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In Search of ‘Fresh Expressions of Believing’ for a Mission-shaped Church

Abstract

This article argues that the contemporary renewal of religious life requires that ‘fresh expressions of church’ must also and equally encourage ‘fresh expressions of believing’. The first part draws on the Schleiermacher tradition to lay out the groundwork for the kind of approach to theology that might allow such fresh expressions to begin to emerge: a theology founded in experience, shaped and formed relationally, and intrinsically reflective and critical. The second part of the article identifies some ecclesial models that could be hospitable to the nurture of fresh expressions of believing, and proposes resources drawing on traditions of *mysticism*, of *praxis*, and of *deconstruction*. Churches may form their identity around a mission to deepen and radicalise personal and corporate spirituality, collaborative social praxis for justice and neighbourhood renewal, or experimental postmodern styles of gathering, culturally eclectic but institutionally minimalist.

Keywords

Experiential theology, relationality, critical thinking, church renewal, spirituality, praxis, postmodernism

In Search of 'Fresh Expressions of Believing' for a Mission-shaped Church

Introduction

Writing about the development of 'pioneer mission' in the churches, Jonny Baker proposes that 'to pioneer in a new space and community will require an imaginative approach that is able to let go some of the old shape, structure, culture and, *dare I say, theology* in order to allow something new and indigenous to be born.'¹ This is an exception to the tendency, noted in the predecessor article to this one², for contemporary writers on the renewal and re-shaping of the churches specifically to exclude theological change from the process. In this article I want to lay out some of the groundwork for the kind of approach to theology that might allow what Baker dares to hope for to begin to emerge, and to identify some ecclesial models that could be hospitable to the nurturing of such a theology. I will begin with a personal story that brings the issue into focus.

Some time ago I attended a retreat for men. The participants welcomed the opportunity to meet within a context that opened up avenues for Christian believing and belonging that the institutional churches did not offer them. Many were on a quest to rediscover a faith they could own as personally authentic, rather than being stifled by dogma and tradition. One had moved to the fringes of the Christian tradition and no longer believed that organized Christianity in the West had any future. Another had sought inspiration from the Hindu Scriptures and prayers. Another had concluded that only the prayer of silent stillness had meaning, leaving a question mark over the concept of petitionary and intercessory prayer. There were clear signs of weariness with formulaic and dogmatic religion and a longing for a form of faith that somehow 'gets under

¹ Baker, J. and Ross, C. (eds) *The Pioneer Gift: Explorations in Mission* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2014), p. 9, emphasis mine.

² Williams, J. A. 'Ecclesial Reconstruction, Theological Conservation: the strange exclusion of critical theological reflection from popular strategies for the renewal of the Church in Britain', *Ecclesiology* 11 (2015), pp. 289-305.

the skin’ of formal ecclesiastical ways of talking about God.³ In this article I will argue that the kind of need articulated by these men can only be met if the way is open, alongside ‘fresh expressions of church’, also and equally to encourage ‘fresh expressions of believing’.

In the first main part of the article I endeavour to set out some characteristics of the ‘lived faith’ that needs to be circulating in the life-blood of a ‘mission shaped church’.⁴ I argue that such faith will be founded in experience, shaped and formed relationally, and intrinsically theologically reflective and critical. The first step towards elucidating the character of such a faith takes its cue from the seminal work of Schleiermacher. In the second part, I go on to propose several traditions of Christian theology and practice that embody this criticality in a way that could feed profitably into the quest for ‘fresh expressions of church’ sustained and enriched by ‘fresh expressions of believing’.

Towards a ‘lived faith’ for a contemporary church

The legacy of Schleiermacher

³ I use the illustration of the men’s retreat because it brought the issues into focus for me: I do not at all imply that the questions are relevant only to men.

⁴ Since the *Mission-shaped Church* report a series of volumes with the phrase ‘mission-shaped’ in the title have been published by Church House Publishing in London: P. Bayes and T. Sledge, *Mission-shaped Parish: Traditional Church in a Changing Context* (2006); S. Croft, ed. *Mission-shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today’s Church* (2008); S. Gaze, *Mission-shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside* (2011); S. Hollinghurst, *Mission-shaped Evangelism: the Church in Contemporary Culture*, (2011); S. Hope, *Mission-shaped Spirituality: the Transforming Power of Mission* (2011); T. Sudworth, *Mission-shaped Youth: Re-thinking Young People and Church* (2007); M. Withers, *Mission-shaped Children: Moving Towards a Child-Centred Church* (2010).

Schleiermacher's work continues to be foundational for the analysis of religious faith as something that is first and foremost *experienced* and *lived*.⁵ He was an early pioneer of the attempt to provide a descriptive analysis of that orientation of the heart and mind, the disposition of the whole person, that is called 'religious'. He argued that it was something *sui generis*, not merely a prop for the moral imperative, nor a putative source of information available only by revelation. As Schleiermacher is often mistakenly portrayed as the instigator of a disastrous turn to human subjectivity and 'mere feeling' as the basis of religion and the consequent emptying of theological doctrines of revelatory authority, it is in order here to set out briefly the positive significance of his legacy for a practical / experiential approach to theology.

In *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799), Schleiermacher sought to convince the sceptics that their rejection of religion was due to a case of mistaken identity: 'doctrines are not the essence of religion but simply the result of reflection on religious feeling.'⁶ For Schleiermacher, theology is 'systematic reflection on the piety of a particular religious community and how it is expressed.'⁷ Christianity is 'an orientation of the human heart', and rightly to identify it requires 'the perception and maintenance of a particular mode of faith (*Glaubensweise*).'⁸ Adopting this methodology, we find that religious faith is essentially about neither what we can *know*, nor what we ought to *do* (here he parts company with Kant, who grounded religious faith principally in the moral sense as a datum of practical reason), but about

⁵ Schleiermacher's concern was fundamentally with the practice of 'piety' (*Frömmigkeit*), a word somewhat tainted in English by association with an over-emphasis on the inner life and a tendency to sentimentality, but better understood as referring to the complex of acts, habits, rituals, practices and expressions by which the inward disposition of faith is *observable*: a tradition that bears fruit in ethnographic work such as that of Meredith McGuire in *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶ B. A. Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1984), p. 13.

⁷ R. Muers and M. Higton, *Modern Theology: a Critical Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 67.

⁸ S. Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1984), pp. 84, 86.

feeling (Gefühl). This however is not mere ‘emotion’, a kind of Romantic effusion of private subjectivity, notwithstanding Schleiermacher’s declared affinity with the Romantic movement. It is much closer to what the twentieth century came to call ‘intuition’: ‘what is known intuitively is grasped “all at once” rather than being achieved through reasoning.’⁹ When we use religious language, we are trying to put this ‘immediate perception’ into words: ‘one has to communicate one’s religious feeling in order to communicate religion.’¹⁰ For Schleiermacher, religious faith operates from a pre-linguistic moment or event of perception, or ‘existential awareness’, an event in which ‘the relation between the individual and the totality (the intimate closeness and yet definite separation...) is immediately (i.e. in an unmediated way) disclosed.’¹¹ The distinctive ‘feeling’ or mode of awareness characteristic of piety was later summarized by Schleiermacher in *The Christian Faith* (1821 and 1830) as ‘a sense of absolute dependence’.

For Schleiermacher the sense of an ultimate state of being totally, unconditionally dependent means that at the heart of all things, our being is not necessary but contingent, not self-contained and self-explanatory but incomplete and questionable, not self-possessed and self-sufficient but needing the ‘other’ for its wholeness. This underlying universal experience, however, never occurs ‘neat’, so to speak, but is invariably mediated through a particular religious tradition; and in the case of Christianity, what makes it distinctive (its *Glaubensweise*) is that ‘everything in it is related to the redemption effected by Jesus of Nazareth.’¹² It is noteworthy that Schleiermacher’s mark of Christian distinctiveness is itself the aspect of Christian doctrine that can most readily be interpreted through the medium of *experience*, i.e. Christianity is fundamentally about ‘being redeemed’: its essence is soteriological. It is beyond the scope of this article to enter the debate about Schleiermacher’s claim to have identified a

⁹ Muers and Higton, *Modern Theology*, p. 64.

¹⁰ A. Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 92.

¹¹ Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 138.

¹² cit. Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church*, p. 25.

‘universal’, or to pursue a critique of how Schleiermacher worked out his theory in the structure of his systematic theology. The key point here is to acknowledge how Schleiermacher introduced into Christian theology the principle of the priority of experience, and hence opened the door to practical theology, since experience is manifested in the observable habits and practices of piety. The heart of the matter is *faithful practice as personal and relational*.

Some characteristics of personal / relational faith

Robin Gill adopts an approach influenced by the Schleiermacher tradition in his advocacy of theology as a social system. At its heart lies a *relational experience* which is not of itself reducible to words: whereas propositional knowledge has ‘an important function in establishing and reinforcing religious identity and differentiation ... it is a theological error to confuse such propositional knowledge with the theistic relationship itself’, and therefore ‘an understanding of Christian faith which is relational, rather than propositional, need no longer feel intimidated by social and cultural relativism.’¹³ To illustrate the point autobiographically: the time of most palpable spiritual growth within a congregation where I once ministered was over a period when, one by one, several prominent church members became seriously ill and a number died. At one point as many as fifteen members of the church could be found in the local hospital on the same afternoon, as in-patients, out-patients or visitors at the bedside. People met to pray, to weep and to agonize over what was going on: where was God in all this? The point is that wherever people come together in a profound shared experience, something is generated and affirmed that transcends the very real differences of viewpoint, opinion and preference that those individuals might otherwise display. In philosophical terms it is to say that God is apprehended in inter-

¹³ R. Gill, *Competing Convictions* (London: SCM Press, 1989), p. 12. Material has been revised and updated by Gill in *Theology Shaped by Society* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) as part of his trilogy on ‘sociological theology’.

subjectivity. To put it another way, the locus of transcendence is in the ‘overplus’ of interpersonal relations, where something arises that is more than the sum of the parts.

One Christian tradition that yields valuable insights here is Pentecostalism, which represents within the spectrum of Christian practice a peculiarly localized and communal expression of the relational presence of God. For Pentecostals ‘unity in the Spirit’ is worked out at the level of fellowship experience, including the corporateness of worship, more fundamentally than by way of doctrinal accord. Although Pentecostal churches are often assumed to be doctrinally strict and exclusive, the test of commonality of experience and fellowship ‘in the Spirit’ ranks higher than doctrinal inquisition: as Harvey Cox notes, for Pentecostals, the priority of experience ‘shatters the cognitive packaging’.¹⁴ In Peter Hocken’s words, ‘the fellowship experienced between the participants has not been primarily kinship of ideas, but knowledge of lives being touched by God in the same way.’¹⁵ David Martin observes the ‘hybrid character of Pentecostalism’, combining a highly recognizable core set of beliefs and practices with ‘an amazing capacity to become indigenous, and adapt to local cultures’.¹⁶ For Pentecostals, where the creative energies are flowing among and between the members of the Body of Christ, there is a touchstone for the authenticity of faith that is not primarily governed by formal doctrinal expression.

It remains to spell out what has already been implicit, namely that experiential / relational faith will also be critical / reflective faith. Because faith is at bottom an affair of the heart, an orientation of life, a fundamental commitment, there must be a certain open-endedness about it, simply because human life is contingent and not bounded as a closed system. This means that it is not possible, with authenticity and integrity, to hold that what we *believe*, in formal

¹⁴ H. Cox, *Fire from Heaven* (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 71.

¹⁵ P. Hocken, *Streams of Renewal* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1986), p. 178.

¹⁶ D. Martin, *The Future of Christianity: Reflections on Violence and Democracy, Religion and Secularization* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 69.

propositional terms, will not change. To expect to bring all life's experience and the learnings to be drawn from it into conformity with a predetermined package of beliefs is a recipe for alienation and bad faith. All this requires of the church the practice of critical theological reflection. This excludes two extreme positions: on the 'right wing', a kind of fundamentalism that rules out reflection on the contents of faith, and on the 'left', a relativism that provides no anchor for the reflection.¹⁷ Ruling out these extremes leaves two positions in healthy and creative tension. On one side, there will be varieties of practice based upon a principle of extensivity, breadth and plurality (as commended for example in the work of Martyn Percy¹⁸), for which any danger of over-indulgence in cultural accommodation will need to be countered by regularly seeking out the original animus within the foundation materials of tradition. Toward the other end of the spectrum, there will be varieties of radicalism based upon a principle of intensification, of going back to the roots (for example in John Milbank¹⁹ and Stanley Hauerwas²⁰), for which the dangers of a sectarian spirit will need to be countered by a constant dialogue with changing and complex social and cultural realities.

What then might be the resources for 'fresh expressions of believing' that would facilitate this kind of critical and public practice? What is certain is that a 'fresh expression of church' that

¹⁷ This position reflects the Aristotelian view that virtue resides in the mean between two extremes: a position commended in the Pietist tradition by which Schleiermacher was greatly influenced; see R. J. VanArragon, 'Intellectual Virtue and the Adventurous Christ Follower', in C. Geertz, ed. *The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education: Forming Whole and Holy Persons* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2015), pp. 167-178.

¹⁸ M. Percy, *The Ecclesial Canopy: Faith, Hope, Charity* (Farnham, Ashgate: 2012); *Anglicanism: Confidence, Commitment and Communion* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

¹⁹ J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006); *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

²⁰ S. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics and Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

operates solely at the level of the offer of easier accessibility and a more enjoyable experience, and socializes only into a largely unquestioning traditional mindset of belief, will fall short. However, there is no shortage of theological provision for doing better than that, and in the next section I will present resources drawing on traditions of *mysticism*, of *praxis*, and of *deconstruction*, together with a final example from the Society of Friends.

Critical resources for fresh expressions of believing

Monastic Church: Traditions of Mysticism

The first ecclesiological model that could be hospitable to the cultivation of fresh expressions of believing is the church that is fashioned around the quest for a deeper spirituality, underpinned by a mystical theology. Mark McIntosh²¹ has drawn on Aquinas to argue that the very process of doing theology is the experience of being taught by God about God, as our ‘thinking about God’ turns out to be ‘God thinking in us’. For McIntosh it is crucial that ‘Christian communities themselves believe that theology comes to birth because of their ongoing encounter with God.’²² This is precisely about the character, the virtues and performances, that are shaped and nurtured over time through the lived study of theology that is, at bottom, a species of *encounter* with the ‘object’ of study that can only ever be the active ‘subject’. To put it another way, in theology the encounter with divine being elicits the kind of response that reveals the authentic character of the person of faith as necessarily *critical* being, because no questions are ever foreclosed, the fund of truth is never exhausted, and competence in Christian practices is never fully achieved.

In an earlier work, McIntosh alleges that far from promoting this kind of mystical-critical, theological engagement, the contemporary ‘turn from religion to spirituality’ often issues

²¹ M. McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: an Introduction to Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

²² McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, p. 13.

in a ‘pseudo-spirituality that deals in escape, in avoidance of the reality of the other’.²³ As an alternative to the focus on somewhat inward-looking, therapeutic and consumerist-oriented spiritual practices emerging in what Heelas and Woodhead termed the ‘holistic milieu’, a ‘monastic’ church will embrace a ‘mystical’ theology that rejects the damaging divide between spirituality as the (theologically weak) subject of personal, devotional exploration and formal theology perceived as irrelevant to the life of faith.²⁴ In a perceptive study of the potential of contemporary literary texts as a resource for a postmodern form of mysticism, Sue Yore makes a case for the creative capacity of a mystical theology. Mysticism is not ‘an extraordinary or ineffable experience available to a few lucky individuals’, but ‘a radical engagement with the Other, whether it be God, the natural world or other living beings.’²⁵ The modern Christian tradition has promoted a privatized spirituality that seals people into a safe capsule where they can contemplate their inner life in a manner detached from the concrete challenges of societal injustice. By contrast, Yore seeks an alternative portrayal of mysticism in the work of Grace

²³ M. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 5. The present cultural preference for ‘spirituality’ over ‘religion’ has been widely researched and documented and cannot be addressed in detail here. The best known piece of research is the ‘Kendal Project’ documented in P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004). A sharp critique of the ‘spirituality industry’ may be found in J. Carrette and R. King, *Selling Spirituality: the silent takeover of religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005). For a comprehensive account with a much more positive evaluation of the new spiritual movements, see P. Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

²⁴ On the divide between spirituality and theology, see T. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1972); M. Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997); P. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (London: SPCK, 1999).

²⁵ S. Yore, *The Mystic Way in Postmodernity* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 35.

Jantzen, for whom a contemporary mysticism ‘needs to offer visions to enable human flourishing ... to think independently from accepted cultural, academic and religious norms’.²⁶

What are the prospects for such a development of mysticism in the churches? On a spring holiday break I visited a historic Christian site with a spectacular medieval abbey church. Occupying the central expanse of the nave, cleared of all seating, a labyrinth was laid out on the stone floor. People were slowly, prayerfully walking, and pausing at a variety of stations along the way to light candles, gaze at icons, meditate on flowers, or read from their bibles. Around the perimeter there were some benches, where three men were sitting, two of them with their arms around the shoulders of the third, clearly engaging in some form of ministry of prayer, counselling or comfort. At the west end a small café was open for business, with comfortable armchairs and sofas for people to rest in with their coffee. In the north aisle and transept were a bookstall with popular theology and spirituality works and a separate shop with free trade goods and charity products, together with an outlet for spiritual artefacts of various kinds, jewellery, cards, candles, CDs. I felt I had glimpsed one possible future for the church: but was its engagement with contemporary spiritual eclecticism enough?²⁷

Gordon Lynch has sought to identify a stream of ‘progressive spirituality’ that represents an attempt from the sociological side to hold out the prospect of a publicly engaged, theologically astute and critical spirituality capable of bringing new expressions of church to birth within the residual frameworks of the old.²⁸ Progressive spirituality is neither a world-view

²⁶ Yore, *The Mystic Way in Postmodernity*, p. 66.

²⁷ Within the fresh expressions movement, the ‘new monasticism’ most persuasively brings to birth this type of new church: see G. Cray, I. Mobsby and A. Kennedy (eds) *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2010); I. Mobsby and M. Berry (eds) *A New Monastic Handbook: From Vision to Practice* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2014).

²⁸ G. Lynch, *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-first Century* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 2007).

in itself, nor a co-ordinated movement, but identifiable in a loosely networked collection of groups, organizations and campaigns operating within or on the margins of conventional religious bodies. It is underpinned by a cluster of theological commitments including ‘the unity of the ineffable and immanent divine’, ‘pan(en)theism’, ‘mysticism and the divine feminine’, ‘sacralization of nature and of the self’, and a broadly inclusive or syncretistic approach to the relationship between religions.²⁹ People involved in these movements are often politically left of centre and committed to green issues, and theologically open and exploratory; they typically find more in common with each other *across* theological, denominational and religious divides than with their own co-religionists, so that progressive spirituality has an authentically ecumenical spirit.³⁰ A church that embraces and encourages such movements can contribute to the articulation of ‘fresh expressions of believing’.

Political Church: Traditions of Praxis

The second ecclesiological model for the nurture of fresh expressions of believing is the church that is formed principally through its engagement in social action in the world. The most challenging theological riposte to *Mission-Shaped Church* came from John Hull, who alleged that the advocates of ‘mission-shaped church’ were in fact recommending a ‘church-shaped mission’, largely oriented to getting more people into church.³¹ In his essay in *Mission-shaped Questions*, Hull advances a theological argument based on the claim that with regard to God and humanity, the gospel obliterates the distinction between vertical and horizontal. Transcendence is

²⁹ Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, chapter 2.

³⁰ Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, p. 21.

³¹ J. Hull, *Mission-shaped Church: a Theological Response* (London: SCM Press, 2006). Hull offered his own more detailed constructive account of mission in his final book, *Towards the Prophetic Church: a Study in Christian Mission* (SCM Press, 2014).

no longer construed in terms of a kind of relationship to God that depends on a sharp distinction between two worlds, earthly and heavenly, secular and sacred, the here and now and the beyond, but rather a single, inclusive, mutual and interpersonal relationality in which the experience of God is mediated to us. The stimulus for mission is that ‘we are confronted by absolute otherness, by the presence of the other person, the fellow human being, whose need places upon me an unqualified demand such that in that demand I find myself in the presence of God.’³² Hull’s ‘horizontal transcendence’ exemplifies a significant trend towards ecclesiological models rooted in missional practice, most commonly cited via David Bosch’s classic text on the *missio dei*.³³

Writing from within the fresh expressions movement, Michael Moynagh works this approach through in terms of the church ‘giving itself in mission’ by engaging with the world for the ends of God’s Kingdom.³⁴ He draws for his interpretation of the *missio dei* on the work of Karl Rahner who ‘famously declared that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity’³⁵, and on Karl Barth’s doctrine that ‘mission is the whole of God, in the sense that all the divine attributes have a missionary purpose. Mission is God’s self-giving for the sake of humanity.’³⁶ This is important for Moynagh because ‘any view that sees the divine missions as a consequence or outward expression of the immanent Trinity makes these missions a second step for God.’³⁷ In this ‘second step’ view, the church mirrors the immanent / economic distinction by being constituted *intrinsically* in gathering for worship, and *only then* dispersing for mission in the world. Moynagh counters this by insisting that worship is seen as symbolizing and enacting this

³² Croft ed. *Mission-shaped Questions*, p. 115.

³³ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).

³⁴ M. Moynagh with P. Harrold, *Church for Every Context: an Introduction to Theology and Practice*, (London: SCM Press, 2012), chapter 6.

³⁵ Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, p. 123.

³⁶ Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, pp. 124-5.

³⁷ Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, p. 122.

fundamental character of self-giving rather than being something the church does ‘internally’ before going out to engage in mission ‘externally’. Two vital concepts, inculturation and partnership, create the drive towards fresh expressions of believing inherent in this model.

On inculturation, James Heard argues that the contextual evolution of the Christian faith ‘challenges the notion of a “pure” Gospel that is effectively *a*-cultural and *trans*-cultural, which only risks dilution by being radically contextualized or shaped for a particular agenda.’³⁸ He points out that alternatives to those colonial missionary methods that set out to obliterate local cultures and impose the values and practices of western Christendom can be traced at least as far back as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with some missionaries adopting certain indigenous customs and being prepared to tolerate others. In perhaps the most influential modern text on inculturation, Vincent Donovan’s missionary experience led him to a prolonged process of listening and engagement that convinced him of the authenticity of the Masai people’s knowledge of God and the wisdom that western Christians might learn from them.³⁹

However, Heard’s point is that what was even more significant was Donovan’s application of the same methods to his own American culture on his return, and this is surely the lesson for contemporary mission. For example, the discipline of congregational studies challenges churches to conduct searching and critical analyses of their own cultural habits and practices, as well as of the communities that surround them.⁴⁰ Inculturation flows from an incarnational theology, and this demands proper attentiveness to context: as Nicholas Healy

³⁸ J. Heard, ‘Inculturation’ in J. Gittoes, B. Green, B. and J. Heard (eds), *Generous Ecclesiology: Church, World and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM Press, 2013), p. 63.

³⁹ V. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003, originally published 1978).

⁴⁰ See for example the methodologies set out in H. Cameron, P. Richter and D. Davies (eds), *Studying Local Churches: a Handbook* (London: SCM Press, 2011); the case studies in M. Guest, K. Tusting and L. Woodhead (eds) *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); and the discussion in relation to mission in J. A. Williams, ‘Congregational Studies as Resource and Critique for a Mission Shaped Church’, *Anvil*, Vol. 26, no. 3, 2009.

writes, Christians ‘sift through the resources of the various cultures and subcultures in which their members live, rejecting certain possibilities, modifying, privileging or down-playing others so as to make them serve the tasks of witness and discipleship.’⁴¹ To achieve inculturation in mission, churches need to gain a greater understanding of this ‘experimenting’ and ‘sifting’, in relation both to their own cultural configurations and to those of the surrounding world.

A further implication for a church shaped by traditions of missional praxis is that always and everywhere mission involves *partnership*. Standing points out that to answer the question ‘whose mission is it anyway?’ with the affirmation of *missio dei*, that it is God’s, ‘is only the beginning of asking the question of whose mission it is’.⁴² With whom do churches work? On what basis? What theological and practical challenges are raised by the choices churches make and the commitments they enter into? The particular form of partnership focused on by Standing is that between churches and secular agencies, for which he offers an extended case study example of the Street Pastors team in Plumstead, south-east London. He outlines three possible approaches to such partnerships. The first places the priority on Christian distinctiveness articulated in a kind of ‘charter’ of core theological values that will underpin any missional engagement with other institutions and social contexts: ‘it is most important that as we collaborate with other agencies we do not lose sight of Jesus, the motive of our mission.’⁴³ The second approach reflects a more positive view of the capacity of ‘secular’ institutions to welcome contributions from a spiritual perspective: there is a ‘soft secularism’ that is not aggressively anti-religion, and remains hospitable to Christian influence and insight offered with due humility in a manner that moves away from the assertiveness and desire for ‘control’ that characterized the earlier ‘Christendom’ mode. This is broadly in line with the recommendations

⁴¹ N. M. Healy, *Church, World and Christian Life* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 181.

⁴² R. Standing (ed.) *As a Fire by Burning: Mission as the Life of the Local Congregation* (London: SCM Press, 2013), p. 245.

⁴³ Standing, *As a Fire by Burning*, p. 250.

of Ann Morisy, who writes of the mutual benefit of Christians and non-Christians working on projects alongside one another in ‘venturesome love’.⁴⁴

The third possibility, however, is to dispense with partnership as a concept altogether, on the basis that Christians acting in service and care for their communities and in pursuit of justice and peace, are *ipso facto* engaging in the *missio dei*, raising the question, ‘how important is a Christian “badge” on any missional partnership?’⁴⁵ The Street Pastors case study offers evidence for reflection on these varying levels of Christian distinctiveness in the character of partnerships as mission. Such partnerships need to be open to the expectation that they will be a profoundly formative learning experience for all parties; understood pneumatologically, this is entirely what we should expect because the Spirit is the networker, breaker of barriers and midwife of the new. Churches that forge their identity in relation to collaborative social praxis in response to the needs of a particular cultural environment readily find themselves addressing profound theological issues of soteriology and missiology that would otherwise either remain unexamined, or be the subject of little more than partisan theoretical debate.⁴⁶

Anti-Church: Traditions of Deconstruction

The third ecclesiological model generative of fresh expressions of believing represents a kind of deconstruction of inherited models. For this approach I want to draw on the work of John

⁴⁴ A. Morisy, *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission* (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁴⁵ Standing, *As a Fire by Burning*, p. 251.

⁴⁶ For example, in evangelical circles the doctrine of hell has been a theological ‘hot potato’ in recent times because of the publication by megachurch pastor Rob Bell of *Love Wins*, a work that challenged traditional conservative evangelical views of who can be saved, and of the eternal destiny of the ‘unredeemed’ and of non-Christians. The tenor of this debate appears extraordinarily abstract when engaged in on the level of ‘sound versus unsound doctrine’, whereas community churches engaged in community projects rapidly find their theology challenged by the experience of working alongside others for the common good.

Caputo, particularly in his *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*⁴⁷ Engaging with the thinking of Jacques Derrida, Caputo sets out to deconstruct elements of Christian belief. The technique of deconstruction operates with the notion that language does not work by assembling building blocks of fixed units of meaning, but is an altogether more subtle, flexible and fluid medium in which meanings are strongly contextual and often contested. Caputo says, ‘Deconstruction does not “destroy” something but loosens it up, opening it up to invention, novelty and innovation, not absolute novelty, but the novelty that comes from innovating on the existing system.’⁴⁸ The point is well illustrated by applying Maurice Blanchot’s untranslatable French pun, *le pas au-delà* to the domain of transcendence with which religion has to do.⁴⁹ The phrase literally means ‘the step beyond’ (or perhaps in English idiom, ‘one step beyond’); but in French, since the word *pas* means not only ‘a step’ but also ‘not’, the phrase can also mean, ‘the not beyond’.⁵⁰ This ‘step beyond’ that is also ‘the “not” beyond’ is characteristic of *personal* forms of knowledge: it is not possible to know another person exhaustively, but rather the closer the relationship, the more the awareness of how much is not known. All the more therefore is this the case with God; theology is about God, and God is never finally known. Theological language does not merely state what is the case, it summons the hearer to participate in the acts of faith that will usher the things signified into being. It is the ‘affirmation of the impossible’; to enter language in the cause of theology is to step defiantly into the radical uncertainty of existence in the pursuit of a vision of what might be.

⁴⁷ J. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Post-modernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

⁴⁸ Caputo, *What would Jesus Deconstruct?* p. 144.

⁴⁹ Blanchot, M. *Le Pas Au-Delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

⁵⁰ A similar move is made by postmodern Ulster theologian Peter Rollins in the title of his book, *How (Not) to Believe in God* (London: SPCK, 2006).

I have here used the term *anti-church* to denote the post-modern ecclesiality Caputo represents and commends. He illustrates his deconstructive church from the *Diary of a City Priest* by Catholic priest John McNamee who ministers in a run-down ghetto area of Philadelphia. The situation is repeatedly described as ‘impossible’: both the neighbourhood itself and the condition of McNamee’s life within it. Ministry there is almost devoid of the trappings of ‘conventional’ church, even down to the absence of any viable Catholic congregation. McNamee sees a grotesque disconnect between much of what ‘church’ means as traditionally understood, and what actually goes on in his parish. There is the ‘big Church’ or the ‘bureaucratic Church, the hierarchy’; and there is his ‘working church’, making it up as it goes along, managing crises, picking up life’s rejects, enduring perpetual disappointment, confronting institutional inertia, salvaging urban wreckage. Caputo says that this gives a special priority to the Feast of St Thomas the Doubter: ‘in a situation like this, faith is impossible, *the* impossible: one is called on to have faith in a world in which it is impossible to believe anything.’⁵¹ In this context a surplus of ‘official theology’ would be a burden too far; but amidst the ever-present reality of doubt there are moments of profound love; there is a moral passion that generates awe; he sees it in the devotion of a little Irish nun in the slums, ‘the unspeakable, unintelligible cruelty of existence along with some pulsating event of love and mercy... What must be believed cannot be believed- that is the mystery we call God’. In this church, the typical prayer is that of the dying Jesus: *eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani*: ‘a perfectly auto-deconstructing prayer: it is addressed to God- which presupposes our faith that we are not abandoned- and asks why God has abandoned us.’⁵²

An alternative approach to a postmodern ecclesiality is presented by Ulster experimental church leader and theologian Peter Rollins. According to the biographical detail at the front of his *How (Not) to Speak of God*, the Ikon community he convenes in Belfast describes itself as ‘apocalyptic, heretical, emerging and failing’. He depicts what he calls ‘the long Christian

⁵¹ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* p. 121.

⁵² Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* p. 123.

tradition of forming spaces' for gatherings that 'operate on the fringes of religious life': 'anarchic experiments in theodrama that re-imagine the distinction between Christian and non-Christian, priest and prophet, doubt and certainty, the sacred and the secular', multi-media experiences that 'provide a place that is open to all, is colonized by none, and that celebrates diversity.'⁵³ This is not so much 'a church' as an experiment in 'ecclesiality'; it is 'church' deconstructed into a never-twice-alike 'Happening'.⁵⁴ As Caputo puts it, 'an institution modelled *after* deconstruction would be auto-deconstructive, self-correcting, removed as far as possible from the power games and rigid inflexibility of institutional life ... near but not all the way to anarchy, some point of creative "chaosmos".'⁵⁵

In the two passages just quoted, Rollins and Caputo both introduce the concept of 'anarchy' in relation to church. Given the profound reliance of classical Christian theology in its Johannine form on the notion of the *apxḥ*, the fundamental source and origin, the basic underlying truth principle indwelling all things, the denial of *apxḥ* enacted in the assertion of *anarchy* may appear to be anathema. Christian faith is treated as the guarantor of the orderliness and rationality of the creation: *cosmos* not *chaos*; and the church is surely called to reflect this. But *chaosmos* of course is a typically postmodern piece of word-play that insists on putting the opposites together; and arguably, it is a word-play that captures something important about the church. The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) despised Christianity as the most absolute manifestation of religion as *apxḥ* in the sense of 'rule, governance, authority', keeping people in dependent infancy through the assertion of Lordship.⁵⁶ However, traditions of Christian anarchism grew up alongside the atheistic movements, most notably perhaps in the work of Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). Christian anarchism sees in the teachings of Jesus the seeds of

⁵³ P. Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal* (London: SPCK, 2008), p. 176.

⁵⁴ Rollins, *Fidelity of Betrayal*, p. 184.

⁵⁵ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* p. 137.

⁵⁶ D. Guérin, (ed.) *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005).

an anarchist stance in the Christian faith, that is, a rejection of all earthly governments in favour of the radical new order of the Kingdom of God.⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, Christian anarchism largely rejected the church as an authoritarian corruption of the original message of Jesus. Jacques Ellul writes that ‘for Christian anarchists, the goal of anarchy is “theonomy”, the rule, the ordering, the *αρχή* of God.’⁵⁸ In the emerging postmodern environment, however, the conditions are more hospitable to a new *rapprochement* between anarchism and the church, but only with the proviso of the denial of all forms of co-option of the church into the institutions of the state, and also the rejection by the church of all pretence to the reproduction of such institutional mechanisms in its own life.

And yet for all this, McNamee’s is ‘inherited church’: a Catholic parish, albeit one that rational calculation would provide the church authorities with absolutely no reason not to close down. By contrast, Peter Rollins’ Ikon Community is far more self-consciously a radical experiment in postmodernity: its multi-media, avant-garde liturgical / ritual happenings (a type of performance art) are designed to subvert all attempts to subsume Ikon within the category of ecclesiality understood as institution, guardian of orthodoxy, moral authority or ministerial order. But it creates *intentionally* (and some might say, occasionally a little pretentiously) what McNamee comes to by the sheer force of what *happens* to him: the realization that it is a false theology that purports to know the truth in advance of its testing even to destruction in the onslaughts of life. Ikon believes it is in the interests of the cause of Jesus that we must be disabused of our notions of church in order to be able to see what Jesus’ proclamation of the

⁵⁷ A. Christoyannopoulos, *Christian Anarchism: a Political Commentary on the Gospel* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010).

⁵⁸ J. Ellul, *Anarchism and Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011), p. 78.

Kingdom means: a deconstruction that does not ruin and destroy but strips back to the original foundations.⁵⁹

It would be entirely within the spirit of the postmodern to treat these and other blueprints for an emerging, progressive or radical church eclectically and to co-opt the elements in any of them that seem attractive or potentially fruitful. This in essence is what Doug Gay attempts in his considered and thoughtful proposal that seeks to unite perspectives.⁶⁰ The ‘remix’ is a familiar part of today’s popular music culture, creating new versions of familiar songs and tunes by importing samples and segments from other works, changing the order in which elements appear, adding alternative beats and rhythms, repeating certain passages and reducing others to only a word, a phrase or a few bars. For Gay, ‘remixing’ is the fifth and final stage of a hermeneutical spiral that begins with ‘auditing’, taking stock of where we are now as church, our strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and challenges. The next step is ‘retrieving’, scouring the inherited traditions to see what we need to rediscover from times past to help resource contemporary renewal. This requires ‘unbundling’, the complex process by which we attempt to disentangle what we actually need from the ecclesiastical paraphernalia with which it has become bound up over time. We then add new contributions drawn from a wide range of cultural sources in an act of ‘supplementing’; and finally, in what Gay calls ‘bringing it all back home’, a distinctive ‘remixing’ of church takes place. In a sense, this is ‘anti-church’ brought within a creative, critical and reflective framework that contains (limits) the flight to the extreme and co-opts diversity to the cause of a new, post-denominational type of ‘born-again ecumenism’.⁶¹

⁵⁹ This approach is developed in Rollins’ subsequent work *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (London: SPCK, 2008), which argues for the necessity of the ‘betrayal’ or ‘giving up’ of inherited faith by the church as a condition of its renewal and of the authenticity of faith for the present time.

⁶⁰ D. Gay, *Re-mixing the Church: Towards an Emerging Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

⁶¹ Gay, *Remixing the Church*, p. 107.

Conclusion

As one specific example of a long-established tradition that also holds out for many the hope of a 'fresh expression of believing', Quakerism offers its own distinctive model of faith that can be comfortable with a critical spirit. Crucially, it locates the centre of faith in a nexus between an experience of the heart and a commitment to practice: 'Quakerism is a way of life, rather than a dogma or creed. It rests on a conviction that by looking into their inmost hearts people can have direct communion with their Creator. This experience cannot ultimately be described in words, but Quakers base their whole lives on it.' This is not just an individualistic faith, however: 'belonging to the worshipping group exerts a gentle discipline which Friends gladly accept.'⁶² The practice of 'seeking together after truth' means that 'Friends have always questioned anything they were told to believe! ... all individuals have to find their own way to religious truth, being aware of God in their own lives, learning from the wisdom of the past... and comparing their experiences with others in the Meeting.'⁶³

I have drawn on Quakerism in concluding because it combines elements of all three of the traditions I have suggested as potentially fruitful resources for fresh expressions of believing. Quakers draw on a variety of *mysticism* that locates faith in the 'inner light' and the expectation of the Spirit in the Meeting. They are committed to social *praxis* as a central articulation of faith that demands critical theological reflection. They represent a kind of *deconstructive* tradition within historic Christianity with their rejection of dogma and minimalistic attitude to ecclesial structures and rituals.⁶⁴ I suspect that many of the men on the retreat I mentioned at the

⁶² Religious Society of Friends, *The Quaker Way* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1985).

⁶³ Religious Society of Friends in Britain, *Your Guide to the Quakers* (London: Outreach Committee, Quaker Life, 2000).

⁶⁴ This brief characterization of contemporary Quakerism leaves out the considerable complexity of the historical development of Quaker theology from its origins to the present broadly 'liberal' standpoint: see in detail Pink

beginning would be far more likely to find a permanent spiritual home among the Quakers than in any of the denominational churches, even in the most adventurous of fresh expressions.

Historically, however, the Society of Friends could not be accommodated within an existing denominational church. It is entirely likely that many fresh expressions begun by Anglican, Methodist and other mainstream churches may eventually want to cut loose of the apron strings and become independent, leaving the traditional parent church to sink or swim.⁶⁵

I have proposed that, on the basis of an experiential and relational approach to theology rooted in contextual Christian practice, certain models for the church hold out the hope of fresh growth that also enshrines critical theological exploration. Churches may form their identity around a mission to deepen and radicalise personal and corporate spirituality, engage in collaborative social praxis for justice and neighbourhood renewal, or experiment with postmodern styles of culturally eclectic but institutionally minimalist gathering, following Jesus ‘outside the camp’.⁶⁶ We do not know where the proliferation of fresh expressions of church will lead, but we do know that new ecclesial communities are being formed under cultural conditions that have not prevailed before. It would be curious indeed if the churches thought that the future of the ‘mixed economy’ could possibly be a stable settlement of the juxtaposition of old and new. One thing that *must* happen if that is not to become a source of regret and recrimination is

Dandelion, *An Introduction to Quakerism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially chapter 3 on ‘Quakerism in the Twentieth Century’.

⁶⁵ See B. Keith, ‘To pluck up and to pull down, to build and to plant’, in Baker and Ross (eds), *The Pioneer Gift*: ‘As pioneers engaged with the mission context, new experiences conflicted with existing ideas and beliefs... growth followed, often developing from a deepened awareness of contextual and missional practice, *experimentation in belief* [emphasis mine] and practice, and modified understandings of church’ (pp. 129-130). Keith concludes from her research that fresh expressions were better able to handle these tensions the greater the space for independent development they were permitted, outside the constraints of the ‘parent’ denomination.

⁶⁶ Hebrews 13 v. 13.

that the very real necessity of fresh expressions of believing is acknowledged, explored and endorsed by the sponsoring churches.