MISSION AND AUTHENTICITY

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 33, ISSUE 3

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It was a privilege to participate in the Pioneering on Estates and New Housing Developments conference organised by Church Mission Society and Methodist Pioneering Pathways earlier this summer. Over 100 practitioners attended, working across a range of spatial and cultural contexts, many in localities of high deprivation but also in new areas of impending ‘garden city’ and new housing development. It was illuminating to hear of many examples of innovative and intuitive engagement in areas where familiarity with Christianity is in decline, and yet the search for belonging and meaning are still palpable.

The backdrop to this search for belonging and meaning has been thrown into stark relief by recent tragedies over the summer, including the Manchester and London terror attacks and the Grenfell Tower disaster. These events exposed the fault lines of poverty and inequality that are endemic in the structures of our public life, as well as the frightening rise in hate crime and overt intimidation of those perceived as ‘other’. On the other hand, these events also showed a huge willingness to reach across cultural and ideological boundaries to do something practical for others in need, and to show a deeper allegiance to fellow citizens, other than that predicated on purely economic transactions. What became apparent, particularly in the immediate aftermath of Grenfell, was the increased absence of public space in which these impulses of caritas and solidarity could be expressed. Under the twin pressures of both privatisation and austerity, the availability of truly public space has sharply declined, which is why spaces and places curated by faith groups – churches, temples, mosques synagogues – are increasingly in demand in the wake of traumatic public events, as well as in the day to day delivery of welfare and care to communities.

Yet, as this conference highlighted, there is much more that needs to be done if connections of trust, faith and cohesion are to be re-woven and re-invigorated. The churches cannot simply rely on policy demands, or national tragedies, to make or re-establish connections with their neighbourhoods. They also need to engage with a series of deeper social dynamics, of which one of the most prominent is the search of authenticity. In this article, I explore some emerging ideas of how the notion of authenticity is being played out in the public sphere, and its close links with ideas of re-enchantment and the postsecular. I then examine how this agenda challenges our assumptions about the nature of church engagement in both new and more established urban areas.

SEARCHING FOR ‘GOD’ AFTER GOD – A NEW ERA OF POSTSECULAR RE-ENCHANTMENT

The American theologian Harvey Cox, in his seminal book, The Secular City,¹ written at the height of 60s secular optimism, premised his challenge to the church to act as an effective public agent of change and transformation on the assumption that we now live in a modern and therefore disenchanted world. Cox envisages the modern city as a Technopolis, founded on technological innovation, planning and progressive social change in which most challenges confronting human existence – poverty, want, education etc – will be met by the critical mass of human ingenuity and connectivity that the modern city can bring together. Cox’s view of the city, and the radical new theology it generates, is directly influenced by Max Weber’s thesis that as the world modernises, so it becomes ‘disenchanted’; in other words, we reach a point in human knowledge and ingenuity, that ‘we can in principle control everything by means of calculation’.² This new framework of knowledge, Weber predicted, would result in the elimination of all spiritual forces – including a sense of magic, enchantment, a sense of a deeper mystical reality rooted in the natural world, and the death of charismatic leadership that leads others through inspirational action to dare to dream the impossible.³ Cox provocatively asserts that irreversible secularisation is willed by God to free humankind from superstitious and backward religion based on mystical and enchanted phenomena. In the modern secular age epitomised by Technopolis, Cox argues, religion and the church will have to adapt to living an authentic faith founded on prophetic politics and discipleship in a de facto religionless world. Cox’s theology is deeply shaped by the work of German theologian Dietrich

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Bonhoeffer. Back in the 1940s, before his execution by the Nazis for his role in the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer talked about the emergence of a ‘religionless Christianity’ in what he called ‘a world come of age’. The Secular City, said Cox, following on from Bonhoeffer, is the new space for a more mature form of religion to emerge in which humankind no longer lives in servile humility to a controlling deity, but enters into a new covenant with that deity that is predicated on the virtues of stewardship and co-responsibility.

What is now clear is that the 21st century has not seen the unrolling of the processes of secular modernity as envisaged by Bonhoeffer and Cox, although this in no way diminishes the startling power of their theological ideas. Rather, the opposite has happened. Our current modernity is simultaneously intensely globalised, secular and religious. Religion and belief have stormed back onto the public agenda in a way that few had anticipated. However, the roots of this new visibility of religion first surface in 1979, just 12 years after Cox’s anticipated. However, the roots of this new visibility of religion first surface in 1979, just 12 years after Cox’s seemingly unassailable logic surfaced, with the Iranian revolution against the West/US-backed Shah, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 90s instigated by the Catholic-based Solidarity movement of the 1980s. These events, including the global rise of Islam and Pentecostal Christianity, led to the emergence of the concept of the ‘postsecular’ at the turn of this century. The term was coined by the German political philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, who said that the new hyper-diverse, hyper-connected globalised modernity we had created required a new ‘postsecular imagination’ in which ‘the vigorous continuation of religion in a continually secularising environment must be reckoned with’. In other words, the postsecular is not, as some have inferred, a linear or teleological replacement of the secular by the religious, but rather an increasingly blurred and potentially contested public space, in which the two have to learn to coexist side by side.

THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY AND RE-ENCHANTMENT – CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POSTSECULAR AGE

The philosopher of religion, Richard Kearney, I think has a neat approach to unravelling some of the spiritual and political implications of this postsecular era. In a book entitled Re-imagining the Sacred he suggests that we have become strongly ‘disenchanted’ with Weber’s idea of disenchantment, and that a new search for re-enchantment is under way. This search for re-enchantment he labels as ‘anatheism’ – or what he calls the ‘search for “God” after God’. The clue to this thesis lies in the small prefix ‘ana’ which is described in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as ‘up in space or time, back again, anew’ (2015; 6). In other words, what is being proposed is a complex understanding of ‘after’, which includes both ideas of backwards and forwards, so that ‘after’ is not a simple return to what was before, but a radically different revisiting something that is neither captivated by a pristine past or controlled by teleological future. The clue, says Kearney, lies in the two a’s of ‘ana’; one a reflects the Latin adverb ‘ad’ which means a journey ‘towards’, whilst the other reflects the adverb ‘ab’ which means a journey ‘away from’. Within the movement of Western thought, the ‘ana’ of anatheism can be read as the third iteration of our journey with the divine. Theism reflects the era of high cultural and historical integration with a sense of God and the power of religion – for example western Christendom from the 5th to the 16th centuries. Atheism, or the Death of God, that emerged during the 18th to the early 20th centuries, reflects the cultural and historical integration of knowledge predicated on the emancipation of humankind from childish dependency on enchanted epistemologies and ontologies.

However, as predicted by both Nietzsche and Weber, the experience of atheism leads to a collective sense of abandonment, disillusionment and disorientation. Weber for example, predicts the destructive downside of an Enlightenment model of modernity in which the development of a modern bureaucracy, and a modern state, emerges as the secular object of worship and obedience, in replacement to the divine. In his book, Economy and Society Weber refers to the ‘steel frame of modern industrial work that creates the shell of bondage that is characteristic of the “bureaucratic state machine”’. This metaphor was famously paraphrased by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons as ‘the

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8 Ibid, 17.
9 Max Weber, Economy and Society, (Berkeley: University of California, 1978), 1403
iron cage of bureaucracy\textsuperscript{10} that traps not only our bodies, but also our minds and imaginations within a materialist and calculability framework.

What Weber didn’t expect or predict is the current moment of ‘turning around’ - a potential era of anatheism, which contains within it elements of the preceding eras – namely ‘both an atheist and theist moment’ and yet which also ‘exceeds them both’.\textsuperscript{11} Kearney elaborates further:

In its atheist guise, adieu is a departure, a leaving, a farewell to the old God of metaphysical power, the god we thought we knew and possessed, the omni-God of sovereignty and theodicy. Adieu, therefore, to the God that Nietzsche, Freud and Marx declared dead. But in saying adieu to the omni-god, anatheism opens the option of a God still to come – or a God still to come back again...a supplementary move of aftering and overing.\textsuperscript{12}

So it is with this grand narrative of re-enchantment in mind that we look to see how this trajectory is being played out in both secular and religious contexts within the public sphere, in which the church is called to define its mission.

AUTHENTICITY AND ‘THE NONES’

A recent update on the British religious landscape for the British Attitudes Survey\textsuperscript{13} suggested that the number of people describing themselves as having ‘no religion’ was, for the first time, a majority in the UK, at 53 per cent. This trend was particularly strong among 18–24 year olds, of whom 71 per cent identified as no religion. However, other factors needs to be read alongside these headline statistics, not least because they are at odds with a globalised trend for religion which suggests that by 2060, 86 per cent of the world’s citizens will affiliate with a religious identity, with the numbers of those not affiliating declining to 12.5 per cent.\textsuperscript{14}

One factor is that ‘no religion’, while clearly a personal identifier that expresses a desire not to be affiliated or associated with an institutional expression of religion, does not however preclude an interest in religious ideas and experiences, spirituality, the transcendent and the mysterious. A major 2015 enquiry by the Pew Research Center into the spiritual hinterland of Millennials (namely those born between 1981 and 1996) in the US found a complex array of positions with regard to religion and spirituality. Although only 27 per cent said that they attended religious services on a weekly basis, 46 per cent say that they feel a deep sense of wonder at the universe at least once a week, 55 per cent think about the meaning of life on a weekly basis, 76 per cent say that they experience a strong sense of gratitude at least once a week, and 51 per cent say that they experience a deep sense of spiritual peace and wellbeing at least weekly.\textsuperscript{15} This is clear evidence of the re-enchantment thesis outlined above.

Another piece of emerging research, also from the States, suggests there is a political dividend that is beginning to evolve alongside this search for meaning. This political dividend can best be described as the search for a politics of deeper connection and authenticity expressed in a series of new trajectories of civic engagement. These trajectories were first identified in the immediate aftermath of the tumultuous global events in the spring of 2011, including popular uprisings in the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ and Occupy demonstrations of public squares across North America and several countries in Europe. In a book entitled Networks of Outrage and Hope,\textsuperscript{16} sociologist and economist Manual Castells tracks these events in the immediate months after their happening, and notes in particular the way they deployed new technologies of communication and social media to create instant and fluid affinity groups and hubs, and networks of knowledge and learning, while circumventing the official attempts of the authorities to censure and disrupt them. However, beyond identifying what he called rhizomatic forms of political participation (i.e. horizontal forms of self-selecting communication that both root and shoot in new configurations), Castells struggles to identify a unifying or coherent political manifesto. Rather, the drivers of these events, he suggests, are not so

\begin{itemize}
  \item Kearney, Re-imagining, 17
  \item Ibid, 17
  \item http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/ accessed 29 September 2017
  \item http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/23/millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans-but-just-as-spiritual/ accessed 29 September 2017
\end{itemize}
much ideological, as emotional, aimed at addressing more fundamental and existential human needs that the internet and modern structures of society often struggle to meet. These include: the creation of community and togetherness as a fundamental mechanism for overcoming fear; the creation of spaces of symbolic meaning that evoke memories of previous uprisings and the attempts to regain back control; the creation of a space of deliberation, which can lead to a more enhanced and permanent sense of power and confidence, and a heightened sense of communal, as opposed to individual, autonomy. At their best, Castells proposes, digital and social media platforms generated by the internet help coalesce an individualised search for autonomy into one that is shared on a public basis, so that digital sharing goes on to generate physical networks of ‘outrage, hope and struggle’.

THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY AND THE NEW FORMS OF CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Five years after Castells’ book, which sometimes feels longer on rhetoric than substance, we have perhaps a bit more detail as to how these networks of outrage and hope may be cashing out in more sustainable expressions of civic and political engagement amongst Millennial citizens (although it is perhaps surprising that as a total generational cohort, 35 per cent voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election). A longitudinal qualitative and quantitative survey of 3,000 millennials across the States entitled The Power of Voice – A New Era of Cause Activation and Social Issue Adoption found a complex vernacular of terms and positions by which these ‘new givers’ engage with the public sphere, with a series of terms such as advocate, activist and ally. For example, an upper-case ‘Activist’ is ‘someone whose profession it is to be advocating, creating marches and rallies and co-ordinating groups to bring attention to policy’. A lower-case ‘activist’ meanwhile is someone who frequently thinks about addressing issues and thinking of ways to make them better, this representing ‘a more of a relaxed way of thinking about social change’. Second, the research suggested that Millennials’ interest in far-reaching social issues – what the report calls ‘the greater good’ – is driving their ‘cause engagement’ today, even when they don’t have a personal connection with the cause they join. The current top three social issues to engage Millennial activism, advocacy or ally-alignment are civil rights/racial discrimination, employment rights and healthcare reform. This willingness to transcend narrow barriers of ideology, class or ethnic loyalty seems to be a defining strategy towards building this ‘greater good’, and is linked to a greater sense of authenticity – namely the direct linking of political and civic causes to one’s own identity and set of beliefs in ways that complement and overlap more traditional and mainstream forms of representative politics.

This assertion is backed up by two telling recommendations located at the end of the report for those wishing to study or engage with Millennial civic activism further. Because Millennials are interested in causes/social issues relevant to the quality of life for the greatest part of the population, the report recommends that would-be engagers or employers,

‘accentuate the humanity associated with your cause. Share stories of the individuals who benefit in a manner designed to strike an emotional chord and clearly indicate how a specific action will advance the group. Use social media such as Facebook Live to humanize your issue, allowing the individual to connect directly with those you serve.’

Second, the report refers to the growing band of those who are ‘uppercase Activists’, who could be the future leaders and game-changers in the political and civil realm. The Power of Voice report recommends,

‘pay attention to the level at which [these activists] want to engage, then use their unique characteristic and interests in ways that reward them with individual satisfaction, meaningful engagement and measurable advancement of the cause/social issue.’

The report highlights the vicarious impact of the ‘new...
givers’ public actions since they see their authenticity and identity linked to causes and people beyond their immediate circle or interest group.

‘Remember that for millennials important causes/social issues are only as compelling as the individuals they represent, and they are most concerned with the disenfranchised and marginalised. When calling on your audiences to act, don’t single out those directly affected by the issue – or risk missing out on a large group of passionate individuals.’

There is clearly the need for a similar in-depth study of UK and European Millennial experience, but if the American experience is indicative, then we see within this cohort a clear strategy that is exiting mainstream Protestant religion in order to discover a new set of spaces by which to create a sense of community, meaning, re-enchantment and authenticity.

AUTHENTICITY AND BELIEVERS

My thesis is that the new postsecular public sphere, in all its liminal and contradictory complexity, is being populated by the arrival of ‘no-religion’ citizens experiencing an increasing disconnect with institutional religion, but who are nevertheless looking for a re-enchanted and more authentic style of living. I believe they are being augmented by a cohort of religious Millennial believers, disenchanted with the cultural and materialistic trappings of their tradition and looking for more enchanted and challenging spaces and methods of discipleship and mission. In this analysis, I am following the work of American sociologist James Bielo who has explored the roots of the emerging intentional community/new monasticism church movement in the States. These new emergent lay communities are planted in either poor inner urban districts, or in the cultural wastelands of the exurbs, by growing numbers of evangelical Christians. These believers are seeking a more authentic, challenging and embodied form of religious identity and discipleship. Bielo uses the concept of ‘deconversion’ to express this movement by some evangelicals from their own cultural and ecclesial roots. De-conversion involves a rejection of the cultural frameworks of evangelical Christianity: its obsession with materialism and maintaining inward-looking sub-cultures at the expense of transforming wider society. Some of the founders and joiners of these new monastic communities, Bielo claims, are also de-converting from a narrow biblical literalism that represents a superficial form of Christian discipleship, devoid of challenge and engagement in the complexity of the world.

Bielo intriguingly suggests that de-conversion of Christians and other millennials from the cultural shell of their religious tradition is part of a wider social phenomenon that expresses late modernity’s or postmodernity’s search for authenticity. Charles Lindholm in his book Culture and Authenticity suggests that ‘modern’ obsessions with cultural phenomena as diverse as country music, sky diving, bungee jumping and slow food is the search to rediscover that which is ‘original, real and pure’. This obsessional search, it is suggested, comes from a number of different sources; the alienation and estrangement generated by urban industrialisation, and the ubiquitous experience of living with strangers; the over rationalisation of symbols which sees them subject to an instrumental manipulation rather than a deep engagement with our being; and the general postmodern desire for a ‘real’ freedom, that is no longer subject to false beliefs and fetishism that undermine our existential freedom.

AUTHENTICITY ON THE MARGINS

For some American evangelical Christians, this search for authenticity in the form of new monasticism or intentional communities has potentially strong echoes to historically episodic movements in Christianity, beginning as early as the 4th century with the desert fathers and mothers. Their journey into the purifying heat and solitude of the desert, beyond the built environment or towns and cities was driven partly by the inversion of Christianity as a mainstream rather than a marginal way of life, following the Constantinian settlement. The new experience of ‘feeling at home’ in the world of Empire was disorientating, and the appeal of material comforts and worldly status that came with it proved too much for some converts who felt the radical power of the Christian gospel had been blunted and compromised.

Within a UK context, there have been a series of recent volumes, most notably the Mission in Marginal Places series of six volumes (2016–18) edited by Paul Cloke and Mike Pears, exploring the journey from the centre to the margins undertaken by some Christians in the search for a more deep and authentic

26 Ibid., 36
experience of Christian praxis and mission. The thrust of the argument in these books seems to be that the church is transformed by the deliberate choice to embed itself in social change and radical expressions of social justice. In a volume exploring a series of case studies of intentional Christian communities entitled Working Faith – Faith-based Organisations and Urban Social Justice, Sam Thomas reflects on an Eden Project/Salvation Army project in Oldham, whose mission statement is to express their Christian faith by ‘working to improve their community through commitment, friendship, action, care, compassion, love and neighbourliness’.29 The project’s core team of paid staff and volunteers, all of whom live in the locality, were running drop-in youth clubs, football clubs, a multimedia project that provides positive stories and depictions of the neighbourhood, a school cookery club, a schools’ learning and support project, and an educational project linking a local comprehensive and a fee-paying former grammar school. Reflecting on the highs and lows of the experiences of those working in this project, including personal symptoms associated with burnout and depression, Thomas suggests that the margins seem to be speaking back to the church in new and often challenging ways, which is prompting new learning and reflecting on its role of creating new ‘assemblages of hope’.30

In what Thomas calls ‘dialogical’ spaces and moments of exchange generated between the centre and the margins, the church learns what it is to ‘theo-ethically embrace the otherness of those that the unchecked spirit of capitalism drives us to dispel and write-off’.31 In words that echo Bielo’s US research on disenchanted evangelicals seeking to authentically renew themselves in the culture of the world, Thomas articulates the renewed sense of purpose and discovery that emerges from this open dialogue between the centre and the margins. Instead of being ‘obsessed with self-enrichment and self-fulfilment’, he suggests, ‘these faithful Christians seem to be journeying into the wilderness in search of making the impossible possible, prophetically praying that dry riverbeds will run with crystal waters; a prayer that they are asking of themselves, as well as others in these disadvantaged communities’.32

This search for a more authentic form of Christian witness, mission and incarnational living is an attempt to live out a performative apologetics which highlights the potentially transformative power of religion and belief at an individual, locality and spiritual level. The implicit, but also increasingly explicit rationale behind this emphasis on self-reflective journeying and practical hands on engagement is the growing recognition that in this confused age of authenticity, re-enchantment, and the renewed interest in social justice and theo-ethics that goes with it, that faith is something that is ‘caught’ more than ‘taught’. To that end, mission needs to engage at an affective level of emotion, narrative and experience with people looking for a space to express both outrage but also hope, before it can perhaps also begin to engage at a cognitive (or intellectual understanding) level.

**CURATING SPACES OF HOPE AND CONNECTION IN BOTH MARGINALISED AND NEW COMMUNITIES**

The complexity of the new social, cultural, political and economic landscapes in which religion and belief are now embedded are evident in the wide range of case studies that were shared at the Pioneer conference and which are highlighted in this volume – old council estates, inner suburbs, new towns and garden cities. Some localities are resource poor, but have deep connection and relationships. Others are materially affluent, but chronically poor in relationships and a sense of belonging. Perhaps one missional response to those searching for a sense of identity and community, and yes perhaps searching for a sense of God (and surprised that they are engaged in this searching), is to curate new spaces of action, and curate new sets of conversations about the nature of our society and what sort of flourishing locality we want to build with those with whom we share a physically proximate location. By using the word ‘curate’ in this context I am interacting two levels of meaning. The first is the technical understanding of the term. It refers to the ability to ‘select, organise and look after the items in a collection or exhibition’ (Oxford Dictionaries Online). The second understanding originates in canon and

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30 Ibid, 83.
31 Ibid, 83.
32 Ibid, 83.
ecclesial law, where the verb ‘to curate’ identifies the duties of the ordained priest who is entrusted ‘to exercise pastoral responsibility’ via the ‘cure’ or ‘care’ of all the souls in their parish, irrespective of church membership or allegiance (Oxford Dictionaries Online).

At their best, churches and other faith groups hold the cure of souls and the cure and transformation of social and material structures in a unique and creative tension. For those citizens seeking a more authentic way of living that also ‘does something about something’ for the greater good, churches and faith-based organisations can offer structured, but also more improvised spaces in which to engage in either welfare provision, community building, or more radical and sustained projects of urban social justice. That authenticity is likely to be further nurtured by the chance to discuss the shared beliefs, values and worldviews that perhaps bring us into these new postsecular spaces of engagement and partnership.

In this way, churches create both public spaces of debate about what really matters, as well as then the opportunities by which to act on the impetus of those shared conversations. For those seeking re-enchantment, the creation of spaces of public ritual and memory making and narrative-making will need to be created, especially in new garden cities, town extensions and exurban communities built on the far-flung edge of established towns and linked only by dual carriageways and shopping hubs. The search for authenticity and re-enchantment is a growing phenomenon that sits uneasily and often oddly alongside a narrative of institutional religious decline and introverted agendas. A theology of mission must creatively and confidently engage this search for authenticity, both within and outside of the church.

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ANVIL: JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY AND MISSION

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