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Mission and Evangelism Global Action and Networking

Evolution, God and World Mission Encounters

Mission Agencies worldwide are going through a period of massive change. Maybe it has ever been thus. But the speed and intensity of change surrounding us in the early years of the twenty-first century mark it out as a period of perhaps unusual complexity and challenge.

Globalisation, post-imperialism, economics, the re-alignments of power in international relations, the fragmentation of cultures and the rise of nationalisms and fundamentalisms - all these and more re-inforce the sense of bewilderment and uncertainty facing us all.

I recently attended a lecture in London on Emergence Theory - linking scientific debate around the great questions surrounding the origins of life to changing understandings both of anthropology and theology. It led me to reflect on what I observe emerging in the context of Mission and the World Church, and to ask questions about the nature and direction of change.

Emergence Theory

The lecture in question was the 2006 Boyle Lecture, delivered in the Church of St Mary le Bow, adjacent to St Paul's Cathedral in London, by Professor Philip Clayton of the Claremont School of Theology in California. His title was "The emergence of Spirit: from Complexity to Anthropology to Theology". The lecture was set in the context of a repudiation of the arguments for Intelligent Design currently hijacked, especially in the USA, to defend a doctrine of creationism over against evolution.

Emergence Theory may happily allow for the possibility of intelligent design as a rational way of understanding part of the evolutionary model, but it is a far cry from intelligent design (Capital "I", capital "D").

Emergence Theory, Professor Clayton contests, states that "analogies between various cases of emergent complexity are strong enough to support emergence theory over reduction as the more adequate philosophy of science and as a fundamental characteristic of natural history".

A reductionist view of evolution states simply that life as we know it is as a result of chance, and that all attempts at understanding meaning and purpose fall away before the simple truth that one level of complexity in evolution depends on one earlier, simpler form - right back to the very beginning - to the self-emerging Big bang.

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If we took such a reductionist view of the complexity of the mission challenge facing the church in the world today, we would land up with a form of theological despair, in which either we would lose all sight of transformation as a positive goal, or would fall prey to the Creationist view that somehow the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition acts only on the outside of the cosmos - the old *deus ex machina* - thus abandoning any serious understanding of incarnation. Alternatively it is left falling back on a theory of Intentional Design, which most in the scientific community would regard as a quite inadequate alternative to the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and those who have followed his lead over the past century.

Complexity, however, according to Professor Clayton, is that which allows us to see the interaction of increasing and developing molecular and chemical activity giving rise to that which we cannot any longer define in terms of molecule or chemistry alone: something new emerges, and demands a new language to describe it. Hence there is a legitimacy in talking of animate over inanimate matter, and then of personhood over against animate matter. Something truly new emerges - and complexity in the evolutionary system allows for a series of quantum leaps forward to be made.

From personhood, Professor Clayton moves on to analyse what people as people learn and experience, what it means to be in relationship, and hence what it means to talk of the next emergent stage, that of Spirit, and spirituality. (Note this is not "better" or "separate" from personhood, but is rendered possible as a result of the increasingly complex nature of the physical/communal developments). None of these developments, he argues, are inconsistent with either natural law, or with evolutionary theory as currently understood. In fact, he says, it offers a more rational, more scientific understanding, because it takes into account observable data and phenomena.

Emergent affirmations

Based on this theory of Emergence, therefore, it becomes possible to affirm a number of important things:

- ◆ our humanity over against our animality, and our sense of being community - or Society (pace, Mrs Thatcher) - over against our being solely a series of individuals relating to one another more as snooker balls on the table, than as pieces of a subtle and inter-related jig-saw puzzle.
- ◆ An affirmation of the value of tradition, as being in itself an aspect of the evolutionary process - the handing on of the corporate memory and experience of the community, and yet the possibility of tradition affirming the new that breaks in - the moment of the Spirit - that is both part of the

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tradition and a “new thing” emerging from it, and in its turn informing and interpreting it anew. (This reflects for example Paul Tillich’s understanding of God being both “in spite of” and “because of” rational experience.)

- ◆ In a missiological context, that the local church, wherever it finds itself is capable of being both part of the universal church, and something unique and distinctive in its own culture and context. Its very distinctiveness, and that of its local theology, becomes the means whereby it finds its place in the whole, and offers to it, its own critique and judgement.
- ◆ In terms of Communion, and for example its expression in the current struggles being experienced within the Anglican Communion over the issue of human sexuality, it actually calls for us to attend to, and hold in tension, the values of the tradition and the experience of the new in the local cultural and social context.
- ◆ Part of the blockage in understanding in the present debate has to do with the western Church’s inability to grasp the new thing that is represented in a truly (for example) African contextual theology; and a parallel inability among parts of the church in the global south to understand the new place in which the western Church finds itself seeking to engage in mission in a radically different post-modern cultural context.

Tradition and Change

The question arising out of all this for me is where is the link between the tradition and the emergent really felt? The tension is obvious, but where is the link? What if you like, is the DNA string that holds together the communities of faith, when the experiences of being hand, foot, nose, mouth, or buttock are all so radically differently felt and expressed?

Now some would argue, very simply, that the DNA is the Word of God, the Scriptures. Hold on to that, and truth and falsehood will be revealed, and rational, moral and ethical decisions all fall into place.

But Emergence theory tests this understanding of Scripture, and challenges its simplicity. What if, even in the Scriptures, truth is an emergent, not a static thing? What of the God of the Old Testament, and the steadily growing and changing understanding of God that is expressed in the stories and encounters of the Patriarchs, the Prophets and the Kings? What of the “new thing” that is found - and done - in Christ, and on the pages of the New Testament? Each step is of the tradition, but each step also radically challenges, and supersedes it.

Others would claim the DNA is more in the Tradition, or in the Word and the Tradition combined; and would equally refute the new, if it did not directly flow from either.

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Professor Clayton's take on Emergence might be helpful here. For emergence in nature, he argues, is a result of increasing complexity, not increasing simplicity. It is when divergent, complex, subtle interactions happen, where history and experience really lock horns, that the environment is created in which the "new thing" can happen, or emerge. This is a clear critique, in my view, of the ease with which some faith communities fall back into simplistic solutions or dogmatic formulae, almost as a defence mechanism against complexity. The growth of fundamentalism as a religious and political phenomenon bears witness to this process.

One benefit of globalisation, for instance, is that the increasing complexity of the modern world, or indeed the modern global church, is not a cause for wringing anxiety, but for anticipating the "kairos" moments when the new and appropriate truth for today may emerge out of the myriad interactions represented in the complexity.

Here we should note, and affirm, the value of cross-cultural placements in mission. USPG's experience of encouraging mission "from everywhere to everywhere", would attest strongly the value of such committed engagements, through which a serious process of listening, reflecting, and engaging across many of the divides that, left unchanneled, could drive us all apart. An Indian Christian engaging in inter-faith dialogue in South Africa, an English priest teaching theology in a Brazilian Seminary, an African exploring HIV issues in Britain, a Sudanese Christian ministering to international sailors in the port of Dar es Salaam - all of these encounters, and countless others, allow the church to wrestle with what is emerging as the truth of God in one place, and that truth enlightening others elsewhere

An emerging and emergent God

What if, and here the theory becomes truly challenging, if God himself is an Emergent God? A God who by His very life and being is dynamic not static, relational not super-cosmic, and truly incarnated by His own choice, rather than transcendent in the sense of standing right outside the created order of things?

This kind of God, the God within, the God of questions more than answers, of weakness and vulnerability more than strength and might, reveals himself in emerging from what has been, and calling us to what will become.

Pursuing this line of enquiry further into the context of the mission of the worldwide church, are we not confronted with a God who is emerging, whose

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epiphany is all around, and who is recognised wherever people come together to wrestle with the paradoxes, anguish and misery of the world around them, and to celebrate and delight in its newness and its wonder?

Reflecting on my own experience as a missionary in South Africa, and as a Parish priest in the UK, reminds me how discovering the “new” in one context later illuminates the journey of faith in another. Sharing the anguished search for hope in the midst of the devastation of apartheid with those who were victims of appalling violence, taught me how to better recognise and understand those who were marginalised and abused in one of the great cities of northern Britain. Emergent truth, transcending culture and context, speaks new things into new contexts, as a result of both the complexity, and the engagement.

Moving from the particular to the general, then, the value of the tradition, and of the wider Communion, is to help us to test out what is of the Spirit and what is not, because the tradition itself is alive with the stories of previous encounters with newness. The value of the Communion is in that it summons us to live with, and alongside, people whose glimpse of the Emerging God is revealing something perhaps as yet hidden to us, in the narrow and closed world of our limited time-and-space. We need not to stifle the new, but to shape and energise it in accordance with the emerging DNA of the community of faith itself.

Emergence in Mission praxis

My reaction to professor Clayton’s lecture, as a total layman in the scientific world, was first one of challenge to my own ignorance, and then of a chance to think about my own work within an Anglican Mission Agency with a 300 year history.

USPG was founded in 1701, and we are proud of all that our history has led to in terms of the growth of the Anglican Communion worldwide. However, at each stage of our history, there has been a living struggle to discern what has truly been of God and what has not. Truths have emerged, as have falsehoods.

For years the Society endorsed and practiced slavery in the Caribbean. Later the truth emerged of the evil of this practice; the Society sought to repent and move forward, and with others became instrumental in the fight to remove this blight from our history.

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Similarly our part in the imperial expansion of the West is not one we are proud of, yet what emerged out of the process was a contemporary Society radically committed to social change and to solidarity with the poor of the world.

More recently the emergent change has been from post-colonial models of mission to those based on companionship, and mutual sharing of gifts and resources. Step by step, out of success and failure, has emerged new truth, new inspiration for mission. And no doubt today also, we will be judged in history to be children of our time - yet a community perhaps who will continue to dare to learn new things out of the reality of the present.

Transcendence and Change

So in what direction is this Emergent Theology leading us? Some pointers:

- ◆ *The creativity of change* - Change is neither to be regretted nor embraced for its own sake, but rather as we influence it, and it influences us, we recognise that it is part of the emergence of truth, part of the life of a changing God, who lives and dwells in relationship with the created order.
- ◆ *The continuity of change* - Change is not the opposite of tradition, but rather it is its true expression. "Constant change is here to stay" as the sign said on the manager's door. This means we are not necessarily trying to create perfection - the very Kingdom of God itself is not a fixed order, but a harmony of living relationships.
- ◆ *The transcendence of change* - to say that God is in the changes we experience may sound stilted and trite: but if God is truly incarnate, then his life will be found and expressed in every part of the cosmos Christ came to redeem, and the challenge of Mission is to recognise and work with that Emerging stream of love; and there is a continuing paradox here: God transcends the change, but the change itself is also a part of the transcending God. Food for thought.

Some tentative conclusions

- ◆ Emergence theory gives ground for encouragement and hope for the church, in that; however fast-changing and potentially de-stabilising the modern world may be, it is essentially that which continues to demonstrate the goodness and power of the life of God as God-in-Creation.
- ◆ *God is not just interested in the cosmos but God is in the cosmos.* He is emergent Spirit, brooding, waiting, lurking in the shadows, erupting in the joys and sorrows of the world.
- ◆ *God is not just in favour of mission, but God is intrinsically a God-in-mission.* Mission is dynamic, moving reaching out, moving from what has

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been to what might be; but it is also about recognising what is emerging all around, where lives are being changed, hope restored, courage and wisdom evoked.

- ◆ *Mission is not just about people but about the redemption of the cosmos.* Evolution explains many of the mysteries of our past, but leaves many questions. Emergence allows, within that naturalistic theory, for a rational understanding of the possibility of the divine, yet within. It is the task of mission to seek it out, to recognise it, and to proclaim it with passion.
- ◆ *Mission finds its true self when it represents an encounter* between different experiences of God's reality emerging in the life of different people, and different communities, owning their own history, tradition, culture and context.
- ◆ *Mission is as much about secular transformation as about individual renewal.* These are not "either-or"s: they are "both-and"s. There is much talk of holistic mission, indeed it is often a slogan claimed by conflicting groups seeking the missiological high-ground. But "crooked is the way and narrow the gate, and few there be" that find a truly holistic view: it is the path of wisdom, of prayer, even of sainthood; and while it may be that which in part rationally emerges, it is also that which is in humility and servanthood, received as new, and offered again.
- ◆ *More than anything else, Emergence theory might be seen as a call to the Mission Agencies, to listen more attentively, and to observe more closely, all that is happening in the midst of the complexities of the emerging world church, and to walk with them whatever new paths they wish us to share with them, while testing each step against the wisdom, the DNA stream, of the shared inheritance of faith.*

Revd Canon Edgar Ruddock

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Global context of change
Church context of change
Confusions and questions

Boyle Lecture on Emergence of Spirit
Complexity, anthropology, theology

Knowledge and experience
Scientific reductionism
Experience and discovery of the new
This not inconsistent with empirical scientific view of world

Tillich's "In spite of/because of"

Tradition and newness - are they inconsistent?
What is the DNA of the continuity?
New religious movements
New experiences of church in changing culture/cross culture

Vision/values debate in USPG

Outcomes

The creativity of change
The continuity of change
The transcendence of change

God not just interested in the cosmos but in the cosmos
Not just in favour of mission, but intrinsically mission
Mission not just about people but about the redemption of the cosmos
Mission as much about secular transformation as about individual renewal