ECCLESIAL REFLECTIONS: ONE

Sketching a "Faith Landscape" for Millennials in the Developed World

There is nothing especially surprising about the idea that religions move with the times. In their need to adapt and survive, they are, like any organic species, conscious of their need to both resist and accommodate their environment. But what does this look like? In a word: mixed. Even a cursory glance at the landscape of religious belief in the twenty-first century will note changes. The damage now done to the Roman Catholic Church through scandals on child-sexual abuse have significantly weakened its authority in the eyes of the public. Placing the organisation of the institution above justice and truth – for that is how it is perceived – has caused irreparable damage to trust and confidence. In Ireland, once the 'priest factory of Europe', referendums on same-sex marriage and abortion rights, all of which granted progressive freedom, further point to the waning influence of the church.

Recent studies carried out by Gallup in the USA show how to what extent the cultural shifts on issues such as sexuality become, in the end, a force for change within the churches. For example, in 1977 56% of Americans thought that homosexual people should have equal rights in the workplace; the figure for 2004 is 89%. Support for gay clergy has moved in the same period from 27% to 56%. Some 60% of American in the 18-29 age-bracket now support same-sex 'marriage', compared to only 25% of those who are over the age of 65. The statistical surveys of churchgoers repeatedly show that there is growing toleration for same-sex unions in congregations and amongst clergy, across the ecclesial and theological spectra. All of which, suggests a church that will adapt and evolve in relation to its context (Myers & L. Scanzoni, 2005, 140-152).

Evangelical groups have been a particular research interest of mine over the last thirty years, and I observe that until recently, four cultural tropes have shaped their discourse, almost like unwritten laws: (1) we are growing (others are dwindling); (2) we are biblical (others are not); (3) our faith is true (beware of those who are false); and (4) we are right (others are wrong). You can find these tropes, alive and well, in some of the hard-core echelons of conservative Christian Unions, and amongst Conservative Evangelicals.

But increasingly, I hold, for Millennials and generation Z-ers, such tropes no longer make any sense. If they are still uttered at all, it is with some significant increase in cognitive dissonance. I have only to think back to a Christian Union talk I attended at university in 1983, as an undergraduate. Someone asked the speaker about the ultimate fate of Mohandas Gandhi, following the global success of Richard Attenborough's 1982 movie that explored Gandhi's life and times. Most of those who saw the film were deeply moved by the portrayal of Gandhi's non-violence, piety and faith. So, "was Gandhi saved?", asked the student. The speaker paused, and then said "probably – and I have heard he was a secret Christian". Now, there is no evidence that Gandhi was anything of the sort. But this was 1983. The University library was shut for the weekend. There was no social media. So the answer could stand until Monday, when the university library doors opened again.

In the kind of Evangelical 'bubble-worldview' of the early 1980's, assertions like this worked; but only just. The lack of access to immediate information meant it was possible to sustain tropes through an artful socio-spiritual construction of reality. Over the course of that term, we heard that there was a "big revival amongst the chemists", and we prayed for more of that, and that it would spread. (Incidentally, there wasn't, and it didn't. But such assertions are performative in character: this was perlocutionary religious rhetoric). Equally, you could join a prayer group that prayed for missionaries and conversions in Saudi Arabia. There was no counter-information to check up on this, and no statistics available. Social media makes this all very different now. Almost everyone has access to ready facts, news, alternative facts and fake news. Wikipedia would quickly confirm that the numbers of Christians in Saudi Arabia are miniscule, and unlikely as a percentage of the population to increase. This may sound naïve, but I think it is now almost inconceivable that any Christian group in a major university would seriously sanction prayer for the conversion of Muslims – let alone a Muslim nation.

So, what of now? In 2018, *Soul Survivor* announced its plans to cease convening. For over two decades, *Soul Survivor* – the brainchild of the gifted and entrepreneurial pastor Mike Pilavachi – has combined open charismatic-evangelical teaching and fellowship with cutting-edge music, worship and club culture. Millennials and Generation Z-ers have attended in their tens of thousands. These festivals have combined modern evangelical culture with contemporary arts and music, and by any standards, were impressive. (Imagine 'Glastonbury-meets-the-Christian-Union-prayer-meeting',   and   you'll   be

somewhere near the mark for what these gatherings might be like. They are branded as 'alternative' in their self-identity, though of course, strangely conservative in their own way too).

But the religious and cultural moorings that shaped the first gatherings no longer resonate. The world of Christian Union talks and Evangelicalism in the 1980's that gave birth to movements like *Soul Survivor* has ebbed away. Moreover, quite quickly. Whereas the evangelical culture of the early 1980's could sustain a worldview in which talks on the evils of masturbation and the dangers of "heavy petting" were relatively normal, the emerging generation now expect talks on gender equality, ecology and ethics. In the pre- and immediate post-Aids/HIV era of the early 1980's, same-sex relationships were unconscionable for mainstream evangelicalism. Now, many evangelical students in Christian Union groups will have friends in same-sex relationships, and it is unlikely that they will be telling them to repent, much less that they spend their eternity in hell. Some Christian Union groups will even be able to welcome openly gay students - and without them feeling alienated or persecuted. Times have changed.

As a general rule, Christian Union groups have become less propositional in orientation, and much more geared towards the relational and personal. So, far less teaching, much more fellowship. Their numbers are much smaller too. But a sample of one recent group in Oxford revealed a group who numbered in single figures who met for fellowship, and comprised, along with the normal range and representation of evangelical Christians, one Roman Catholic, a Jehovah's Witness, an Adventist, and one young man in a committed same-sex relationship. Such a mix would have been inconceivable even twenty-five years ago. Times have changed. More progressive Christian festivals such as *Greenbelt*, which is now over forty years old, and had evangelical roots, whilst not the driver of this change, is certainly a barometer. Most years will see the *Greenbelt* programme – along with the usual mixture arts and music – of positive and progressive messages on LGBTQ+ issues, gender justice, ethics, poverty and politics.

One might think that the church has some responsibility to engage with the reality of sexuality in the early years of the twenty-first century. But it is, I believe, failing in this regard, not least because the Bishops (certainly in the Church of England) tend to be somewhat intimidated by the bullying tactics of right-wing groupings and their supporters. Rather than grasping the nettle and addressing the *real* problem of homophobia, they frequently opt to kick the issue into the long grass. Evidence of this lies in the growing number of reports

and papers that have been commissioned over the years, of which I mention just a few here: *The Working Party on Sexuality* 1968; *The Gloucester Report,* 1979; *The Osborne Report,* 1987; *Issues in Human Sexuality,* 1991; *Some Issues in Human Sexuality, 2003*; and the recent *The Pilling Report,* 2013.

But here, times are changing too. The Church of England, having commissioned yet another report on sexuality in 2017, found that the General Synod refused to receive it. The bishops, in response, decided to commission a 'Teaching Document' on sexuality and marriage to be published in 2020. It is difficult to imagine what could possibly be said in this document that has not been said already. It is also somewhat naïve of the bishops to think that the stalling tactics that have operated for half a century in the sphere of human sexuality will continue to work in the very different climate of today's church and society.

Sketching Evolution and Revolution: Churches Struggle to Survive and Adapt

That the church lives in difficult times is not the problem; the fact that we constantly forget the church has always lived in difficult times – that is the problem. Every generation of Christians that has ever lived has lived in modern times. It is just that our modernity, and its challenges, are different from those of the past. But there are lessons to learn, I think?

One only need reach back five hundred years, to the age of Martin Luther, to see what the issues that faced Christendom then might also have some resonance for churches now. The invention of printing presses, and the fact that these were in the hands of the merchant and middle classes, meant that Martin Luther could publish his ninety-five theses and numerous tracts, at will. Even if he agreed to them being repressed, others could just print them overnight. Confiscate or burn them - as the Church tried to do - just meant people printed more.

Martin Luther, in other words, and in modern idiom, "went viral". Suddenly, it was no use the Roman Catholic Church telling everyone not to read the tracts; or not to trust the tracts they read. Or, to only listen to what the priest said the Bible meant, and not to translate or interpret it for themselves. Because now, everyone could read the Bible in their own language. There were lots of views and interpretations on meaning. So, people could make their own mind up, thank you very much.

The Roman Catholic Church lost its monopoly on expertise; and with it, authority - which passed from the Church to the people; and from the Church to individuals. An Age of Individualism was born in the Reformation. The invention of the printing press, and Luther's Reformation, is remarkably resonant. The Roman Catholic Church tried to insist in had the Truth; and not to read or listen to anything else. Threats of coercion, hell - even violence - did not work. People choose freedom. This was the Guttenberg Moment. The printing press - perhaps like the internet - meant people could select information, reason for themselves, and come to their own conclusions. Cheap print fed popular piety. The Roman Catholic Church was in the sixteen century was far too slow to adapt. The result was the Reformation. And then, the further splintering and fragmentation of communities followed.

Cheap print made everyone a potential expert. Individuals are similarly empowered with their computer, tablet or the internet. So this is our modernity: we live in the Age of an Information Revolution. And it is continuing to transform us. For example, my youngest son recently graduated from university. He hardly opened a book in his three year course. All his readings, chapters and journal articles were available on-line. He submitted his work on-line. He could 'live-stream' his lectures, and be in another place, yet still 'attend' classes. The library and the lecture theatre are now 'virtual'. His children will learn to read without books. They will understand emoji's before they can read. In contrast, my study is crammed with 3,000 of my own books. However, many of our new lecturers in Oxford have few books, if any - so their bookshelves often lie empty.

Churches are being left behind in this Information Revolution. When a major issue of division - say like sexuality - comes up, church leaders often point us back to reports written one, two or several decades ago. Bishops in the Church of England are still fond of drawing our attention to a 1987 Report called *Issues in Human Sexuality*, as though this had relevance today. But no person under the age of 40 would think a report written in 1987 was relevant - on any subject. None would read it. It is history. It belongs to a past that is a foreign country. And with the exception of tiny minority of people, no-one would think this had any bearing on how they lived today. Churches either have to resist the challenges and changes that contemporary culture brings, or accommodate them, and adapt. Resistance and accommodation can be uneven and nuanced, and often is across denominations. You can hold a line on the Christian ideal of marriage, for example, but quietly adapt to the reality of divorcees in your congregations.

But what is the lesson here? Paradoxically, it lies in understanding the unchanging 'hardware' of faith, and the constantly updating 'software' of belief. Think, for a moment, of your tablet, i-phone, laptop or computer. Its physicality and basic working does not change (i.e., the 'hardware'). But the 'software' does change - with that message that comes to all of us, and says "updates available - install now". Now, we all know what happens when you don't install these "updates". The phone or computer slows down. Eventually, it begins to stop working. If the church does not keep updating, it will simply stop and become obsolete.

The church is an institution with a lot of hardware - buildings, and core beliefs. I mean by this the actual creeds, the bible, and the core articles of faith. But everything else is 'software'. Practices, styles, taste: these are preferences. The meanings of scripture, and interpretations for life, to keep the church working efficiently in contemporary culture - subject to regular, though infrequent updates. The churches need to install the updates. To be sure, churches have to be resistant to contemporary culture.   But they must adapt as well - and update. If they fail to do that, the same fate awaits them as it did for the Roman Catholic Church five hundred years ago with the printing press and Martin Luther's mass-produced theses and tracts.

For Wade Clark Roof and William Mckinney (1987), the transition amongst the emerging generation is marked by movement from formal religious observance and membership to 'surfing' from congregation to congregation, and not belonging strongly to any one particular body of believers, and with an increased appetite for spirituality. Over thirty years ago, they wrote:

> 'Large numbers of young, well-educated middle-class youth[s]…defected from the churches in the late sixties and seventies…Some joined new religious movements, others sought personal enlightenment through various spiritual therapies and disciplines, but most simply "dropped out" of organized religion altogether…[there was a] tendency toward highly individualised [religion]…greater personal fulfilment and the quest for the ideal self…religion [became] "privatised" or more anchored to the personal realms' (Roof & McKinney, 1987, 7-8, 18-19, 32-33).

But lest this sound too pessimistic already, Sylvia Collins points out that religion is merely mutating rather than disappearing:

> '…spirituality…has moved from the self-spirituality of the boomer generation to a more aesthetic spirituality, a spirituality which is focused

on pleasure and experience in and of itself…Successful churches, it seems, offer an atmosphere and intimate experience of God over and above doctrine…the spirituality of intimacy of the millennial generation will be deeply bound up with the consumerism that has increasingly concerned youth throughout the post-war period…' (Collins, 2000, 233- 235).

The added power of consumerism in late modernity reinforces this sense: niche marketing to almost every age group for every stage of life is not only prevalent, but also highly successful. Wade Clark Roof notes that 'in times of social upheaval and cultural discontinuity especially, generations tend to become more sharply set off from one another' (1993, 3). And in the emerging faith of Millennials and Generation Z, although desires appear to be still clustered around fulfilment, there is also an increasing hunger for more around authenticity. This may be bad news for churches that put the needs and reputation of the institution ahead of justice and truth, and the impact of this can be traced in patterns of membership and belonging. Millennials and Generation Z-ers are likely to recuse themselves from institutions they associate with discrimination and injustice.

As Parks notes, there is a 'hunger for authenticity, for correspondence between one's outer and inner lives…a desire to break through into a more spacious and nourishing conception of the common life we all share…' (Parks, 2000, 9-16). Parks' work is one of the few treatments of faith and belief in the 'twenty-something' age group, and her work is a prescient consideration of how generational change evolves within itself, even to the point of questioning the contemporary bewitchments of consumerism and self-fulfilment. For churches and congregations, there are important prior lessons to be learnt from sociology before the development any new effective missiology can take place. Something, I'm sure, Jim Cotter would have us pay some attention to.

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