

'The Changing face of Christianity in the 21st Century'

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Liquid Faith: looking for anchorages in 21st century cultures

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There are just a few things to note before I get into this paper proper. Firstly, I am a practitioner, as an ordained priest in the Church of England within extensive experience in the evangelical sub-culture. Secondly, that I am a practical theologian who is interested in sociology rather than a sociologist who specialises in religion. So I approach the writing of this paper with an impressionistic background gained through participation and an enthusiasm for academic rigour both in theology and sociology. Thirdly, my experience and research interests are focused on evangelicals, this is reflected in my examples and sources. All that said, lets get to the point...

Centred around his own experience of 'moving on from Evangelical faith', Gordon Lynch writes reflectively and pastorally, but with some key sociological insights into the way evangelical communities operate. Lynch captures the discourse that underlies "all that goes on in most Evangelical churches" and offers a simplified version. [Lynch, 2003: 11]

...what we have here is a way of talking about the world that begins with God, or Jesus, and the way that God has acted towards me. God, the source of all goodness, loves me and through an undeserved act of grace He has chosen (through Christ's death) to save and redeem me from sin, death and hell. An appropriate response from me is one of love to God, in which I seek to lead an obedient life of service and discipleship that expresses my gratitude for the things that God has done for me. [Lynch, 2003: 10]

Lynch does highlight some benefits one can find within this discourse, but he is more concerned about the 'down-sides' that it supports: "hierarchical and patriarchal structures, a dependence on 'approved' Evangelical sources for finding out the truth about life, and a pressure to conform to certain standards of behaviour whether or not these are really essential to a morally and spiritually healthy life." [Lynch, 2003: 13]

Moving on from containment within such a discourse is, in the end, enabled by globalisation. People start raising questions about the evangelical community and its assumptions "when they have some kind of encounter with someone or some kind of experience that challenges" it. [Lynch, 2003: 16] Lynch suggests these encounters or experiences are of two kinds: those

that challenge the goodness of God and those that question the received practice of Christian lifestyle and discipleship.

These two *kinds* are essentially what we are used to tracking in order to maintain aspects of the sociological picture of Christianity: beliefs about God, or 'in God' and certain Christian practices, such as church attendance.

There is a different way of looking at these encounters and experiences, one that considers the contextual nature of theology; the forgotten practice of pre-modern theologians, the wisdom of which we are only just beginning to appreciate. Two particular publications will serve our particular needs here.

In her publication *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, Ellen Charry considers the pastoral function of Christian doctrine. Charry argues that theological discourse was always meant to be salutary: good for us. Christian doctrines emerged from an ethics of character formation designed to shape lives that were centred on understanding and knowing God. One of the consequences of the modernisation of our epistemology was the disembedding of these Christian doctrines. Instead of pertaining to everyday life, doctrine and God-talk became systematised and isolated; a far cry from the epistemic assumptions that our pre-modern theologians operated under. Having established the rough deal theology had during modernisation, she proposes pre-modern theology is comparable to modern medicine and suggests a shared epistemic approach, which has three elements "[b]oth rely on experimental knowledge which is open to revision; both use inferential knowledge based on accumulated cases; and both employ clinical judgement." [Charry, 1999: 11] As Charry explores this comparison and suggests examples of these three elements in both medicine and theology, she hopes modern readers of theological texts might be able to at least sympathise "with the theological assumptions under which [pre-modern theologians] worked, namely: God's being, work and teaching, as well as the practices of the church, are genuine knowledge that may effect salutary human transformation when applied prudently and caringly in the proper setting and under optimum circumstances." [Charry, 1999: 15]

With theology re-embedded into a personal, relational and community context, Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, in their work on *Theological Reflection*, clarify further the function of Christian theology in relation to practical circumstances highlighting three key tasks.

First, theology informs the processes that enables the formation of character... Second, theology assists in building and maintaining the community of faith (including determining where the normative boundary of faithful practice might lie...). Third, theology enables the relating of the faith-community's own communal identity to the surrounding culture, and the communication of the faith to the wider world. [Graham, Walton & Ward, 2005:10]

Taken as a whole these two pieces of work recognise that the modernisation of our talk-of-God, our theology, saw it disembedded from the place where it makes sense: the life of the community of faith. Further, that if we allow ourselves to sympathise with this, and take seriously the epistemological assumptions of the pre-modern theologians, we will begin to recognise that theology is all about a unique set of relationships.

The three key tasks of theological reflection identified by Graham, Walton and Ward outline three lines of relationship between God and the believer, between believers in the community of faith, and between believers and non-believers. These three lines of relationship, three social bonds, are essentially where the identity of the individual believer and the community of faith lie.¹ It is these three social bonds and their symbiosis that is at the heart of what it means to be a believer: a disciple of Christ, and a community of believers. The form these social bonds take is a secondary, although vitally important, issue. However, it is these forms that we largely encounter and interact with, count, measure and speculate about. However, these forms, issues of personal habits and behaviour, community events and relations with the wider world, are not the powerhouse of faith.

Why is this any different from what Lynch is saying? To a large extent it is not. Lynch clearly recognises the importance of the relationship with the Divine, the depth of the relationships within the community of believers, to the extent that he develops a theme of bereavement as part of the process of moving on from evangelical communities, and relationships with non-believers as they are one of the sources of challenge to the evangelical discourse. This set of unique relationships is recognised. The point that the pre-modern voices bring, translated by our practical theologians, is that this set of unique relationships is the heart of the matter. Evangelical discourse has settled on the form of these relationships captured in the doctrinal and theological practices of the community, the salutary effect of which is still assumed. To

1. The extent of uniqueness of these bonds in relation to non-believers and members of faith communities other than Christianity is worth pondering, but not in this paper.

put it another way, the doctrinal and theological practices, originally proposed because of their salutary effect, were solidified by the community, in reaction to and inversely proportional to, the disembedding of theology from everyday life by the process of modernisation. Evidence of this solidity can still be seen clearly in the official voice of evangelical communities. It is aspects of this solidity, in particular attendance at church services, that we use to measure and track the changing face of evangelical communities and the Christian faith in general. Tracking these solid aspects of the Christian faith can only give at best an impression of its changing face. The real action is along the social bonds of the unique relationships at the heart of individual and community Christian identity.

It is now time to bring Zygmunt Bauman into the conversation.

Bauman's liquidity thesis is that the 'melting of the solids,' that initial and permanent feature of modernity, has acquired a new meaning and a new target: namely "the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions – the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life politics on the one hand and political actions of human collectives on the other." [Bauman, 2000: 6] "The[se] liquidizing powers have moved from the 'system' to 'society,' from 'politics' to 'life-politics' – or have descended from the 'macro' to the 'micro' level of social cohabitation." [Bauman, 2000: 7] Whilst we would expect to see the effects of these liquidizing powers in the general sweep of the lives of Christians by nature of being part of the society at large, they also have particular expression within the Christian community.

The social bond that new Christians share with other believers, which theologically speaking follows the prime social bond with the Divine, is however, socially speaking, the stronger of the two. There was an intimacy between the discipleship-politics of the individual and the ecclesial-politics of the community: belonging to a worshipping congregation, following the teaching of the minister/pastor, submitting to the pastoral care and discipleship program, offering your money, gifts and talents to the further promotion of God through that congregation and being willing to sacrifice any previously lived-in social circles in order to prioritise activities within the community. Affirmation as an individual Christian came through involvement in and the success of the specific Christian community to which the individual belonged. This at least is the way it is remembered since the intimacy of this relationship has been replaced by wide spread indifference. Decisions about attendance are more likely to be subjected to the wider interests of the individual and family setting and

cross-referenced to the availability of different styles of services at a variety of easily accessible venues. The teaching and doctrinal positions of the community are held to lightly as part of a broader stream of teaching that individuals are dipping into. Christian communities have become but one, often a small one, of many opportunities to give and the services-in-return provided by Christian communities are often a small voice within the marketplace of services that are designed to meet the needs of consumers. In return for emancipation from the structures and control of the community of faith, the individual believers now have the freedom to explore their spirituality in the global and multi-cultural marketplace and bear all the responsibility for its success or failure; however one chooses to measure that. The private desire to tame the flesh and seek after heavenly things no longer has a public answer through which the individual will find salvation. The public language within congregational spaces has, and is finally catching up with, its elder sibling: the public space in general. The powers of liquidisation that have melted that which binds the disciples choices into congregational action are those that have affected every similar bond in society at large: mobility, connection, individualisation and commodification to name some popular ones. The individual believer has been disembedded or uprooted from the place where their discipleship both made sense and gained its frame of reference and arena of action. Being a Christian is no longer a given, it is now a task; a task for the individuals to work at by themselves. Daily joys of following Jesus are more likely a daily trial to maintain the status of disciple, albeit a ill-fitting version of one: a privatised faith with a generic public display in which everything is done to maintain the individual experience of the challenge to follow Christ. To paraphrase Bauman; there is a wide and growing gap between the condition of disciples *de jure* and their chances to become disciples *de facto* – that is, to gain control over their fate and make the choices they truly desire. It is from that abysmal gap that the most poisonous effluvia contaminating the lives of contemporary disciples emanate. That gap, however, cannot be bridged by individual believers efforts alone: not by the means and resources available within self-managed disciple-politics. [Bauman, 2000: 39]

The prime social bond, that between the believer and the Divine, has undergone accelerated individualisation; no doubt fuelled by the uprooting of individual believers from the community of believers. The power of the sung word in the temporary communities of worshipers is often overlooked. However, the story they tell is just as powerful, as we observe

that the lyrics of corporate worship concern the 'I' as the subject, seconded only by the Triune One, although usually only one divine individual at a time. The *said* word, the living word, the Bible, has become a meadow of individualism. The lack of second person plural inflections in the English language means that the authorial intention of preaching about and to the social bonds that hold together individual discipleship effort in congregational action is not just lost but inverted through an individualised hermeneutic. The reading and the singing of the word in congregational settings is now consumed by the desires and needs of individual believers and the prime social bond, which, from the beginning of the faith, was meant to be a 'blessing to others'; has become subject to the ebbs and flows of the market forces of faith.

The individual disciple is truly liberated, a freedom gained in exchange for a security in community; but this freedom is cancerous to discipleship, eating away at it from the inside out, sapping its power for effective transformation. Perhaps then *Congregation* has become a 'zombie category'. [Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 203] They are still there and look like they are alive, but they are in fact dead, theologically and socially. They are at best "peg' communities, a momentary gathering around a nail on which many solitary individuals hang their solitary individual fears.' [Bauman, 2000: 37] This again is not so different from Lynch's simplified evangelical discourse, whose prime actor turns out to be a 'me' disembedded from the congregation in which the discourse occurs.

After preferring the term 'disembedding', with a corresponding improbability of re-embedding throughout his *Liquid* writings, Bauman has more recently followed François de Singly in critiquing it as "implying a one-off act of individual emancipation from the tutelage of the community of birth and the finality, irreversibility of [that] act". Instead De Singly suggests the metaphor of *anchors*. [Bauman, 2008: 83; Singly, 2003: 108] Anchors can be drawn and cast out many times, they are but a temporary marker in the itinerary of a ship. Anchors can stay down a long-time, comparatively, and they can be used for just minutes at the discretion of the captain in a complex manoeuvre. Although they disturb the seabed when they are lodging and being drawn, they are very resilient themselves and bear little lasting impression from the various anchorages into which they may have been cast. As ships, individuals, charged with the unending task of self-identity-creation, are at sea with "no line on the horizon' [U2, 2009: track 1], calling into hopeful anchorages and moorings. The hope is fuelled by a yearning for "security which only the stamp of social approval, countersigned by a community of reference, can offer." [Bauman, 2008: 82] Perhaps

congregations, in the face of living in that in-between world of the *zombie*, are in fact experiencing a reincarnation, or a regeneration, as *anchorage*s and *moorings*; promoting themselves to passing disciples as places of rest and revival on their everlasting voyage of hope. As the individual disciple-politics of believers resonate with particular anchorages they settle for a while. There they find comfort knowing and befriending other individuals struggling with the same discipleship issues. Their comfort though is destined to remain frustrated since they lack the public language to form congregational action to address collective struggles. The best outcome is to find the most refined comfort, one where the shared discipleship fears can hide within a wider social setting; only in these places might one lease a mooring, a fixed spot granted by the community. But it is only leased, no freehold is available nor desired: to paraphrase Dido, Life is for rent and I haven't learnt to buy [Dido, 2003 :track 3] Mobility, that most prized possession of modernity, still needs to be held on to.

Gordon Lynch, and the many others who have and are moving on from evangelical communities, that perhaps represent the rise and decline in numbers across different contexts and the increase in hybridisation and emergent new forms and expressions, are indeed signs of the increased liquidity of the Christian faith as the unique social bonds that capture and form Christian identity are subjected to ongoing modernisation.

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