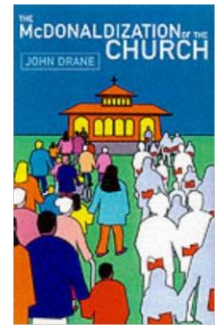


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The McDonaldization of the Church – spirituality, creativity and the future of the Church

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Alison Morgan April 2001



Stimulating, interesting inclusion of personal perspective. First part better than second.

Preface

Realisation that we cannot continue to do things the same ways as our forebears; our inherited patterns of belief and discipleship belong to a way of being oriented towards the past. Previous generations have done good job of contextualising the gospel into the culture of their day, but we have become disconnected from their vision and enthusiasm.

1. Cultural change in personal perspective

We keep analysing postmodernity, but are we being too precise, and is it making any difference to our effectiveness? Church in UK predominantly over 50 and female. At a time of burgeoning spirituality all over the world, Europe is the one place that seems to buck the trend. In general the church is in decline; people are leaving: and often claim that doing so is actually a way of maintaining their faith. Church is boring, and not conducive to personal growth. Many churches/church leaders have lost a sense of confidence in the ability of the system to address their own deepest needs. 'far from having some clearly articulated world view or cultural position, today's people – Christians included – actually seem to be faced with nothing but chaos and confusion as we journey toward new ways of being' 6. Values of modernity have been rejected; but not replaced with some other coherent world view.

Sociologists, esp George Ritzer on the so-called McDonaldization thesis; and theologians, esp D Browning, *A Fundamental practical theology* – theology as critical reflection on the church's ministry to the world. Browning stresses the need for the commentator to be honest and transparent in locating self in relation to the subject/object of study.

Where author is coming from.

Remarks that most of the people now attracted by what would once have been seen as wacky ideas are the ones who a generation or two ago would have been pillars of their local churches, and this is one of the key reasons for the decline of the church today.

Hubris in academia; deconstruction the only orthodoxy; 'if there is today an emperor who truly has no clothes, then this pseudo-intellectual pursuit would have a good claim to the title' 13. Idea that you can have no world view but sit outside it all in judgment is incoherent and unworkable, and boils down to clumsy attempt to silence those who disagree with the liberal consensus. It is rational individualism, end product of *I think therefore I am*. Complaint that academic theology fails to refer to the concrete situation of the church in the modern world. Contrasts this with his wife's work as a Christian clown. And with a Kenyan comment, *I am, because we belong*. Suggests that the Church is declining because its theology brings this about.

2. Rational systems and human values

Need to be more than intellectual – Jesus' focus was on people, and effective mission cannot be restricted to cognitive discussions.

Rise of technological society; but with it, other questions about the meaning of life and the worth of people have become more insistent. Negative side to the technological revolution too – global warming, pressure of increased information, transportation, unemployment/overwork. 'A world dominated by the pressures of achieving career success, on the one hand, and the insistent demands of consumerism on the other, is becoming less attractive as a sustainable way of life' 20. People define selves by the work they do (try asking, 'tell me about yourself'). Daily life is no longer carried out in a relational context; we are the only people in the whole of history who have supposed that our mechanistic and individualistic understanding of life is the way to become fulfilled and whole persons.

Metanarratives assume some kind of shared experience of life, and today the notion of community has become problematic. But he thinks we still want one; just it's harder to find. We have become positively distrustful of other people, so that we regularly find selves desperate for community and meaningful relationships, but quite incapable of accepting either ourselves or anyone else. The rationalist-materialist world view has led to lives that are fractured and broken, and has created personal dysfunction on a grand scale. Rise of caring professions – we now pay people to care. Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption*. Increasingly influential voices rare now insisting that the cultural norms developed in Western society over the last 200-300 years have played a crucial part in undermining the essential human quest for personal fulfilment and meaningful spirituality. Cp films. The world we have created for ourselves seems not to be real. People are now at the point where they are ready to question the values of our culture. Examples – people leaving high paid jobs to spend more time with families; rise of high risk sports. Desire to find something more 'authentic' than our regularly pre-packaged lifestyle, 27. Question therefore: 'is church as we know it just too bland, dull and safely predictable for people who crave an experience of radical challenge?' 28. McDonalidization – rationalisation of everything. Even our own free time has become a product which we purchase from somebody else (package holidays, theme parks). TQA in univs. A human quest becomes a bureaucratic procedure. If the church offers only the same things as the rationalised world of work, why should people who are oppressed elsewhere in their lives expect to find a resolution by joining the church? 'Could it be that we have allowed our churches and their structures to be taken over by the creeping rationalisation of modernist culture, and we now find ourselves suffering all the drawbacks of that with very few of the advantages of it?'

3. The Church and the iron cage

Ritzer – 4 key characteristics of the McDonalidization process: efficiency, calculability, predictability, control. Apply these to the church...

Efficiency

A good thing; but it is done by the system, not by the individual. People are trained to do things in a particular way. Young people prone to it too (no role models, so a major source of personal identity becomes conformity to an image, eg sex as personal entertainment, despite lack of rational benefits). In the Church we love rationalised systems, programmes, spiritual fast food, how-to books. But pre-packaged spirituality is no longer a premium product. Christian faith not about processing people as if they were all the same; life is messy, and meaningful spirituality needs to take account of that.

Calculability

This means size and quantity – tendency to equate quality with quantity. Cp academic world, value judged by numbers of publications. But numerical growth doesn't necessarily mean spirituality, just as decline can't be justified as quality not quantity. Most church growth in W is not growth but transfer. Need to ask not, how many of us are there, but how like Christ have we become? Need not to limit length of services to present time. Ie, measuring fixed parameters isn't what it about; it about spirituality.

Predictability

This one easy to identify in the church! People in the church tend to be those who like predictability; but loads out there like experimentation and change. This is a major stumbling block to effective evangelism in today's postmodern congregation. Hence the desire to imitate other people's successful models; to put everyone through Alpha/Emmaeus (with diff results), etc. But our social context is so diverse that even a small town can contain several diff subcultures, and the gospel needs to be contextualised differently in each.

Control

Issues of power and control are the subtext to everything so far. In society, loyalty cards give control (info about our spending habits); attendants in theme parks, uniforms in McDonald's, etc. In church we have evangelistic crusades with counsellors who follow a dress code and a greetings ritual and who love you, and send you out through the bookstore. Or we have lay ministries, meaning that the laity do the jobs only the clergy used to do, and if their innate gifts and talents are unconventional, we find it hard to change the system to accommodate that. We identify in other people only those gifts that are not going to challenge the position of the established leadership. Small groups can become another control mechanism, unless they have the space to develop as fully functioning churches within themselves; otherwise they become shallow pseudo-communities, rather than being allowed to develop into open networks of mutual support, encouragement and healing.

One might have thought that the Christian tradition would have been a major opponent of the commodification of human life; nothing further from the truth. The reality is that the Church invented globalisation long before anyone else thought of it – Christendom was at least as powerful as a multinational corporation such as McDonalds. All goes back to Constantine.

He isn't sure that McDonaldisation should be located only within the shift from modernity to postmodernity. But it is probably the key issue Christians need to engage with. There is spiritual searching out there; and yet we seem to have ended up with a secular Church in a spiritual society.

4. Whom are we trying to reach?

Inescapable facts: Church in decline in W; and that we live in a time when the overt search for spiritual meaning has never been more intense than it is now. Church has by and large been negative about the developing signs of postmodernity, from Beatles to anti-apartheid. Generation born at the turning of the cultural tide was that between end 2WW and 1960. Church has sided with the moderns; but *all* the generations to come will be postmodern. Postmoderns do not like to be pigeonholed, and find that the reduce to a series of predictable rational categories the rich variety of our experience of God is too restrictive and inauthentic. This is the iron cage. Result that many churches have become the preserve of the middle-aged to elderly. The kinds of people we need to reach are:

The desperate poor

Gap between haves and have-nots has widened. McDonaldisation disempowers have-nots – who can't even take initiative to polish shoes on the streets without a licence. Immigrants, those with mental health problems, homeless. But mainstream churches have never been accessible to these people, throughout history.

The hedonists

Those who deal with the discontinuities and pressures of life today just by partying at every possible opportunity. They live for themselves. The desire is escape. There are no role models, and so these people have no idea what reality actually is, or what to believe in, or even what they do believe. When they search for images that might help them to form identity, all they find is a combination of music videos and advertising, which provide nothing more substantial than an 'attitude' to imitate. Like the poor, the party-goers have never been part of the church.

The traditionalists

People who are fundamentally happy with where they are now, and like the world they are used to living in – community, family, locality. They are misunderstood by politicians, who present manifestos for dismantling this traditional lifestyle in the belief that people want to be rescued from it. They want the spoken word, personal life stories, group identity. Working class traditionalists in particular don't want theorising. Hence success of 'fundamentalist' churches in such places.

The spiritual searchers

Motivated by a desire for self-fulfilment. The search is the important thing. They find rationalised living unsatisfactory, want to put reason in its place and live more directly from the heart; rationality is good for shopping lists but a bad guide to relationships and spirituality. These are people who feel at home in a postmodern setting, and are comfortable with the image-dominated culture which is now the norm. This is the most crucial group, because of size and influence. These are the movers and shakers, the people who would have been pillars of the church in a previous age. They may not know what they mean by 'spirituality', but they contrast it with 'religion', as an all-embracing reality which gives meaning to the whole of life. Holistic. The church is irrelevant; it has lost its ability to speak to them. The old paradigm said, if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new one says, if you experience God, you will have the right teaching. The church's inability to relate to this group is the single most sig reason for the decline, and unless and until we are able to reimagine the Church in ways that will relate to their deep desire to find meaning and direction in life, the decline of recent years will undoubtedly continue.

The corporate achievers

People whose lives are dominated by their career. Since few make it to the top, most aren't achievers at all. But they have to project the image, by lifestyle. Lonely and fragmented lifestyle results. It looks like drive to reach potential; in fact it means the corporate image. This group feels most at home in a McDonaldised world, and they often end up in lay leadership, not due to their spiritual competence, but due to the image of success they project. But they bring the philosophy of corporate enterprise into the church.

The secularists

The only group left who defend the conventional liberal beliefs of an Enlightenment world. but because of the positions they occupy, they play a large part in determining the officially sanctioned definitions of reality and meaning that are reflected in our education system, in media, in govt. Powerful group. They offer an orthodoxy of doubt. Their world view takes its shape from a prior rejection of the gospel.

The apathetic

Those whose lives centre round what others regard as trivialities – life gets its structure from daily rituals that cannot be interrupted. Work provides a rhythm to life, and routine is used as a distraction from uncertainty about the meaning of it all.

Most churches have only traditionalists and corporate achievers. Most of the groups we make little attempt to reach. But the spiritual searches will not be reached by the churches we now have; the traditionalists need something more community and relationally oriented. Both these groups don't like the deductive approach, both want meaningful relationships, both are likely to be available for social action. Desperate poor need challenge to take control of their lives; hedonists for selfishness and irresponsibility; spiritual searchers need to accept the rational is part of life; corporate achievers to be less competitive and more sharing.

5. *Celebrating the faith*

About worship. Since worship is fundamental to being human, it might seem a good way to intersect with those who have yet to encounter the gospel in a form they are able to hear. Theological training: designed for the express purpose of ensuring that none except their own kind will be able to relate to what they have to say...

Matthew Fox, *The Reinvention of Work*, identifies 7 key features of church life which can be traced to secularising influences of modern culture:

- machinelike rituals lacking spirit and prayerfulness
- rituals inanimate and without ultimate purpose
- bland and colourless, inert like the modernist cosmos
- disconnected from bodies
- lacking in spontaneity and freedom
- church architecture which sets worshippers up as spectators
- Enlightenment view of God as supreme engineer, requiring worship in rationalised forms

Spaces for worship and church interior design

McDonaldisation of liturgy, including Eucharist (plastic wafers) and baptism (token sprinkle). 'Nowhere does the gospel call us to be curators of antiquities' 100.

Movement in worship; need it. Dance in his experience, liberating, effective.

6. *Prophetic gifts*

'Once we begin to view our biblical roots through the spectacles of the challenge now placed before us by the emergence of post-modern culture, it is surprising how many points of convergence there are – by which I mean, insights that are as old as the earliest strands of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and yet which look as if they could have been tailor-made for the circumstances in which we now find ourselves' 113. This particularly true of dance and drama. All OT festivals had drama; and notion of word becoming flesh is good interpretation of what drama is. Jesus used drama – Last Supper. See also baptism. OT – prophets. Bear in mind that 7% of impact comes through words, 38% through vocal signals, 55% through non-verbal signals. Lots of examples given from OT and NT. Also mime. Cp Hebrew word *dabar*, which implies a speaking more dynamic and full of cosmic energy than the kind of disembodied words we have been used to encountering.

Theatrical tradition in church history.

Clowns and martyrs. If we are to empower people in the spiritual search today, we need to find vehicles that will allow us to be real about ourselves. Humour is one way of doing that; clowning juxtaposes the worlds of success and failure, hero and fool, and enables us to laugh at ourselves. They did it in Warsaw; thousands of people took to the streets every night in late 80s, dressed as clowns; no speeches, rallies (illegal) but social protest nonetheless, and impossible to crack down on – for being dressed as *clowns*? Jesus often portrayed as juxtaposing completely different worlds alongside each other; this is the world of the clown. Tragicomic world – donkey, INRI, drawing in sand, Peter as Rock. Parables are classic clowning. Liebenow: 'parables were never intended to be instruction manuals.. They were intended to confuse the rational. Those who intend to understand God rationally are doomed to failure, for God is not rational... We have to learn to react from feeling, rather than from thought. It is only through living the parables that we can come to understand them' 125. Clown is symbol of hope, character who never gives up believing that the impossible will someday become possible; a nonconformist, vulnerable; a clown demonstrates the foolishness and weakness of the gospel. Christ as a wandering troubadour, with no place to lay his head; as a clown in the circus parade, satirising authority with regal pageantry when he has no earthly power, mocked by enemies and crucified with a sign over his head. God is neither rational nor logical.

7. Telling the story

No metanarratives? But more stories than ever before – film. Evidence of popular culture supports search for metanarrative. New Age popular because it has no metanarrative, but because it offers a different one from the one the W has traditionally embraced, offering universalism, pluralism, tolerance, individual choice, mystery, ambiguity in preference to the traditional exclusivity, hierarchy, rationality. Post-modern people do believe in truth, but it is a truth embodied not in truth structures but in particular values such as freedom, individualism, integrity, tolerance, the importance of nature, value of a spiritual connection, belief that people should serve others. If modernity turned out to be too scientific, too rational and logical, too Western and individualistic, ignoring the mystical and spiritual side of life and imperialistically imposing a view of absolute truth, then post-modern culture espouses the antithesis of such beliefs. It values a holistic view of humanity and the world. The inspiration behind modernity was the categories of Greek philosophical discourse; but in world terms, they have been only one of many possible ways of understanding modernity. The gulf between traditional formulations of Christian belief and the emerging culture of the W is as great as that between the ancient world views of the Indian subcontinent and traditional W concepts. Contextualisation is essential if our message is to be heard, let alone understood. Once again, story has to become a primary vehicle for meaning. Interesting, isn't it, that the bible is written in story form, not conceptualised. Stories cross cultural boundaries, leave open questions, speak to the whole of experience.

Cp medicine – new recognition after period of reductionism that people are not machines, but that feelings, relationships and personal history impinge significantly on their health and wellbeing.

There are 3 connecting stories – God's story (natural theology/creation-centered spirituality), bible stories, personal stories.

David Hay – religious experience is normal.

NB email takes us back to the characteristics of an oral, not written culture; we don't write letters, we have conversations by email.

8. Dreaming the church of the future

Church cannot expect to continue to survive for long into the C21st in its present form. Consumerism doesn't satisfy, and a McDonaldised existence is less than fully human. Offers no blueprint; we need to ask what the church might now need to look like in the place we each are; for there is no magic ingredient. But the entry points will be *community* and *mystery*.

Need to shift from word-based to image-based culture. We may not like it; but Plato didn't like the rise of literacy instead of oral culture either: 'this invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it.. They will not need to exercise their memories, being able to rely on what is written'. 164.

Mission also needs to be released from McDonaldisation. People looking for something that works; and that means something which increases love, provides inner peace and a sense of meaning, and establishes a safe place where people feel they can belong. Need to include women's ways of looking at things, traditionally discarded.

Martin Luther said that if you preach the gospel in all its aspects with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time, you are not presenting the gospel at all.

Jesus' missionary style: consistently honest about the mess that is sin; never instilled a sense of guilt in those he met; always held out possibility of a new start and fresh empowerment to be the best people they could possibly be. 179. Good principles.