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2. Towards a Postmodern Church: values and beliefs

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The journey of the Postmodern Church in the West is something of a maiden voyage. We haven't been here before and we're feeling our way. When I'm talking about the Postmodern Church, I'm really talking about the Church in Western culture. We can talk about that as being Postmodern or late modern; we can talk about it as post-Christian; and I think we can talk about it more accurately in terms of the Global North. 'West' is no longer west; it has migrated. Now the main distinctions in the world are Global North and Global South. So when I talk about the Church in the 'West' I'm really talking about the Church in the 'North'.

Two big questions are up for grabs in contemporary Western culture: the big philosophical questions that have been with us for more than two thousand years.

- ***What is the good?*** That's a question about values.
- ***How do we know things?*** That's a question concerning the status of religious knowing versus the status of scientific knowing.

I think these two questions are underlying lots of the uncertainty about where we are now

and where we're going. These are questions the philosophers long ago were smart enough to ask, and smart enough to know were really important questions that we are never finished answering.

My plan is to apply some tried and tested social science frameworks to bring some light to the complex issues rampant in the North mission context. And we are in a Cathedral so, like a good preacher, I have selected a text: *Jeremiah 31.34b*

'They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD.

I think this Scripture is important for us, as it's hinting at a new democratization of knowledge.

As I said, I'll be treating the Church in the West as some sort of homogenous entity – which of course it is not. We can think of it in terms of four quadrants:

- The church in North America
- The church in Europe and UK
- The church in Eastern Europe and Russia
- The church in Australasia

Well, the church in each sector varies enormously and I'll just give you a brief thumb-nail sketch, so that when I address the big philosophical questions, you will think how differently they will be instantiated in each of the four sectors or quadrants.

First, **the States** (I'm almost bi-lingual, being born in the States, but having lived in Britain for a long time): What's the Church like in the States? Why is it different from here? I think a big factor is: a low level of welfare support makes voluntary organisations which care for people a lot more important in the local community. There is - and has been since its founding - a culture of volunteerism. There is also the ideology of the Pilgrim Fathers. That might be a bit fictitious, but it is an ideology. And all these things encourage church-going in the context of a highly secular and consumerist society. I think sometimes just the harshness of life and of competition for these high consumerist goals put the church in different light. We think of the States and high levels of accumulation; but actually life is very tough and competitive, and I think the church offers something by virtue of that contrast to the more extreme version of capitalism.

Here **in the UK** there is still a kind of profound attachment to the local parish church as a symbol of belonging and a source of 'vicarious religion' (Grace Davey's phrase in *'Vicarious religion: A methodological challenge'*, in Ammerman, N. (ed), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 21-37). Vicarious and precarious: hanging by a thread sometimes. That is countered by a diminished voluntary associational pattern. You'll know that trade unions and membership of political parties are in decline here. And of course we in Britain enjoy a culture of intellectual skepticism; and I think all of that has had a combined effect of discouraging church-going, because as long as there's the local vicar in the parish – a really nice guy – he can do church for us. We feel that it's our birthright, but we actually don't have to lift a finger towards it.

In **Eastern Europe and Russia** you have different patterns of church-going and different patterns of the 'church and culture' relationship. You have the church as a place of resistance to the Communist regime as well as, unfortunately, elements of complicity. And you have the role of the churches in Eastern Europe and Russia as keepers of the traditional soul of the nation; and that's combining to renew interest in the Church. But, of course, with the seventy years of restricted freedom, the churches are less well resourced to cope with resurgence in spiritual interest in these countries.

In **Australia** and to some degree in Australasia, you have a desire for consolidating (say, in Australia) their own unique cultural identity; and that competes with the class and empire

associations of Anglicanism. And then, on the other hand, you've got this rapid influx of immigrants seeking a spiritual home, and that's presenting an enormous mission opportunity.

In summary of the four quadrants, you have competing influences that make church as we know it problematic, but with a hint of growth.

So let me now continue with our philosophical questions. We're talking first of all about

Values: what is the good?

A substantial amount of sociological data from over 80 countries over four decades has been amalgamated and assessed. This data by Inglehart and Welzel (2005) helps to make sense of very different values held in the West, or the Global North, in comparison with the South. There's hardly been a larger research programme in recent decades and I'm very impressed by this data, because it makes a lot of sense of the kind of values that are emerging in a post-industrial, post-modern Global North context.

In this research, the nation is the unit of analysis. It doesn't work on an individual level; it works on the national. The nations which work on a GNP per capita of 15,000 dollars or less, show values such as respect for authority, 'religion is important', traditional family patterns, national pride, and 'good' and 'evil' are clear, distinct categories.

So, in this huge research agenda, traditional values are found to correlate strongly with a particular economic base. Marx was a bit right here! Whereas developed countries, with GNP per capita over 15,000 dollars, show post-material values such as freedom of choice, tolerance for non-traditional life-styles (including abortion, divorce and homosexuality); high life satisfaction and high trust in people [*Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, Ronald Inglehart & Christian Welzel, Cambridge University Press 2005 ISBN 0521846951].

Now for the majority of people living in advanced industrial societies we are now taking for granted the absence of the fear of starvation. None of us are going to starve. Survival needs in the Global North are generally assured and, as a result, traditional values change to secular rational values and survival values change to self-expression values. Self-expression becomes more important for well-being.

We think that values are just evolving out of our own psyches, but they have a strong economic base. There is something pragmatic about values. If you are living under conditions of survival, then you want a strong, traditional hierarchy to manage the world view and to manage the goods that are available to be gotten. No sense in everybody under survival conditions in the Sudan wishing to express their collective unconscious through abstract painting. It's not going to happen. It's not relevant.

So really our life conditions do not dictate, but they afford some values more than others. So in the Global North we are free of the threat to survival. That's had a big impact on how we think. Freedoms from threats to survival brought about by the triumph of science and technology precedes traditional religion, which become peripheral to society's functioning. God seems less necessary to explain the world and to protect us from it. The data shows that culture invariably becomes secularised when freedom from survival needs becomes the norm for the majority in a given nation.

In the later stages of modernisation the welfare state and communication technologies bring a great degree of social flexibility. This is particularly true of Europe and the UK. There is a great degree of social flexibility and freedom from traditionally prescribed roles and duties; so religious authority declines and modern culture takes a subjective turn. However, a religious niche continues to survive in Western culture. Here we are – we're the niche. We're the niche market; albeit within a non-authoritarian individualised framework.

Now the song that I'm singing is not new. You've heard it in many different ways. But I'm so interested that there is the strong economic base for it; and this enormous amount of

statistical data that's been gathered over forty years to show it's really robust. So autonomy-loving, wealthy societies foster a search for meaning and this guarantees the survival of an interest in spirituality, if not institutional religion.

Well this is the story of most mainline Christian denominations and Reformed Judaism in the West. And either the encroachments of secularisation and humanist morality are accommodated by religion to some degree, as has been the case in liberal forms of Christianity, or they are strongly resisted as in conservative forms of Christianity or conservative-radical forms of Islam. So can you see how this picture starts to unveil what's going on beneath some really strong tensions in the world: tensions between conservative forms of Christianity versus liberal; and you see this in Islam and, to a certain degree, we see it played out in Buddhism and Hinduism in certain places (like Sri Lanka).

So these two responses – either secularisation, humanist morality and science are accommodated, or they are very actively resisted. Ironically, the solutions that work in the wealthy North and the solutions that work in the developing South mission contexts for the church are almost mirror images of each other. So when we talk about the church in the West, we're talking about something that's going to work here differently than the way it's going to work in the Global South.

The political and economic turmoil in the Global South – think of Africa – benefits from a strong church taking a clear stand. But that doesn't wash very well in the West; so we've got some real conflicts between bishops in the said Communion. So you have the bishops and archbishops in the Global South taking a clear stand, espousing clear values, traditional values, not least to withstand the onslaught of radical neo-Islam. [When I talk about radical neo-Islam, I'm talking about a *distortion* of Islam. It is not true Islam. That's another story, but that's my view of it. And as well, in the Global South, there is a sorry increase in the persecution of Christians. So the church there has entrenched in its hierarchical and traditional nature in order to deal with the conditions that are there, whereas what is happening to us is so different; so the church has got a lot of fault lines at the moment.

A question of prime importance, then, for the Anglican community in the Global North (Western, post-modern culture) is this: with its perilously ageing demographics, how can the Anglican communion and the church in England reconnect with the young people that are leaving it in droves? You have on the one hand the conservative solution which is working really well in Africa and Latin America and in some places in Asia. I think one of the most important things that's going to happen on this planet is the Christianisation of China – and probably the planet hangs on this, because otherwise why shouldn't China want all the consumerism that we have? In which case the effects on climate change are going to be so enormous that I think there is a lot of hope in this conservative upsurge of Christianity in China. If you think of conservative evangelical fundamentalism – it might be really important that it works in China, at least in this critical juncture for the planet.

So we have these great tensions in the world and in the church and I'm going to return to this question of how the Church can reconnect with young people, because this is really where it's hanging. The rest of us are going to go on our merry way - and who's going to follow us? If we carry on the way we are going, the churches will be empty in the UK and in Europe.

Will a subjective spirituality akin to the New Age holistic milieu take over the traditional role of institutional religion? This is what some sociologists of religion say is what's going to happen (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). Well I think that the appeal of the New Age eclectic spirituality is overrated and I don't think we can rely on this supposed upsurge in spirituality to fill the gap.

Research that I've done (published in *Understanding Generation Y*), shows that there's a quantum change in the way young people aged 15 to 25 make sense of the world and how they connect, or actually don't connect, with the Christian world view. Graham Cray describes Generation Y as 'the first one hundred per cent consumerist generation' (Savage, Mayo-Collins & Mayo, 2006 p 144). They're the people for whom the Internet is a birthright. It's the norm. They were born texting their friends. The rate at which they can download

things and transpose songs, music, film, create something, and send it to somebody's phone *just for the fun of it!* They have different ways of engaging with each other and with the world. They have new facilities that we don't have. It's a generation influenced by the electronic media to such an extent that concepts of space, time, even human community, have radically changed. Traditional concepts of a transcendent God, sin, atonement, are absent. Young people are not anti-Christian, but they know almost nothing about it; and traditional church – no surprise here – is not their style. But neither are they looking for meaning in a post-modern smorgasbord of New Age beliefs. And I was very surprised that these post-modern young people did not have, from a social science philosopher's point of view, a Pick 'n Mix smorgasbord view.

What was surprising in our research was that, far from being disenchanting and alienating, young people create a vibrant sense of meaning and community through their immersion in the popular arts and their 24/7 communication with their friends and virtual networks. In our research, young people showed a coherent world view; a coherent narrative undergirding their understanding of the world: a story that functions as a benchmark for their moral and aesthetic evaluations.

We named this story the **Happy midi-narrative**. And what we mean by that is this world – to young people – and all life in it, is meaningful as *it is*. Young people have no need to posit ultimate significance somewhere else. Life is meaningful as it is, lived in the here and now.

Now of course young people are not stupid. They know there are difficulties in life and their meta-narrative takes the form of a three-part basic story. All folk tales and fairy tales take this kind of three-part story, and theirs goes something like this:

1. Yes, bad things do happen in life – and the bad things to the young people were particularly broken relationships, depression, ageing, and basically being unattractive and unlike. But
2. There are resources to help you – particularly the family. They are real believers in the family. It doesn't matter that statistically more than half of them have experienced family break-up. They believe in the family. It is a tenet of faith. And they believe that their friends will be there for them. And they know that the popular arts are only a download away. And there are a lot of self-help resources out there for them to tap into. And they can have fun. They can have fun in their social world, immersed as it is in the popular arts, which is an ever-moving panoply of fantastic, engaging, fast-moving visual-musical stimuli.

Happiness is the aim. It is believed that happiness will prevail in the long run. There is a belief that the world is like a level playing-field; that life is basically okay. But if you were to preach at them and talk about 'fallen nature', 'sin', they would look at you and go 'Get a life! How morose are you?!' They know people are wonderful. They know people are to be celebrated. They know life is to be enjoyed. Yes, there are problems, but 'get a life' – you can do something about that.

Relationship is the key to this happiness they believe is the meaning and purpose of life. And actually that is not too far off from the philosophers. What is the good? The good is happiness. There are different ways of defining that happiness; but this is not far off what the philosophers knew. So happiness is the ideal you aim for: that is self-evident.

When we were doing the data-gathering, the young people got really exasperated with us when we were somehow disbelieving this tenet of faith: happiness is the purpose of it all. But it's not a purely self-centred happiness. It's relational: they experience their happiness in relationship with each other and their families. It's understood that my happiness should not exclude your happiness. But the scale of this communal happiness is modest. It's lived out on a midi-scale. Not a mini-scale which is 'Me Me Me' but a midi-scale, which is 'Me, my friends and my family'. And that's why we call it 'the happy midi-narrative': 'I love me, my family and friends – no other gods. I believe in myself,' said one young woman in our research.

In short, the main value of life in our consumerist, post-modern – I would say, particularly, European/UK – culture: the supreme value is life itself (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). Life as it is lived on this planet - human life. For socially-included young people, for whom the Internet is a birthright, a network of relationships is the normal milieu of life. That's the world they live in. That is normal. Now how does that contrast to the world view of the traditional church; the world view of Christendom? The shape doesn't fit. We think, 'Oh church culture is so hard for young people – they walk in and don't know what to do with these hymn books and these pews. We think that those are the issues: we've got to change the language to make it more trendy to meet them . . . I think those things are really peripheral.

I think what's really weird to young people about the church is *the shape of the social container*. The shape they live in is egalitarian, relational and inter-active. Young people are smart. They walk in; they intuit – who's who, who's the boss, what are the social rules, what rules can be bent, what rules can't be broken, what's the shape of the hierarchy? What's the pecking order? Who has status? (Savage in Croft 2006). When young people come into the church and it's as if there's this God posited at the top of the pile through His mouthpieces he will speak and through none other, that is a world view that does not connect.

When *Understanding Generation Y* came out it seemed like really bad news. Everyone wanted to believe that young people are becoming more spiritual and eventually they'll find their way into the church somehow. I think that what we discovered – for socially-included young people – that they have a whole other world view that we're not connecting with at all. Obviously any world view is partial. I'm not saying their world view is true and right; but when you communicate with anybody you want to know what their prior assumptions are in order to communicate. Obviously there are deficiencies in their world view as there are deficiencies in our world view.

So even though this isn't good news, this subjective turn of democratically relational world that is now the post-modern condition, I don't think all is lost for the Church; but we do have a pretty big task. What I think is interesting is – because I've recently written a book to help Fresh Expressions understand the social psychology of a mature church life – and in distilling lots of research and work done on Fresh Expressions, what I'm amazed by is that it's as if the subjective turn of Western culture has placed a lens - a new lens – over the New Testament and is highlighting particular Christian values that have been there all along, but now these values are, as it were, jumping off the page. They are emerging and they are 'fresh expressions' of these values in the church today. Even though young peoples' world view has been changing without us really knowing it, actually the Holy Spirit is always working through culture and a new move is afoot.

So what are some of these emerging values that are being espoused consciously, intentionally, by emerging forms of church as Fresh Expressions? And if you go on the Fresh Expressions website and read the blurb you will see these words leaping off the page. This is what people are about in new spiritual ventures today within the Church.

- Authentic spirituality; allowing differences; honesty
- Real relationship with God and others, to enable personal transformation – so can you see it's getting a lot more messy and like that network model of relationships?
- Dissolving sacred/secular distinctions; a whole way of life – not just Sundays
- Rather than the Old Man in the Sky god at the top, it's about God being an immanent presence hallowing the whole of life. We begin to see that there are some natural connections emerging through emerging values of emerging churches.
- Non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical; the humble servant; the empowering leadership and mutual transparency. That means [that even] senior staff should be in this 360 degree accountability feedback: 'How am I doing? Where are we now?'

- Humble cognition. There's a whole philosophical challenge to the status of knowing and making assertions. So it's about allowing for doubt and question. It's an eclectic Christian spirituality: 'roots down / walls down'.
- A great growth of the contemplative approach; because that, too, is about relationship with God, but it's in the silence – allowing the 'beyondness'; that we can't capture God in our words. God is beyond human cognition; therefore our words about God must be humble.
- Concern for social justice; action for poverty on the planet.
- Dissolving in-group and out-group distinctions. And particularly in the institutional church we are not good at this: 'they are not like us – they are not as good.' That's a very normal human propensity – to value the in-group of identification over and above the out-group. But what's particular about social identity is that it comes with the desire to do down and denigrate the out-group. What hits the press about the Church is not very pretty, because we see liberals trying to do down conservatives and conservatives trying to do down liberals. So we have a lot of conflict in the Church today.

I have spelled out that we have these 'emerging' values. They are particularly post-modern values that are not going to emerge in a culture that is about survival. They are just *not*. This is the first time in history they have emerged. This is the first time in history we have been post-industrial, post-material, post-modern. So these values do spell conflict. We have to use all the methods of resolving conflict.

Conflict resolution

When Christians are in conflict have you noticed how very ugly we become? Research by Prof Ken Pargament (Kenneth I Pargament *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice*) helped me to be a bit more understanding as to why we as Christians find other Christians who conflict with our values so very difficult to deal with. Based on his empirical psychological research, coming to faith is like a discovery [at first]; then we come to a consolidation and conservation of that faith - this spiritual 'coping' – coping with the faith that I have – and if some kind of flack of violation or loss comes in, we are plunged into a spiritual struggle.

I think that in the Church today, this conflict over spiritual values is like a **desecration** of the sacred: a desecration of the sacred for the liberals and a desecration of the sacred for the conservatives. And that means we are in a spiritual trauma, which is attended with a high risk of the down-turn which can lead to spiritual disengagement. But spiritual trauma is also a fork in the road; a place where real transformation can occur. Because we know as Christians that real transformation only occurs through some kind of deep spiritual struggle, following the contours of a death and resurrection experience. I think we, as a Church, are right now in that kind of spiritual struggle and all sectors of the Church need to find how we can move towards growth, towards transformational spiritual coping.

So what predicts upward growth spiritual transformation following the desecration spiritual trauma that I believe the Western Church is in? Pargament's research shows that if there is a degree of support that a person receives in the process of their spiritual struggle, perhaps in the form of counselling, spiritual direction, or social support, people will move towards this transformed level and their faith is actually deepened. Probably all of us have gone through something like that and know what it's like: that 'dark night of the soul' when we're really struggling and maybe it was somebody who just loved us through it, or maybe it was just the felt presence of God that enabled us to get through. And I think we're in this place right now, and so one of the projects that I'm working on is to develop conflict transformation resources for the Church in time for the Lambeth Conference.

I want to move on to our second main philosophical question that is up for grabs Western

and symbols. That's when religious knowing is really rich and not rigid or defended. It's deep and rich and real. But the Global North Western culture is a place of extremes; so on the one hand we have charismatic Toronto blessings – all heart, no rationality – and on the other hand we have exclusive emphasis on 'the word', eschewing all emotion. What we lack in the West is the cultural endorsement of both kinds of knowing. These run concurrent in religious knowing, whether we like it or not; but when we consciously put them together they can enrich religious knowing in such a way to produce a totality that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is this kind of 'layered' knowing, an eclectic approach to Christian spirituality, is less prone to conflict between different perspectives of the divine. Rich, 'layered' religious knowing will help us deal with conflict over values.

It's no longer necessary – if we think that religious knowing really is this way – and that we should stop demoting the importance of 'heart', emotional, intuitive, experiential, imagistic knowing as a valid way of knowing truth – not the only way, but in dialogue with proposition it's a valid way – when we accept that actually fill up arguments and science and the philosophy of science as well – has put a dent in this high status of rationality. We now know there is no such thing as pure rationality. So it is no longer necessary for Christian thinkers to be impaled on the horns of a science versus religion dilemma. The growing science and religion dialogue reveals some of the conflicts between science and religion are in fact false dichotomies that only occur when either science or religion makes claims far beyond their particular sphere of expertise and their particular ways of knowing: that religious knowing should put them together. The point to make here is that the conflict over what kind of knowing has the most status has moved on in the world, but the Church is still fighting over conservative epistemologies versus liberal epistemologies (e.g. how we know things) as if we are still on the horns of this dilemma. It is no longer necessary. We are enabled by the likes of John Polkinghorne, Philip Clayton, Keith Ward, Alastair McGrath and others to see the openness of our emerging universe with new eyes and to re-envision the material with the presence of our God who is both transcendent and immanent. So both those models of world view – the networking relational one and the more hierarchical one have truths to tell.

Well, we in the North might envy the vibrancy, certainty and sheer volume of converts in the Global South – in Africa, Latin America, Asia. We're jealous and would love to have what they have, but of course we want to hang on to our own prosperity. It's doubtful that what is going to work in the South is going to work in the North. I think it's inevitable that new forms of church that are developing in the Global North may not be able to be managed within existing church structures. Let's be realistic. And I think that's why the wisdom of enabling a mixed economy of 'fresh expressions' of church which are going to happen outside the church, but keeping them in dialogue with the traditional church is really important. Some things are not going to be able to be laundered within the structures that we have. And when this laundering process is well under way and the emerging values that I talked about earlier and the 'heart' and 'head' was of knowing have been put back together and we've enabled the cross-talk, and those values and ways of knowing are being incarnated by the Church, I think we may Christians – in time – flooding back to these funny, strange, beautiful, traditional buildings – at the very least because they're going to need a rest! Doing Fresh Expressions is very exhausting work.

In conclusion. We are in uncharted territory. Moves are afoot – I've described them in terms of changing values which are post-material, post-modern and I've tried to describe very briefly changes in how we know things. Both of these factors underlie a lot of the tensions that are going on. Moving in that way, we can have confidence that we will move towards the magnet:



Christ before the High Priest (about 1617) by Gerrit van Honthorst, 1592 - 1656 [National Gallery]

We will move towards the Magnet, because we are being drawn by the Magnet who is Jesus Christ.

As traditional congregations continue to shrink – and they will – why not, in a sort of reverse psychology, expand the role of theological colleges, opening them to all adult Christians? My suggestion is to start putting resources into an Anglican Open University, possibly based in theological colleges, for life-long Christian development through distance learning, weekend seminars, and a whole host of relational settings; so that we can get that rich relational stuff going on, which is so at the heart of post-modern culture. And it is in this spirit of democratisation, of spiritual knowing and resources, that ‘from the least of them to the greatest, all shall come to know the LORD’.

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