

John Finney: Fading splendour? - a new model of renewal

DLT 2000

Notes by Alison Morgan June 2004

Introduction: why do cups of tea always become lukewarm?

Newman: 'every great movement seems to start with a prophet and end up with a policeman'. Renewals have been indispensable to the Church's vitality – but they have tended to fade. Does God expect us to be disappointed?

A new paradigm – Thomas Kuhn noticed that when a new scientific theory was proposed it went through a pattern of rejection, resuscitation and finally acceptance; once it had become received wisdom things were never seen in the same light again. The same is true in theology.

In times of revival, 'local church leaders have sometimes tried to copy another church and hoped they would see the same results; they have admired the story of its life and wanted *their* church to be the same. That way lies frustration and disenchantment. Every revival is a newly minted coin. It is different from any that has ever been before or that will ever come after. We can learn from it, but we can never duplicate it. The HS does his work with human beings in their context – and both are unique. Besides, if all we had to do was to copy, where would be the faith, where the excitement of treading new paths? Where could we learn the ways of a trail-blazing God?' xii

What is renewal?

Hard to define; its meaning can be suggested by a series of names – Taize, Iona, Greenbelt, Cursillo et al. It can be *individual* – someone conscious of being touched by God and having a closer relationship with him. Or *congregational* – a local church is renewed, and changes its attitude to mission, styles of worship, organisational structure. Or *denominational* – church wide changes eg Reformation, Vatican II.

Renewal is not *reform* or *revival*. Reform is to do with human things, structures and liturgies and procedures. Revival is to do with a work of God in bringing people to repentance and faith. 'In general usage, renewal is seen as less directly God's work and more under the control of individuals or churches' xv. Reform is primarily a human exercise, albeit guided by God. Revival is a divine irruption, though using human agents. Renewal is in the middle – both divine and human.

Renewal:

- ◆ begins with an encounter between God & man, God taking the initiative
 - ◆ is based on hearing the Bible afresh
 - ◆ occurs only through the HS
 - ◆ is characterised by repentance
 - ◆ restores true fellowship
 - ◆ means that the message of the gospel is proclaimed to both Church and world – and that this is the normal work of the Church
- Visser t'Hooff**

We shall see in this book the difficulties which come from the desire of those pursuing renewal to maintain what is perceived to be its original fire and purity through increasingly autocratic means. In the short term it can appear to work, but only at the cost of stifling new life. Sooner or later the dam bursts. xxv

Renewal is always partial, precarious. It can be defined as 'a revitalisation of the life of an

organisation or individual which revives what has become stale, reinvigorates what has become routine and opens up new possibilities. In religious matters it is partly the work of God and partly the work of human beings and can be distinguished from both reform and revival.' xvii

Practical theology

Theology must be earthed: practical theology is the thinking of the Church transmuted into the action of the Church – there must be a constant interchange between the academic and the church on the ground. Best if the agenda for the scholar is set by the experience of the church, not v.v.

1. Hypothesis

New ideas in science go through certain stages. John contends that this is true for renewal too; and that it can be supported by looking at renewals in history. The stages are: mystery→ individual hypothesis→general hostility/small group of adherents→examination→debate→a new terminology→media interest→absorption.

The stages of renewal (can be applied to individuals and congregations as well as the wider church):

1. Renewal – usually begins with one person or group: something happens
2. Conflict – meets with distrust from those who have not had the same experience
3. Networking – people are pushed together, the movement grows
4. Definition – moving from testimonies to statements of faith: the struggle to measure relationship with the Church. Renewal often seen as a break for freedom; but at this stage often restriction returns as rules are re-established. The freedom of the Reformation became the intrusion of the kirk into every detail of life for the Scots in the C16th; the charismatic movement became the rigidity of ‘discipling’.
5. Divergence – some remain within the institutional Church (‘strand B’) and others leave (‘strand A’)
6. Outside communication – renewal becomes part of the tradition and begins to reach outside the Church
7. Consequences – several possibilities: fragmentation; new denomination; assimilation.

2. Sociology and all that

Sociologists have studied renewals. Caveats: sociologists (and many Christians) tend to focus on what people believe – but this may not be the right q for Christianity, which is based on commitment to a person as much as belief in a creed. Emphasis in belief is characteristic of our society in a way it isn’t of others – eg you can be a Jew and not believe in God. Factors other than belief are often important to people; we don’t realise what an unusual question ‘what do you believe?’ is. Faith is driven by enthusiasm; experience is of equal value to theological precision.

Sociologists distinguish between a sect (no negative connotation: means a clearly defined community, coherent structure of value, element of protest against the status quo) and a church (the stable organisation from which the sect emerges). Sects spring from churches over a point of tension, but gradually settle into relationship with them as the sect has to develop internal structures, grows, defines itself, seeks acceptance in society. New Religious Movements provide examples, both sane and insane, of this process.

When examining new movements’ credentials it’s not always possible to be precise. Smail: ‘the best prophecies only have a third from God, but what a third!’ .28

The routinisation of charisma.

Bosch: ‘either a movement disintegrates or it becomes an institution – this is simply a sociological law’. It’s generally seen as a retrograde process, with spiritual power decreasing and the excitement level going down. It has various stages:

1. the membership becomes increasingly affluent
2. the status of clergy is important
3. the educational level of the congregation rises
4. a sense of history begins to intervene (they begin to define selves as part of the historical tradition of the Church, often seeing their role as restoring something which has been lost)
5. apologetics makes an entrance
6. the cost becomes too high
7. growth in numbers brings change

3. Renewal in the temple

What did renewal look like to start with? Following through the stages of renewal above:

1. Renewal.

It all began when the HS descended on Jesus in the form of a dove, then he spoke at Nazareth. The reality of his possession of the Spirit was shown by what he did.

2. Conflict.

Religious authorities... Roman authorities... It worsened from C2.

3. Networking

Christians write and meet across the empire; acquire their own language; linked by travelling leaders. They began to face issues of authority as the first generation of leaders died – the Didache suggests appointment of bishops and deacons who would also exercise the ministries of prophets and teachers. Growing sense of church order in the pastoral epistles. The prophetic spirit began to be quenched. Discipline issues arose. Church leaders became known as episkopoi – Greek word for an official, esp with responsibility for public funds. Montanism was an attempt to restore the prophetic ministry to its former status.

4. Definition

Issue of how far Christians were different from other Jews arose. What was the core of the teaching? Relation to OT? Definition of the faith – hard, because as the gospel entered the Roman world it encountered a cast of mind which demanded verbal precision, whereas the Jewish world saw truth conveyed by many means (emotions leading to metanoia, change of heart/mind; by signs and wonders; by fellowship; by worship; by oral teaching, often in story form). But the demand for verbal accuracy became paramount above other methods of defining and conveying truth. ‘The loss of the more holistic Hebraic view of truth which fills both Old and New Testaments and its replacement by the Roman demand for exactitude of doctrinal statements was deep and lasts to this day’, 64.

Rise of Montanism – an ‘invasion of enthusiasm’ – the first renewal movement. It was rejected by the Church. Renewals are often rubbished.

5. Divergence

renewals usually have the 2 components, Strands A and B. B = those who remain as ‘renewalists’ within the parent body; A = those who leave to form their own organisation, 67.

Strand A split from the Jewish community; the first Christians had stayed within it. Strand B remained; but Jewish Christianity decayed.

6. Communication

A key stage, when Strands A and B must remain in touch. This didn’t happen; Strand B died out.

7. Consequences

Choice between fragmentation and formation of a new faith.

Conclusions

- ✧ Renewals have to manage cultural transfer successfully (no renewal is free of cultural accretions, and the significance of these may not be recognised to start with; but on the other hand renewals are good at recognising the cultural accretions of the previous stage).
- ✧ Strand B is important – we are still suffering from the disappearance of Strand B, which has weakened our theological development (loss of Hebrew holistic approach in favour of Roman doctrinal approach)
- ✧ The desire for legitimation lowers boundaries – tendency for accommodation to the culture, (or sometimes the opposite - high walls to stay safe from the culture)
- ✧ A decision has to be made about the world outside
- ✧ Renewals lose force as they define themselves more closely – verbal precision takes precedence over experience; evangelism becomes less instinctive. Truth tends to be defined by intellect rather than experience.
- ✧ Renewals are affected by social factors

4. Renewal in the cloister

In MA, monks were thought to be the heirs of the apostles. They were the church planters, prayers, preachers of the gospel. But by end C9 regular monastic observance had almost died out. Monasteries had become rich; then became victims of raids. In 900 Odo received a call to the monastic life; he went on to found Cluny, in 910.

Result was the restoration of the monastic life; by C12 there were 1000+ Cluniac monasteries. But again it faded – became rich, then indebted, and overburdened with liturgical routine. As Cluny died, new ideas and ideals rose from its ashes: Franciscans, Dominicans, Crusaders, Augustinians.

Whereas in the early era of Christianity, Strand A dominated (leavers), in the monastic movement the reforms remained within Strand B.

He traces the same path through the renewal:

- ✧ Renewal: foundation of Cluny
- ✧ Conflict: resentment against the Cluniacs' spiritual standing
- ✧ Networking: a thousand monasteries all keeping in touch by travelling abbots. Unrealistic, but all monks were linked to the abbot of Cluny as their spiritual father.
- ✧ Definition: not necessary, for they were returning to the old tradition of Benedict. But this phase of consolidation also meant institutionalisation
- ✧ Divergence: occurs when Strand A forms and leaves. This renewal was Strand B; it stayed in the structures.
- ✧ Communication – Cluniacs often used to invigorate spiritual life in places far apart
- ✧ Consequences: Cluny's demise led to fragmentation of the renewal, many streams

Conclusions

- *1. Strand B renewals need fewer people to start them than Strand A renewals. 'A renewal within the mainstream needs only a few initiators to have a considerable influence'. Strand A needs to happen quickly; Strand B can develop slowly.
- 2. Possessions choke renewals.
- *3. 'Renewals are always in danger of making their greatest asset their greatest handicap. What makes them different and special needs to be emphasized, but if it is not kept in check it will inevitably come to be the only thing on offer.' 94.
- *4. Cluny tried to manage growth by resorting to fantasy – that the Abbot of Cluny could be the spiritual father of every Cluniac monk and the head of every Cluniac monastery. This assumption of pastoral care is common when a church grows, when a renewal becomes widespread or an organisation increases.
- 5. An over-emphasis on the communal can mean that the renewal comes to be seen not in personal spiritual growth but in the culture – lots of people thought worship was the Cluny renewal, just as choruses are often thought to be the charismatic renewal. They aren't; they are just a means to an end.
- *6. Spiritual elitism flourishes – if some are seen as spiritual giants, others look like spiritual pygmies.
- 7. Cluny was productive in its decline – new forms of life sprang from its demise.

5. Renewal in the Church

The Reformation: 'over all Europe there went up a kind of scream of colour' – Charles Williams. The rainbow began to play round the individual human being, rather than God Almighty. A burst of life sought to be free of the confines of feudalism and the Church. Renewal... conflict C16...networking... definition (Luther, Calvin's writings).

It is often assumed that the renewal of the church at local/national level automatically leads to an emphasis on mission; but the story of the Reformation questions this supposition.

Divergence. There were 2 Reformations, one which resulted in new churches, the other which reformed the Church from within. Strand A is the Protestants, Strand B the Counter Reformation. Counter Reformation resulted in new clergy with better training; new monastic orders. Council of Trent, 1545+: a new requirement that all clergy should be educated at a diocesan seminary eliminated the worst of the ignorance among clergy. Outburst of educational work, mission in Europe and abroad.

Communication. Protestants and Catholics moved apart in history, doctrine, practice.

Consequences. Fragmentation, denominations, assimilation.

Conclusions

*Time and tide wait for no one – renewals which do not begin quickly to communicate with the mainstream find it gets harder and harder to do so – cp Reformation churches v Catholic Church; Methodists v CofE.

*Renewal and evangelism do not necessarily go hand in hand. Sometimes individual-in-community has been such a strong sense that it has not been possible to look outside that community.

Mission needs a stimulus

Committed individuals need to take the lead – eg Jesuits. Role of Pope was important.

6. Renewal goes West

There were 2 American Awakenings: 1730s-60s (Whitefield, J Edwards) and 1790s-1820s (camp meetings and deliberate engendering of 'revival'). Millennialism had a major influence – a longing for a new and better world. Pre-millennialism = belief that Jesus will return and reign with Christians for 1000 years, and then Satan will be released. Post-millennialism = belief that Jesus will return after 1000 years.

1. Renewal
2. Conflict – criticism of the revivals by the establishment; also conflict within – how far should it be organised? A blueprint of conversion developed, and camp meetings were always done the same way.
3. Networking – loads of denominations and churches
4. Definition - each group produced its own Statement of Faith
5. Divergence
6. Communication – almost none between these churches and their roots
7. Consequences – new denominations, marketing of selves

Conclusions

2 stances within the church – one life-enhancing, seeing work of God the Creator in all things; the other life-denying, seeing the world as hostile. Often tied to the Pre (pessimistic)/Post (optimistic) millennial labels.

Theological dispute – US has extremes of liberalism and conservatism.

Mass evangelism was the result of the way the revivals were organised

Voluntarism; attempts to do away with denominations; charismatic happenings.

Non-denominationalism, tried by Zinzendorf and others since : one can only say that it does not work. 'It appears to be a fact of Christian human nature that if any group of people get together they will sooner or later, however hard they try not to, form a church'!!140

7. Renewal in today's world

A new paradigm seems to be emerging. Renewal has to operate within its context; in our case, in a scene where modernism and post-modernism dictate the way we think and act. There are 2 worlds: one logical, rational, rather dull; the other often irrational but more fun.

The shaking of the foundations

Word 'postmodernism' came into use, following the modern tower blocks and glass-clad office buildings of the 60s; looking for a new style, more human in scale, user-friendly, less grandiose, using an amalgam of styles from the past. Postmodernism is like a jackdaw – picks up everything, examines it cursorily and puts it in its undifferentiated memory bank. It's fertile ground for renewals – postmodernism is less suspicious of fresh things. It's laid back – imagination, wit, laughter and the ability not to take anything too seriously are part of the postmodern approach. If people can laugh at the world and at themselves they will be given a hearing. It must include enquiry into God; the Trinity describes movement, relationship, paradox, cooperation and love, and we must be sure not just to look to God for what we can get out of him, but rather to perceive him in all his transcendent immanence. Postmoderns will travel with you, but are allergic to experts.

Postmodernism distrusts logic but trusts experience – too easily. But it makes warm waters for renewals to swim in.

Postmodernism dismisses history.

Postmodernism delights in the strange. It enables us to read the Bible more as it was meant to be read.

Modernism is logical, taking a book and picking it to pieces, defining or destroying doctrine. Postmodern hermeneutic on the other hand delights in its stories, paradoxes, relationships, mystery, humour, multiple viewpoints, picture-language.

Postmodernism doesn't want fundamentalism.

8. The hypothesis reviewed

Renewal in a local church

Maybe it starts with a few people attending Cursillo, or a conference, or a Celtic gathering. Potential conflict must be handled carefully – strand B renewals are preferable for the health of the whole church to strand A renewals. Strand A may sometimes lead to successful denominations but often at the cost of making the whole weaker.

Networking – people need help to see how their new experience fits into the whole structure of the Christian faith.

Definition – a culture is born, perhaps centred around a change in worship style.

Divergence; if not acknowledged, people will leave, keeping aloof to start with, eventually perhaps realising they have more in common with other churches than they had thought.

Consequences. Schism is an ever-present threat for Strand A churches – what started as a split can split again.

Renewal in a denomination

Hard for a leader to deal with; enthusiasm arises, others may be upset, the leader may himself feel threatened. He does well to legitimate renewal. He can encourage the renewal to think of itself in relation to the whole of the Christian faith, he can ask the right questions, he may help with potential or actual splits. He will look after Strand B in particular.

Renewal in the worldwide church

Renewals are the lifeblood of the church. Too often overlooked, it is those in Strand B who have commonly been the foundation for what has lasted in the church.

9. Does the splendour have to fade?

2 Cor 3.12-13 – *since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendour.*

Do cups of tea always become lukewarm?

Renewals inevitably change and lose their intensity. Why?

- ✧ Renewals affect individuals – parable of sower
- ✧ Renewals affect groups, and they can behave foolishly/sinfully; but renewals are necessary for the wellbeing of the church
- ✧ Renewals exist in the real world; they seek to change the world but often end up being changed by it.

What do we do about it? Accept the changes.

- ✚ leaders should check nostalgic attempts to return to the initial renewal; forwards is always best
- ✚ the bureaucratisation of the renewal should not be resisted, but made as efficient as possible. Renewals begin in prayer and, if all is well, are borne along by prayer, but that does not absolve us from taking responsibility for our actions, even if we claim they are under the guidance of the HS.
- ✚ there should be a widening of horizons from the object of the initial renewal to encompass the whole of the Christian faith.

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