

Postmodern Responses to being Church

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Debate about how the Church should structure itself is not solely a recent phenomenon. Church history demonstrates that differing structures, rites and opinions have been employed or have developed to enable the church to function and minister to the cultural environments into which it is born¹. Reflection on these developments centres on the need to (or passive transition into) the current cultural context, without jettisoning the rich wisdom and corporate memory of our traditions and history. Alongside which, we wrestle with the mystery of being church as seen in writings from the New Testament onwards². This results in a church that is a mixture of divine mystery and human institution³. As such current culture both shapes and calls us to shape our response to being church. For example, as the contemporary management agenda now favours for facilitators and flat-structures, so too there is a shift from the minister (or missionary) as 'expert' and the desire to have an enabler as part of a team. Another more viciously contested area that demonstrates this is music and liturgy – Hymns vs. Songs, prayer book vs. common worship⁴! However, the cultural condition of postmodernity affects our response more deeply than simple fads or fashions. Whether we see post-modernity as a correction to modernity, an extension to hypermodernity or the emergence of a new philosophical framework, a major and recognised shift in contemporary and academic western culture has been occurring since the late 1960's⁵. A shift of this nature merits proactive response from the church above mere reaction. This paper highlights a framework that may help with this debate.

¹ See Meeks, *The First urban Christians* and McGrath, *Christian Theology*

² If the Church is seen as a continuation of God's community of faith, this mystery stretched back to the creation story, and stories of Abraham and the Patriarchs.

³ This can be supported by developing Augustine's mixed view of the church containing both saints and sinners, Similarly in Luther's ideas of the visible and invisible church (McGrath, *Christian Theology*, page 465 and 469),

⁴ The Church of England's recently 'modernised' liturgy

⁵ See Harvey D, *The condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell, 1990 p. 38

The condition of postmodernity

Walter Truett-Anderson has outlined that postmodernity is not a single response to the current cultural situation, but rather the adoption of four distinct strategies – all of which are post-modern (see diagram 1)⁶. These responses are to

A – Seek pre-modern strategies for understanding reality and relate these to modern life.

B – Reaffirm modern approaches by appealing to latent scientific materialism or the strong cultural power on modern (western) institutional traditions. This view is still prevalent in academia, economics and politics

C – Develop methods of critical assessment and reform (or rejection) off modernism, principally aligning to worldview of ‘truth’ as social-construction

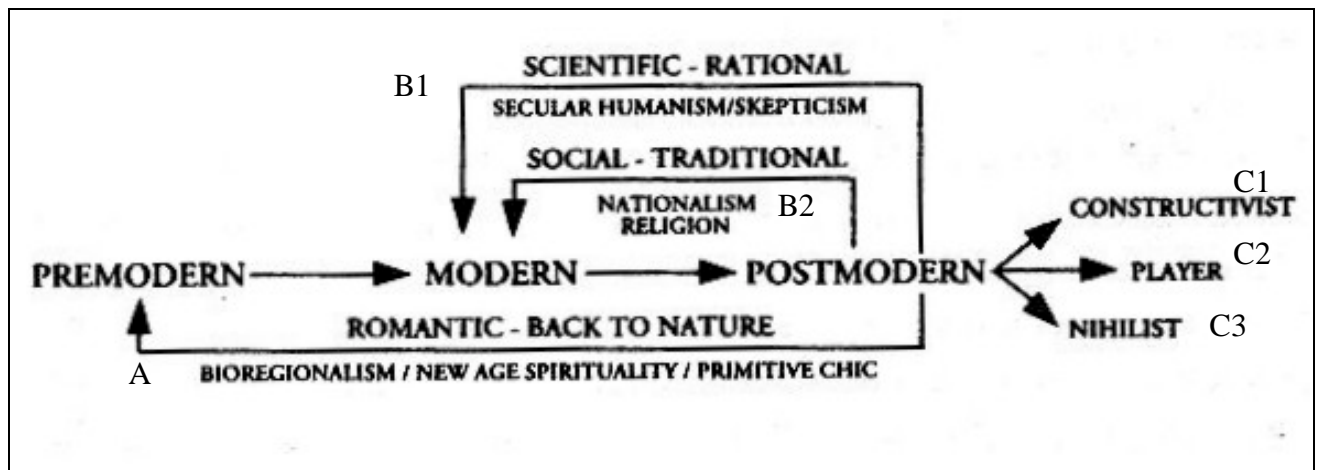


Diagram 1 – Strategies within Post-modernity

The Postmodern Church

It is my contention that a survey of contemporary church structures, and the worldviews that support these organisational and ministry constructs, demonstrate strong alignments to those responses to living in post-modern times outlined by Truett-Anderson.

⁶ Walter Truett-Anderson Fontana Post-modernism Reader, Chapter 17

A) Reclaiming the Pre-modern church

This view seeks to re-discover a 'pre-modern' early church as the template on which we should base our mission. Reclaiming 'authentic' biblical faith has been a hallmark of church reformation. However, this strategy seeks to model its structure and behaviour directly on early church practice as well as review beliefs. The house-church movement of the 70's through to today belies much of this thinking⁷. This has generated new structures and prioritised mission activity, since this is seen as a hallmark of the early church. In addition to this, the resurgence of an active 'supernatural' spirituality can be seen as a 'pre-modern' response correcting the demystifying tendency of modernity. Harvey Cox identified that the secularism of the 19th and 20th century has given way to dynamic 'Pentecostal' spirituality, which he describes as a 'recovery of primal piety'⁸. The Pentecostal movement is a distinct response to the reshaping and reframing of church, particularly church in mission⁹.

B) Reasserting the modern church

Most denominations developed alongside the Enlightenment and those that existed prior to this in the west were also deeply affected¹⁰. Thus there are those who advocate tradition as the paramount determiner of structures and activities (strategy B2). This can be both explicit and implicit. Non-conformist traditions may not have the trappings of tradition such as 'Latin sung mass', but demonstrate this motivator in styles of governance and activity.

There is also an identifiable element that corresponds to a scientific-rational tradition (strategy B1). I would suggest that Willow-Creek, *Purpose Driven Church* and Alpha are strongly aligned to a rational / sceptical response. They are sceptical that certainty is unattainable and rational in the approach to discovering this. Alpha has been expressed as a way of "[providing] answers and *certainty* for people in moral direction, belief and lifestyle"¹¹. The purpose

⁷ Arthur Wallis' *The Radical Christian* demonstrates this approach

⁸ Cox, *Fire from Heaven* p.99

⁹ UK church survey shows that within London the Pentecostal Movement is the only significant growing element of the church, *Turning the Tide*, Christian Research Association

¹⁰ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, pages 87-91

¹¹ Interview with Anglican Minister on the success of their Alpha course, my emphasis

driven, or programme driven models are reliant on mode and method and as such can be identified as a rational approach to mission and ministry.

C) The leading edge responses

The distinction between constructivist, player and nihilist is helpful to understanding fresh responses¹². Within Christendom a nihilist response (C3) is often expressed by leaving the church!¹³. Others, whilst not aligning to the more nihilistic postmodernism philosophies, are highly critical and infuriated with current expression of church. The constructivist approach (C1) is more apparent in much of these groups and contemporary writing – particularly those seeking to engage in mission as part of their expression of being church. The constructivist attempts to align to the philosophical framework of social-construction, understanding that our mode of being church can be adapted – seeking new ways of experiencing and expressing being church. Groups developing alternative worship activities and experimenting with new forms of church can be part of this strategy, though these do not always result in structures to engage society in mission. Degrees of scale are observed in what forms can and cannot be adapted. What is generated in the most part is a healthy debate on the language, imagery and ritual associated with being church¹⁴. Protagonists identify these experiments to be the ‘seeds of future church’¹⁵.

The category of player (C2) is particularly apparent in youth ministry – “people who manage to surf along [through the cultural change] without taking much interest in abstract ideas or self-conscious ‘postmodernism’ their irony is more an attitude or sensibility than an intellectual position”¹⁶. Practitioners who have a knack for ‘hitting the spot’ with young people, designing events that function well as worship or outreach are often “players”. Young people themselves also tend to fit into this category. This may be in part a developmental issue,

¹² Truett-Anderson in Fontana Postmodernism Reader, p. 107-108

¹³ This could explain significant drop off in post-30 age bracket recently identified by the EA as of primary importance to reverse and supported in figures from church attendance survey

¹⁴ For Example, Mass Culture, Pete Ward ed., discusses the place of the Eucharist in worship and mission

¹⁵ Faith in the Future, Michael Riddell

¹⁶ Truett-Anderson in Fontana Postmodernism Reader, p. 108

but could also signal that this response has not yet fully grown its own articulated philosophy to contend with others in the leading edge 'mish-mash'

Concluding remarks

All of these responses need to be reflected upon and engaged with scripture and tradition. Each has a place in relating to our cultural agenda, and each should interrelate to help the church universal grow through these times. I would place myself in the constructivist category. A strong influencer in my approach to reframing church is that of 'faithful improvisation'¹⁷. This concept suggests that our scriptural gift and continued inspiration by the Spirit enable us to immerse ourselves in the story of God and then be able to improvise a way of living that remains faithful to, but does not simply replicate that which has gone before. This framework counters gimmicks and simple pragmatic modes of being church, yet resists rigid institutionalisation and acceptance of a marginalized church. It also provides for the creativity to develop new forms and structures that continue the story and tradition, with flexibility and relevance. It engages with social construction¹⁸, but resists rejection of our traditions and fundamental creedal statements.

Endnote

This paper is adapted from an essay on holistic missions, an assessed piece for M.Th. in Urban Ministry, Spurgeon's College. It represents a starting point for enquiring into post-modern responses to being church and has not fully engaged with other texts available in this area. Comments welcome.

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¹⁷ Middleton and Walsh, Truth is stranger than it used to be, SPCK

¹⁸ Middleton and Walsh argue that scripture is not a 'totalising metanarrative' as it contains many 'voices' and does not seek to marginalize in the same fashion as modern metanarratives – this it is not threatened by, not is a threat to the constructivist agenda (Chapter 4)

Appendix 1 – Brief literature review of the subjects addressed in this paper

Postmodern response to being church	Protagonists	Effect on maintenance against mission
A) Reclaim the pre-modern church	Arthur Wallis, The Radical Christian is a good example of this style of teaching. He defines radical as ‘to the root’ and proposes that the church needs to go back to its roots (i.e. Acts) to be truly radical. Cox, Fire from Heaven	Challenges denominational structures and enabled greater general involvement in mission. Rediscovered the perspective of Charisma, church planting and apostolic function.
B) Reassert the modern church		
1 Tradition	Debate at Greenbelt on ‘Mass Culture’ raised comment from traditionalists on how this ‘sacred element’ of that should not be altered.	Provides an avenue for certain people groups to ‘feel at home’. In worst case preserves structures that are inappropriate or unjust
2 Rationality	Alpha, Purpose Driven Church / Youth ministry, Willow Creek	Does provide new models to engage people and frameworks to provide certainty. This cannot be dismissed unless one believes the approach to be in error
C) Leading Edge responses		
1 Nihilist	Dave Tomlinson, The Post-evangelical – described in Wright, The Radical Evangelical as being ‘like a child who breaks all his toys and then complains they are broken’ Demonstrates the closeness to this position. Riddell’s column in Third Way is similarly cited by readers Christi-Anarchy by Dave Andrews also demonstrates some of this feel	This strategy may raise debate on church structures, but is rarely positive. However, it could be construed as close to a tradition of lament as expressed by the Jewish literature at the time of the Exile, as well as the prophetic books that accompanied them
2 Player		
3 Constructivist	21 st Century Church, Rob Warner, Church Beyond the congregation, James Thwaites, Get a Grip on the Future, without loosing hold on the past – Gerard Kelly, Threshold of the Future – Mike Riddell.	These authors seek to engage with current thinking and culture and propose ways that the church ought to adapt to meet this situation, and rediscover elements of its ministry that have been lost.