

Alternative Worship and the Significance of Popular Culture

Introduction

The recent English Church Attendance Survey confirmed with hard evidence that church attendance has declined drastically over the last 20 years. The decline is particularly bad in the main denominational churches. The Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church have each seen Sunday attendance drop between 40 and 50% in the last two decades. It is worst amongst the young. The number of young people under 15 leaving the church each week is 1000; the number under 19 has halved; the number in their twenties has declined by 45% (Brierley 2000).

This confirms what many other writers have been saying - the church seems increasingly outmoded and irrelevant. The tragic irony is that this is at a time when spirituality is very much on peoples' agenda and part of their lives. But they are not looking to the institutional churches or the Christian faith to meet their quest for spiritual meaning and experience.

Paradigm thinking is one way to make sense of what is taking place. This posits that the history of the Western church fits into six discernible paradigms of time. In each of these periods Christians struggled to incarnate the faith in that particular culture. However 'a style of Christianity successful in one era changes as another era begins. Those who remain committed to the old style of faith freeze that style in the particular culture in which it originated' (Webber, 1999). This process accounts for much of the diversity in the world-wide church today. We can see the different styles of church from different eras continuing in the present. In the current time of transition from modernity to postmodernity, we see this process taking place again. Several writers have made the same observation 'A number of the deeper difficulties we face are because the forms

of our common life have, over recent centuries, become wedded to modernism..... Now that the times are changing the form of the church needs to change with it.' (Riddell, Pierson and Kirkpatrick, 2000) There is a need for new plausibility structures (Walker, 1996) and a renewal of imagination concerning the form of the church (Cray, 1998, p24).

Alternative Worship

One strategy for incarnating the Christian faith in the present postmodern era is what has become known as 'alternative worship'. Alternative worship has been around for over a decade now. There are several groups around Britain and several others in New Zealand and Australia (for a list of groups and their stories see the CDrom in Riddell et al, 2000). Alternative worship 'arises from the need for the church to engage with a culture shift, from the patterns of Christian life which took shape in modernity, to a faith which brings the authentic message of Christ to bear on life in postmodernity' (Roberts, 1999).

Alternative worship is much more than a cosmetic change to the style of church. It really has a different plausibility structure with its own authenticity (Two summaries of what characterises alternative worship or gives it authenticity can be found in Riddell et al, 2000, p79-80 and Roberts, 1999, p5, 14). One way in which alternative worship is deemed to be authentic is if it resonates with the curators of the worship and with the culture outside the church. I want to suggest that the use of popular culture in the worship is one of the ways in which this resonance is established. It is this aspect of alternative worship that I will discuss.

Popular Culture in Alternative Worship

Popular culture features in a myriad ways in alternative worship. The space itself is likely to be marked out by

televisions with looped images and screens with projected still images. These might well include traditional icons but are usually interspersed with images from contemporary culture – for example, a McDonald's sign juxtaposed with a slogan 'fast food' for lent; or a looped image of a sped up tube journey to convey the busyness of urban life.

Often there is a continual backdrop of music tracks, much of it instrumental but carefully selected from the chill out end of dance music. Vocal tracks that either have a spiritual message or have words that are made meaningful by the context they are played in are used. For example Holy Joes played 'The Drugs Don't Work' by The Verve in the sharing of bread and wine at their communion service at Greenbelt in 1998 when the song had just recently been number one in the singles chart. Musical accompaniment to songs is likely to be either sampled loops or dance tracks – whatever way they are constructed, they closely connect with particular subcultural styles of popular music. One example of this kind of accompaniment is that Sanctuary sing the hymn 'Amazing Grace' to a track based on a sample of Massive Attack's track 'Protection'. When the singing finishes, Tracey Thorn's voice comes in singing 'you took the force of the blow – protection'.

The signs and symbols used in rituals may well incorporate popular cultural resources. The labyrinth constructed at St Paul's cathedral in March 2000 involved the use of a Discman to listen to music as you walked the labyrinth. At one station en route, there was a computer with a screen of animated candles – as an act of prayer you lit a candle by moving the mouse and clicking on it on the screen which would 'light' the candle. The language in liturgy and prayer references popular culture – Grace have a liturgy for communion on the theme of hospitality. One of the lines in the Eucharistic prayer is 'you ate the bread, drank the wine – everybody having a good time' which is a quote from U2's song 'Until the end of the world'.

The extent to which popular cultural resources are used in alternative worship is fairly widespread. Their use is seemingly effortless – the resources are readily available at the fingertips of those constructing the worship. The way they are used displays a very high level of ‘subcultural capital’. For example in the version of ‘Amazing Grace’ mentioned above, using a sample from Massive Attack is a sign to those in the know of a good subcultural capital bank account, but what is especially impressive is that the sample is carefully selected from Brian Eno’s remix of the track! The point isn’t that Sanctuary are trying to impress anyone. It’s that this kind of use of popular cultural resources is instinctive. It would be very easy to dismiss this usage of popular culture as nothing more than a gimmick, a change of style, a kind of trendy church syndrome, but I suggest that what is going on is much more significant than that.

Popular Cultural Resources use in Constructing Identity, Meaning and Habitable Space

In a consumer society people use the cultural resources available to them to make meaning by constructing a sense of their own self and the world in which that self lives. For large numbers of people, especially those born since the sixties, popular culture has provided the majority of these resources. This is because it has been so much a part of their lives and language – ‘the amniotic fluid that sustains us’ (Beaudoin, 1998). Stuart Hall defines representation as ‘the process by which members of a culture use language to produce meaning’ (Hall, 1997). Popular culture, as a significant part of peoples language, is thus used to make meaning in representation. Andy Bennett conducted a study looking at how popular music functions in this way for groups of young people in a range of localities and ‘neotribes’ (Bennett, 2000). He says that they ‘use popular cultural resources to construct meaning and authenticity’. This is often in ways different to those intended by the cultural producers. One use young people make of popular

music is to mark out space – ‘forms of popular music and their accompanying stylistic innovations are one of the key ways in which local spaces can be appropriated and made habitable’. He also shows that this marking out of space is very much informed by the local context and in turn helps construct the local.

These insights from Cultural Studies help understand what is taking place in alternative worship. If culture is a site for contested meanings (Storey, 1996) , alternative worship groups have struggled to establish meaning and authenticity by appropriating and marking out habitable local spaces. Popular music, stylistic innovations and other popular cultural resources are key ways in which this is done. They are very significant for the identity and authenticity of alternative worship groups and as discussed above establishing resonance. This struggle for meaning takes place on two fronts – resistance to the dominant capitalism in the Western world, and also resistance to the dominant forms of church. Space that is habitable is carved out within and in opposition to both of these dominant cultures. In this sense alternative worship groups are resistant communities.

Incarnational vs. Ecstatic Theologies of Worship

The fact that what is taking place in the construction of alternative worship has been observed elsewhere by academics in Cultural Studies doesn't suggest that it is necessarily a good thing. Lots of strategies for mission have ended up capitulating to the cultures they are trying to reach in an attempt to be relevant. Alternative worship as a strategy for resistance and contextualisation in postmodernity needs underpinning by theology as well as its intuitive grasp of the language, signs and symbols of the culture.

Many writers on mission and culture articulate the importance of the incarnation as their basic theological inspiration. ‘The

incarnation itself gives us the model of relevance. God shows up on our turf speaking our language so that we might understand' (Riddell et al., 2000). Webber suggests that 'The root problem of our confusion over spirituality may be found in the failure to understand the implications of the incarnation' (Webber, 1999). Whilst every alternative worship group is different I suggest that for most, the incarnation is a theological foundation. It undergirds their seemingly intuitive approach to using popular culture in worship.

Paul Roberts contrasts alternative worship's theology of incarnation with one of ecstasy in terms of worship (Roberts, 1999). He writes that 'alternative worship relocates God back within the physical domain, so to experience God means to encounter him in and through the created things around – symbolically, iconically, sacramentally'. This is not to blur the distinction between Creator and creation but to say that God is experienced in the everyday. Alternative worship groups are aware that 'revelation never happens in an unmediated encounter with God' (Dulles, 1983). They therefore tend to know their own part in constructing rituals and an experiential environment and are not surprised when these enable people to encounter God because 'the sacred is always cloaked in cultural forms' (Beaudoin, 1998). But because of the awareness of their own role are slow to make too great claims for it. With this incarnational approach, the use of popular culture in worship powerfully brings 'the real world' into the presence of God and enables God's presence to be discerned back in that 'real world'. Any notion of a split between sacred and secular is rejected. Groups 'are willing to use ideas, materials and forms from the secular world in worship' (Riddell et al, 2000). Implicit in this incarnational approach is a very positive theology of creation and its redemption.

In an ecstatic approach 'God is located outside the physical domain' (Roberts, 1999). He is experienced outside of cultural forms. Often the term used is 'supernaturally' - worship is

focused on ecstatic experience in which God is encountered 'supernaturally' (rather than naturally). In a culture of 'sensation gatherers' (Baumann) ecstasy has a wide appeal. The reason alternative worship has resisted this theological basis for worship is not because it is against ecstatic experiences of God. This is far from the case. In fact one problem of Roberts' framing of incarnation vs ecstasy is that it could be seen to imply that there is no ecstasy in an incarnational approach which is clearly not so. However most alternative worship groups would reject experience as the absolute touchstone by which we can be sure we've met with God (I suspect that many charismatic groups would as well). The reasons for opting for an incarnational rather than an ecstatic approach are more to do with where it leads you. Following the ecstatic line where God is encountered outside of culture can easily lead to a negative view of culture and 'the world' and to exaggerated claims of truth about God and what he has said. In worst case scenarios salvation is about escape from the world and getting a ticket to heaven. In the meantime energy goes into fuelling a subculture in which ecstatic encounters can be maintained but which has very little resonance with what is going on outside, in the 'real world'. This ends up with a very dualistic view, a negative theology of creation and at best a limited scope of redemption. The follow through on the truth issue is that an ecstatic approach suggests that an individual can hear objectively from God and have an objective experience of him. This sounds highly suspect to postmodern ears – put simply lots of peoples truth claims have been shown to be false. The Church herself, having done all sorts of regrettable things in the name of God, is clearly not exempt. It fails to recognise the embedded nature of all of our positions, in other words that this supposed objectivity is not really available to us. This is particularly noticeable in a world where lots of cultures and theological takes live side by side. An incarnational approach doesn't have the same problem. It doesn't need to make such great claims for its take on the story or the experiences people have. It attempts to improvise faithfully to 'enable people to

encounter God within the context of their own subcultural sign/symbol posts' (Riddell et al, 2000) but recognises the planners part in the construction. It is more akin to Lindbeck's 'cultural linguistic' view that says that 'meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it' (Lindbeck, 1984).

Icons of the present

The use of icons in worship, particularly the image of Christ, has caused much theological debate and controversy down the centuries. In his book 'God's Human face' Schonborn outlines the various threads of debate, especially surrounding the iconoclastic controversy of the 8th century AD (Schonborn, 1994). Interestingly, he states that the heart of the debate was about the incarnation - 'He who rejects the icon also rejects the Incarnation: this is the common conviction of all defenders of images.' Whereas 'contempt for matter is one of the most striking traits of iconoclasm'. The rules for painting icons are very tightly controlled in the tradition. In large part this is because the icons are primarily seen as 'theology in colour' in contrast with much Western art which is seen as romantic and an individual's interpretation.

Popular culture is heavily image oriented and iconographic. 'The icon is the common currency of our popular culture' (Beaudoin, 1998). Edward Robinson has written a book entitled 'Icons of the present' (Robinson, 1993). In this he argues that the arts have always had a crucial role to play in evoking the presence of the holy, functioning as 'windows on eternity'. This is particularly the case when in a well established religious tradition the conventional language of the sacred has become over familiar – art opens up perception in new ways, enabling us to see the world with new eyes. He argues that a spiritual tradition needs to be continually renewing itself if it is to be faithful to its own tradition. 'Every revelation is initially culture bound: it speaks the language, it uses the image of its own time

and society. If it did not, communication would be impossible. Every tradition if it is to live has continually to be breaking that mould, and every succeeding mould.' So what are needed are icons of the present, that keep revelation alive by representing that mystery in the language of the here and now. He goes on to suggest that when any iconographic style ceases to be earthed in the present, whilst its images may still exert a powerful grip on the mind and heart, the dangers both of nostalgia and otherworldliness become very real.

It seems to me that these insights describe very succinctly much of what is going on in alternative worship. Groups are engaged in a process of producing icons of the present to represent the holy in the language of the here and now. Popular culture is a significant part of that language. To give a concrete example, Grace had a series of services that looked at traditional iconography in the Eastern Orthodox Church and then at various representations of the Image of Christ. The question raised by the series was about how to represent Christ now. Several things were striking in these services. One was a reading that pointed out how most of our mental images of Christ are either 'oldy worldy' or 'ethnic' (nostalgic and otherworldly as Robinson says above) and very rarely anything that would fit in urban city life in London where Grace is located. Another was a photo montage of the disciples made from images of young adults taken out of contemporary style or dance magazines which powerfully related the gospel to now – the disciples could have been your mates. At one of the services people were invited to bring things that functioned as icons for them and to say something about them and put them on the communion table. Popular culture featured highly with images, music tracks and even a luminous plastic star placed on the table.

Popular Culture 'Out Of Place' in church

The church can easily dismiss icons of the present, especially using popular culture in the kind of way I describe above as bad taste or a gimmick. In part this is because a high/low view of culture still seems to be prevalent. But I think it's more that the cultural forms of church have become so normative that to insiders they have become the most 'natural' or 'correct' way of worshipping God – you might say culture has become an invisible part of the equation. (Taylor and Willis, 1999 describe how this process takes place more generally). In this reification, popular culture is simply 'out of place' because it transgresses established symbolic boundaries. Television, say, in church is not 'natural'. (It is interesting that in churches that do use video they tend to show either a video produced by Christians or a film clip to illustrate a point in a talk, very rarely something integrated into the worship itself). Change takes time in any culture. 'The Story of the Sony Walkman' records how the walkman transgressed social boundaries because it brought what was a private act – private listening – into public spaces. It was similarly 'out of place' but now it has become accepted. Maybe this will be the case with popular culture and church. The use of worship bands with electric guitars and microphones has become enculturated where it wasn't some years ago. Perhaps alternative worship will be seen to 'offer a way forward for the church' (Roberts, 1999).

Whilst it is true that several alternative worship groups have managed to find space to exist within denominations (notably the C of E), it is very difficult at present to see this process of enculturation taking place on a much wider scale. This is for several reasons, including those mentioned above. But the chief ones are to do with power and control. Time and again the experience of those either in alternative worship or youth ministry taking new and creative approaches to worship is that they are misunderstood. Rather than contextualising the gospel in a variety of subcultures the expectation from the church side is that they will socialise people into what already exists as church i.e. put 'bums on pews'. Those who hold the power call

the shots and can control what is or is not permissible. Often this is done by an appeal to uphold the tradition or what is 'biblical'. The problem here is self evident – those preserving the tradition, the ones with the power, are the very ones who claim that what they are already doing is both biblical and the way the tradition is preserved! A fresh understanding of tradition is desperately needed if the church is to avoid the slide into ever increasing irrelevance.

Reframing Tradition

In a postmodern culture tradition and continuity are actually an incredible gift. Without the tradition there would be no Christian faith now. At a time when culture seems to be changing so fast, to be able to be located in a tradition that has been passed down for 2000 years gives a real sense of 'weight', a much needed anchor point in the world. Being located within the Christian tradition and seeking to be faithful to it helps to avoid groups' and individuals' beliefs becoming too subjective or personal – it offers a check on spirituality (Beaudoin, 1998). It also turns out to be a tradition with a vast amount of resources and an incredible global network. The basic and seemingly obvious point about the Christian tradition is that it is living and not closed or completed. In this respect the kind of use of 'tradition' to defend the status quo as outlined above is not faithful to the tradition at all. Jaroslav Pelikan says that in this kind of scenario religious leaders are defending not tradition but traditionalism (Pelikan, 1984). One is living, the other is dead. Part of the process of carrying a tradition forward is struggling with it, and engaging in its debates as to how its inquiries can be carried forward. A tradition needs diversity at its heart. In this respect whilst tradition does in some respects provide limits, it also gives the tools to liberate us from the way traditions have been used against us. Wherever the message of Jesus for today is distorted the tradition needs correction. To keep reforming religious tradition in a prophetic spirit is to be faithful. This reformatory impulse is at the heart of the tradition. To deny

it is 'to disallow that subversive and dangerous memory of Jesus in the church' (Tracy, 1991). But paradoxically it is the resources from within the tradition itself which will subvert the inadequacies and injustices of a religious tradition (Beaudoin, 1998). To preserve a tradition then is to 'drive to the heart of it to understand its significance and then do our best to re-present the same field of reference in our own context' (Riddell in Ward et al, 1999). Alternative worship groups are in this sense well located within the tradition, regarding the One they follow as the 'Holy Subversive' and themselves when they are true to Him as 'sanctified subversives'.

Conclusion

I conclude by summarising the argument thus far and making some final remarks. I have argued that alternative worship is one strategy for contextualisation and resistance in postmodernity. Popular culture is one aspect of the language of alternative worship that helps establish resonance and gives it authenticity. (There are lots of other aspects – I have just been interested in discussing this one here). On the surface, the use of popular culture does not appear that significant – it's by no means the answer to the church's problems. But underlying its usage is a strong incarnational theology and an understanding of tradition that needs continual renewal if it is to be faithful to itself. Whilst it is just a snapshot, the church's resistance to popular culture and 'icons of the present' in alternative worship betrays the depth of the crisis it faces. It has reified cultural forms that are located in the past, and uses its power and control to preserve those forms. This is true across the denominations. It's not my denomination so perhaps I am out of place to comment on it but it is surprising that even in the Orthodox church which has an iconographic tradition, the rigidity surrounding the usage of icons creates precisely the same problem as elsewhere. Battles raged in this tradition to uphold the importance of the incarnation. Whilst it might be a bit over dramatic, I conclude by saying that in rejecting popular

culture the church is in danger of rejecting or undermining the importance of the incarnation once again.

Written by Jonny Baker, April 2000

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