiction* rather than *fact*. We *imagine* things which are not true. So let me say at this point that it isn't as simple as that. The relationship between imagination and truth is something which calls for some reflection.

Let's begin with the unusual word 'imaginary'—unusual, that is, when used as a noun. 'Imaginary' should be an adjective, shouldn't it? Maybe we think of children's 'imaginary friends'; or the 'imaginary worlds' of Narnia and Middle Earth. But when we use it as a noun and say 'an imaginary' or 'a social imaginary' that needs some explanation.

This is what Charles Taylor says:

> By social imaginary…I am thinking…of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.

> There are important differences between social imaginary and social theory. I adopt the term imaginary (i) because my focus is on the way ordinary people

"imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.[1]

So, what is involved in a social imaginary?

First, let's begin with an issue about the scale of imaginaries. Taylor is viewing things on a macro-scale. He is searching out the imaginaries of 'Western Society'. His interest is in what he calls 'different modernities' and he finds in the imaginaries a tool for understanding how Western modernity differs from other forms it takes in China, or India, or in the Middle East. His work identifies three such macro-scale imaginaries in Western society; although sometimes he writes of 'the social imaginary' using the singular, because he sees these as three aspects of one way of imagining the social world. So for example, he writes, "There are three important forms of social self-understanding which are crucial to modernity, and each of them represents a penetration or transformation of the social imaginary."[2] So there are many practices, stories, images and so on which together make up one huge 'social imaginary'. The three 'forms of social self-understanding' which he sees as the main issues for our modern social imaginary are: the economy, the public sphere (debate and discussion happening in media of all kinds), and democratic self-rule.

But he also writes of what 'is carried in images, stories, and legends'. To see something of what happens when the imaginations works at a smaller scale, we can turn to the work of Anthony Cohen.[3] While Cohen doesn't use the language of 'the imaginary', what he writes about symbols suggests that they perform the same kind of role: they make a connection between individuals in their social groups, seeing our imaginative interpretation of these symbols as key to the way we think about our social relationships. But all of this is at the much smaller scale of 'communities'—which might be a group with an ethnic or tribal connection, or might be

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[1] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 23.
[2] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 69.
[3] Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1985).

geographically defined, focused in one particular locale. So the examples which Cohen takes are an island community in the Shetlands, a tribal group in Mexico, and the inhabitants of a town in Catalonia.

I don't think that this difference in scale between Cohen's symbols and Taylor's imaginaries is a difference of kind. Both are working with the idea that we are connected together by what goes on in our heads. The work we do with our imagination, in working with and interpreting symbols, and in making and communicating meaning, is an important part of the way we construct our social relationships, from the smallest scale of family and kinship groups, to the largest scale of Western modernity.

Perhaps we can conceive the relationship between Cohen's symbols and Taylor's imaginaries as in part being as constituent parts to a larger whole. Certainly Taylor's imaginaries are in part constellations of symbols. Although there is also plenty of room for conflict between smaller communities and larger cultures. And indeed Cohen spends some time exploring just such conflicts and the way symbols are used in such situations. Imaginaries are therefore larger scale ideas constellated in the smaller details of social life.

It goes without saying that a second aspect of imaginaries, as illustrated by Cohen's focus on community, is how a social imaginary is *shared*. It is not about individuals inventing their own private imaginary practices or understandings; it's about things which we share with one another. Taylor writes of a "common understanding that makes possible common practices".

For Cohen, symbols are principally concerned with how communities conceive their boundaries. Communities are, by their nature, bounded. They are concerned with who is included and excluded. Cohen argues that symbols are what communities use to construct their sense of identity and difference; the symbols are used to mark their boundaries. The community shares the symbol.

Consider the example of remembrance: here we have a set of practices which are carried on across Britain; we learn to participate in its practices from a young age:

from parents and teachers, and generally from the expectations which we see enacted around us. It becomes a definite act of will to choose to go against it, by, for example, wearing a white instead of a red poppy. The acts of remembrance have their force because they are shared: they bring with them expected ways of behaving, and judgments of what is right and proper for British people. They help to define a sense of nation.

A third aspect of social imaginaries is that they mediate meanings and understandings; they therefore represents a shared understanding of truth. The symbols which are used by people to understand and invest meaning in their communities are many. They include things such as ritual, and myth; but also what Cohen calls 'more instrumental and pragmatic things in ordinary use—such as words'.[4] He goes on to give examples of words which are symbolic: 'words such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' do not merely describe forms of government and legal status, they also tell us how to regard these forms. They are 'hurrah' words, as opposed to 'boo' words.' This illustrates some degree of similarity with Taylor in terms of the sort of things that symbols and imaginaries are: the word 'democracy' as a symbol, and 'democratic self-rule' as a component of the imaginary.

Taylor's work is based around the idea that we need to explore what he calls the 'self-understandings' of modernity. In the ways we relate to one another through the economy, the public sphere of debate and opinion forming, and through democratic forms of government, what we have are self-understandings. This is how we view our social world. Taking the economic as an example, it's well known that in elections it is the economy which tends to trump all other concerns. So our self-understanding of our society as principally one of economic co-operation is played out. Taylor is not saying this is an absolute truth; but it is a version of truth—a self-understanding, an understanding or assumed truth of how we see ourselves in social relationship.

Cohen looks at the way the self-understanding and conception of communities is built up through symbols; and particularly it is in marking the boundaries of

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[4] Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 14.

community that symbols come into their own. Truth here becomes more slippery.
The particular thing about symbols is that they need to be interpreted, and
interpretation works in different ways for different people in different situations.
"Sharing of symbol is not necessarily the same as the sharing of meaning" as he
says.[5] Cohen believes that a symbol is multivalent; that is, it can be understood in a
wide variety of ways; it can carry a range of meanings.   Even while different people
from the same community may understand the symbol in different ways, that does
not stop its effectiveness in constructing community—in fact Cohen argues that it is
precisely that multivalence which allows symbols to do their work.

Back with remembrance the red poppy of remembrance is a good example of a
multivalent symbol. It can stand for blood and for death, for pride, for sadness, for
waste and pointlessness, for memory, for something good coming from something
bad, for redemption, or for freedom even. But the red poppy does not divide, even
though different people may mean different things when wearing it. Rather it brings
together. So different meanings, different truths, are aggregated though symbols.
For Cohen symbols do not 'integrate', they 'aggregate'; allowing individual difference
to subsist within a community; allowing individuality and communal sharing to exist
alongside each other.

A fourth aspect of social imaginaries from Taylor is that they are based in practices.
The quotation I used earlier said: 'the social imaginary is that common
understanding that makes possible common practices'. So imaginaries don't just sit
there as a sort of inanimate thing. They are constantly being used, and engaged in
the things we do.

The idea of the imaginary seems first to have arisen in the work of Cornelius
Castoriadis. He came from a Marxist background, but argued that the determinism
of Marxism, and Freudian thinking as well, stripped out any notion of our participating
in history. He coined the idea of the imaginary because he saw the way that
imagination comes into play as explaining how we are not determined in all our

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[5] Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 16.

actions; the imaginary is "in its essence rebellious against determinacy" he wrote.[6] So, the imagination creates a space for us to do, for us to participate.

This is part of the background to Taylor's thinking. He writes that 'Ideas always come in history wrapped up in certain practices'.[7] Those practices might involve all kinds of things: marking a cross on a ballot paper; watching the news on TV; wearing a red poppy; signing an on-line petition; talking with a neighbour: these all have the capacity to be the raw materials from which imaginaries take their form.

2. Methodist imaginaries

If we take the idea of social imaginaries and seek to apply it to a Christian denomination such as Methodism, what will we be looking for? It needs to be deeply rooted in Methodist identity, and identifiable in shared, meaning-mediating, imaginative ideas, which are based in practices: ideas by which Methodists construct their social relationships with one another, and with those outside the church. Further than that, it should be obvious that imaginaries are not value-free. We need to be considering what such imaginaries contribute to the renewal and restoration of human being, of the churches, and of the world. As such our relationship with God is also connected here, and discovery of good imaginaries might be seen as a process of corporate prayer and discernment. As Wesleyans this will mean considering how imaginaries relate to the means of grace.

Proposals for potential Methodist imaginaries might be made in several ways. For example, we might approach theological themes familiar to us all: an imaginary arising from Arminian roots, connecting a theological conviction that no-one can be excluded as a recipient of God's grace, with a wider social openness and liberality. Another example might be an imaginary arising from the belief in and desire for Christian perfection, connecting a theological expectation of the work of God's Spirit with expectations of growth and aspiration. Alternatively examples might be taken

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[6] Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1997), 214.
[7] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 33.

from a narrative approach.[8] For example: how might the retelling of the story of John Wesley's rescue from a burning rectory become a part of a wider imaginary which validates spiritual leadership without necessary recourse to church structures? Or examples might arise from practices: such as the way that congregations engage with the sacraments, through liturgy or baptismal policy.

Such examples are offered as provisional and tentative, but worth exploring. As hypotheses they would need research to verify their place within the hearts and minds of ordinary Methodist people. However, there are many which can be offered with reasonable confidence. I will pursue such examples while briefly considering the four characteristics of imaginaries set out in section 1 above, in an amended order: that imaginaries are a) constelled networks, b) mediate meaning, c) shared, and d) are invested in practices.

a. Constellated imaginaries

Taylor makes a distinction between social imaginaries and social theory, alluded to in the first quotation from his work above. Social theory and social imaginaries are inter-related but distinct. Social theory is one of the roots of the social imaginary, and social theorists may be able to influence the way imaginaries develop. In a similar way, if we are to identify Methodist imaginaries we might look to the familiar broad theological themes of our church, and the way those are shaped and crafted by theologians in academic works or church statements. However, this is only part of the picture. In Taylor's terms an imaginary is 'often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends', are not 'the possession of a small minority', and they 'make possible…a widely shared sense of legitimacy'.[9] Imaginaries are necessarily formed within a context of broad social attitudes, and by the practical working out of human life and relationships.

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[8] Ted Campbell's recent book provides considerable examples of how narratives play a part in shaping communal awareness, although his examples tend towards a top-down model. Ted A. Campbell, Encoding Methodism: Telling and Retelling Narratives of Wesleyan Origins, (Nashville: New Room Books, 2017).

[9] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 23.

The connections made in the two theological examples of potential Methodist imaginaries above are significant. Because imaginaries are of the 'ordinary' and are shared. That means that a 'purist' approach to theology and spirituality may find some dissatisfaction in the actual ways that ideas have taken root among Methodist people.[10] Whatever understandings might be desired and advocated by preachers, teachers, and church leaders, that is not what will necessarily be found within the imaginaries of the community. That isn't to say that such advocacy might not influence individuals in their views, and have an impact on the imaginary if widely enough and effectively propounded, but imaginaries will include a spectrum from church theology through to ordinary theology, and from what is taught in ministerial training institutions through to the sometimes small scale practices within congregations or communities, in a way which might sometimes be discordant.

Take as an example of this constellating of imaginaries the connection between Arminianism, predestination and moral agency. The fundamental theological assertion that salvation is not predetermined and that the Gospel message is therefore 'for all' includes within it a belief in human freedom and agency. Charles Wesley records an encounter with a woman whose husband had become a convinced Calvinist, believing that he was 'elect'. He was therefore beating his wife and claiming because he was predestined for salvation and so could do as he liked and 'tells her that if he killed her he could not be damned'.[11] The potential for the stripping away of moral agency is, within a Methodist imaginary, countered by a strong conviction in moral agency and responsibility.[12] This has profound consequences for an imaginary which engages social, political and ethical practices.

Yet at the same time within an imaginary there is a stretching of the theological concept. One of the ways in which I see this being worked out in contemporary British Methodism is in the idea of an 'open table'. As part of the imaginary this idea

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[10] In this regard imaginaries might be seen as more closely associated with Jeff Astley's 'ordinary theology': Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*, (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2002).

[11] S T Kimbrough and Kenneth G. C. Newport, eds. *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2008), 312.

[12] The theory of imaginaries in itself takes shape through Castoriadis as a theory which challenged determinism, whether political, theological, or biological. For this reason the example of an imaginary rooted in Arminianism seems to chime with the theory.

is applied in a variety of ways. In *His Presence Makes the Feast*, the Methodist Church in Britain sought to offer a descriptive account of diverse British Methodist practice and belief in communion. In answer to the question 'Are there any circumstances in which it would not be appropriate for someone to receive the bread and wine?' the report says 'most respondents felt that there should, in general, be no bar'. I am certainly aware of some Methodists who comfortably practice the offering of bread and wine to people of other faiths, while the official church position is one of communion being open only to baptised believers. Certainly the report's assertion that 'very little mention was made of Church discipline' rings true. [13] The way in which an imaginary which has its roots in orthodox Arminianism also includes a range of practices, demonstrates some of the constellating and aggregating capacity of an imaginary.

An imaginary can sometimes constellate quite different impulses which might even be contradictory. Where this is the case an imaginary may not be stable. While it is clear that the idea of Christian perfection, and the theologies which underlie it, is in no way the same thing as an impulse towards upward social mobility and personal financial advancement, yet connection can be made. We can see the steps which link two strikingly contrasting aspects of human living. The theological issues of salvation by grace and the place of works are all too evident here, but imaginaries seem to have a way of by-passing many of our theological ideas and nuances, but a theory of imaginaries might provide a tool for analysis which helps us to delineate some of the underlying issues of diversity and change within Methodism.

b. Imaginaries mediating meaning

The possibly contradictory meanings mediated by (Methodist) imaginaries apparent above draw attention to the *mediation* of meanings. To mediate meanings is not to make meanings the same, but to navigate a space between them: it is about aggregation rather than integration (Cohen). The meanings mediated by an imaginary shaped by Arminianism have different focal points, like the focal points of

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[13] The Faith and Order Committee Report to the Methodist Conference, *His Presence Makes the Feast: Holy Communion in the Methodist Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2003), 23.

an ellipse. Around these focal points we find ourselves in various orbits depending on the strength with which the focal points influence us. Perhaps two focal points can be identified as inclusion and responsibility.

The focal point of inclusion carries with it that openness of the Gospel to all, the love and grace and God offered freely to all. It will be most strongly connected with Bible passages about love of strangers and enemies; it will encapsulate Jesus' ministry to outsiders, tax collectors, sinners, gentiles and Samaritans. The focal point of responsibility carries with it the cost of discipleship and the commandments and call to obedience. It will be associated with Jesus' call to repentance, and the powerful demands he makes on people such as the rich young man, or the would-be disciples of Matthew , and in the moral agency implicit in the sermon on the mount.

Yet the imaginary will also be influenced by other powerful gravity wells. We might identify liberal and conservative positions. This imaginary will, for some, incorporate a strongly liberal approach to moral and ethical issues. Not only is the Gospel open to all, but it is also seen as effective in forgiveness and acceptance, affecting people's views on issues such as remarriage after divorce, or same-sex marriage. For those for whom the imaginary incorporates a conservative approach, there will be moral lines of Biblical interpretation which cannot be crossed. For those people the imaginary which incorporates Arminianism will focus on the necessary repentance which opens up the possibility of God's grace.

As indicated above, this connects with significant issues for the contemporary Methodist Church. Does such an imaginary have the strength to mediate meanings across the theological fault line which surrounds continuing discussions about same-sex marriage? Can an appeal to an imaginary emphasising the openness of the Gospel to all, allow those with profoundly different views to find enough in common to continue within the same church? My hope would be that it can, and the British Methodist Church will be exploring that over the next two years in seeking to come to a resolution which holds LGBT Christians and conservative evangelicals within the one body.

c. Shared imaginaries

Imaginaries engage us both internally and externally, individually and socially. The mediation of meanings is one aspect of that duality. As meanings are mediated between individuals with different points of view they become, to some extent, shared meanings. Or viewed the other way, shared meanings impinge on individuals to allow them to navigate their way through difference.

There is a sense in which imaginaries are internal: they occur within the imagination of individuals; but they are also necessarily shared. This brings us to another potential Methodist imaginary, which in itself embodies and demonstrates this shared aspect: that of social holiness—an imaginary which finds at its root the Wesleyan conviction that 'there is no holiness but social holiness'.[14] John Wesley's reason for writing this was, first and foremost, an insistence that the path to holiness involved being in fellowship with others. The quotation comes from the preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems* and is accentuating fellowship in hymn singing, and along with it stresses the importance of 'doing good to all men' (sic).[15] Again, the possibility for imaginaries to constellate different ideas can be explored. See, for example, Roger Walton's recent blog on *Social holiness and social justice*, which concludes that these two 'are inextricably bound together.'[16]

Our social holiness can therefore be seen as a model imaginary. The inner life of prayer and devotion cannot be separated from the outer life of relationship. Wesley's point is that the Gospel is incomprehensible unless it both transforms the inner being, and connects us with one another as human beings.

d. Imaginaries based in practices

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[14] Eighteenth Century Collections Online: Text Creation Partnership, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, published by John Wesley and Charles Wesley (1739) viii, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004800840.0001.000/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext (accessed 25/07/2018).

[15] Ibid., ix.

[16] Theology Everywhere—Discuss theology today to transform tomorrow, Roger Walton, 'Social Holiness and Social Justice', https://theologyeverywhere.org/2016/07/04/social-holiness-and-social-justice/ (accessed 25/07/2018).

If an imaginary such as one connected with social holiness takes shape in hymn singing, we are already moving on to the way imaginaries are based in practices, and to the relationship between imaginaries and the means of grace. We can view the means of grace as themselves part of the imaginaries which God desires for us. I want to explore this finally through one of the means of grace—that of reading scripture—through an extended Biblical example, because it seems to me that imaginaries also offer us a way of reading Biblical texts, and Methodist imaginaries should be considered in their connections with scriptural holiness.

The imaginaries of the church are expressed through liturgy, theology, preaching, art and literature; but again they have that sense of being grounded in the experience of ordinary people: so it is also expressed through the practices of worship, in Bible study and fellowship groups, in the experiences of 'liquid church' which people engage in through websites and annual events and pilgrimages, and through Christian discourse and conversation. These are the ways we construct theological meaning.

As we consider what our Methodist social imaginaries might be, we might also consider:

>What is their relationship to the social imaginaries of the world?
>Do these imaginaries carry sufficient weight to continue alongside the contemporary social imaginaries?

I want to explore these questions by thinking about a different self-understanding of the church, a different imaginary: that of exiles. This is an imaginary which grows from the Jewish experience of exile in Babylon. As a metaphor for understanding the place of God's people in the world it is evident in the Psalms of lament, and the familiarity of Psalm 137, and its use by Rastafarians as well as Christians, shows how rich a seam this imaginary is: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept, when we remembered Zion." Or rather differently passages like Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29 where the people are told: "Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray

to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." This imaginary raises a big question: Where do we belong? How do we relate to a place where we live out our lives as families and communities, yet where we feel we do not belong?

From this starting point this imaginary extends into all sorts of territory. Zion, Jerusalem as a heavenly city, the longed for home; it is not unrelated of course to the exodus, and the promised land. Within the New Testament it connects with what we think and feel about the Kingdom of God, while in John's Gospel the themes of how disciples relate to a world, a *kosmos*, of which Jesus says: "If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you." In 2 Corinthians 5:6 Paul writes that "while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord", and uses this same kind of imaginary in his understanding of what it means to be a disciple and an apostle: language about being 'ambassadors'— agents of a foreign nation. While in Romans 12:2 we have that passage about 'not being conformed to the world'. There is so much here which leads us into the way we understand ourselves as a representative priestly people, or understandings of purity and holiness.

In 1 Peter 2 these two words are evident: the one in which the disciple lives but does not belong, and the one in which the disciple truly belongs but which remains at an eschatological remove.

> [11] Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. [12]Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.
> [13] For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, [14]or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. [15]For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. [16]As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. [17]Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor.

Imagine how it might have been for one of these pagan city dwellers. The letter is probably written in the context of baptism; to mark the occasion as a sermon,

possibly containing liturgical elements. The journey through catechesis and baptism was a journey from one world into another, one nation into another, one set of imaginaries into another. Particularly as this is catechetical, training those coming into Christian faith, it suggests that this marks the powerful transfer of allegiance which they were undergoing.

Yet at the same time there is an ambivalent element here, as the first Christians tried to work out what their relationship to the Roman state should be. 'Honour everyone…Honour the emperor' is an interesting formula, which seems to be working to relativise the power of empire, even while accepting its temporal power.

This imaginary is still alive and active in our own contexts and settings. Some denominations take a strongly opposed interpretation of this imaginary. For them the purity of the fellowship, which should be conformed to Christ and not to the world. Cohen writes of a symbolic strategy that some communities use, which he calls 'symbolic reversal'. This is where a community which feels itself under threat from a dominant culture uses its difference, and even the things which the dominant culture uses to denigrate them, as a means of strengthening their identity and self-understanding. An example he draws from his study of Pentecostalists in Focaltown, Newfoundland; many of those in the church were long term unemployed, in a town where unemployment was high, and yet at the same time "a burgeoning middle class brought all the materialistic pressures of North American life into the Newfoundland…(rural communities) for the first time."[17]

So he writes of how, although the stigma of unemployment was strongly felt in that context, Pentecostalism offered a way of coping with it, and they did it by "conducting themselves as a closed community. They operated their own schools, proscribed participation in religiously mixed social events, excluded themselves from most of the town's many voluntary associations, and concentrated themselves within a discrete residential section. … It thus became: a community with closed boundaries in which one may seek security and obscurity in the company of people who have shared the

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[17] Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 61.

same worldly experience of negligible opportunity, poverty, and a limited knowledge of the social environment."[18]

In Britain now some religious communities engage in the same way, drawing on their interpretation of that imaginary of exile. And it isn't just in those smaller religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and brethren churches. Similarly it is apparent in churches which are closer to our own ecclesiology, and which will sometimes influence our own thinking: many in evangelical circles who feel threatened by current debates around secularism, sexuality, and civil engagement for example, not to mention Mennonites and readers of Stanley Hauerwas. Our constellation of symbols, our imaginary, is therefore missionally significant. Our attitude to the world with which we engage is expressed and shaped by the imaginary, and the symbols we invoke can be persuasive: not in terms of cerebral argument, but in terms of practices. But they need to be open to that lively remaking which is part of the essential nature of all symbologies. The whole point of an imaginary is that it is open to our participation, and we can make choices about how we engage with and interpret it.

In doing that I would want to make two comments on this imaginary of exile. One from a sociological viewpoint, drawing again on Charles Taylor; and the other from a theological viewpoint.

This imaginary raises the question sharply of how our imaginaries of the church relate to the imaginaries of the world. Because what we have are two sometimes conflicting but definitely interlocking sets of imaginaries. What do we do with them: imaginaries of the world and imaginaries of the life of faith? What Taylor reveals is the way in which the imaginaries of the world have been infiltrated by the imaginaries of the faith, and the imaginaries of the faith have been infiltrated by the imaginaries of the world.

When writing of the economy, Taylor reviews how in the seventeenth and eighteenth century it was a theology of God's providential ordering of the world which influenced

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[18] Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 61.

the growth of our modern social imaginary. The idea of God's ordering of the world is evident in an understanding of the natural world as God's creation, and of the intricacy of living things. "What is added in the eighteenth century" he writes, "is an appreciation of the way human life is designed to produce mutual benefit." So the understanding of the ordering of social life, which is so much a part of contemporary economic theory, came from theological roots. This is just one example of how tangled up the imaginaries of church and world are. Like wheat and tares growing together, we can expect imaginaries to be at work within the church which illustrate our conformity to the world; and we can expect imaginaries to be at work in wider society which illustrate how, as Methodists would say, God's prevenient grace is at work. If we want a smaller scale example of how Christian imaginaries and imaginaries of the Western world have become entangled, we can look back to the example of remembrance. Secular ideas and theological ideas both contribute to what has become something accessible to people of all faiths and none.

Theologically I would want to note that the imaginary of exile has been held ambivalently from the early days of the church. As we see in 1 Peter 2, alongside the church's self-identification as 'aliens and exiles' is a recognition of their situation of having to 'honour the emperor'. Luke Bretherton in his book, *Hospitality as Holiness*, uses this same passage to develop his thinking around what it means to be guests—a very different interpretation of the exile imaginary.[19] Incarnation itself can be seen as a theology of God's making himself our guest. Jesus, of course, is guest far more often than he is host. While he sends the disciples out in Luke 9 with the words: "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. [4]Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. [5]Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them."

So maybe we need a missiology shaped by an interpretation of the imaginary of exile as one about our being guests. The imaginary can then become a powerful self-understanding which will turn churches away from the idea of being host, which always places us in a position of power as we graciously receive outsiders into our

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[19] Luke Bretherton, *Holiness as Hospitality*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006).

buildings and company. At the same time we need to counter the interpretations which would separate us from the world, and connect with our Methodist imaginaries, shaped by Wesley's practice of preaching to ordinary working people in the open air.

Jeff Astley. *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*. (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2002).

Luke Bretherton. *Holiness as Hospitality*. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006).

Ted A. Campbell. *Encoding Methodism: Telling and Retelling Narratives of Wesleyan Origins*. (Nashville: New Room Books, 2017).

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