

John Drane : After McDonaldization

Mission, ministry and Christian discipleship in an age of uncertainty (DLT 2008)

Summary by Alison Morgan, May 08 (for more summaries see www.alisonmorgan.co.uk)

John Drane is an internationally respected biblical scholar, best known for his book *The McDonaldization of the Church*. *After McDonaldization* is its sequel. Culture, community, mission, ministry and theology are the chapter headings. It's a chatty, personal book which combines a rigorous analysis of the problem with an insistence that the solutions are not grand ones but rather a new determination to live in small, human, connected ways, following Jesus not by defining ourselves as members of an organisation but by embracing the conviction that faithfulness is defined as a close walk with the Master. The core business of the church, he suggests, is nothing less than transformation; that is what we must live, and that is what we must offer.

Preface

The reality we face is decline.

To continue as we are may be comfortable, but could also be institutionally suicidal. Our options are simple. We either do nothing, and the decline continues, or we ask fundamental questions about how faithful discipleship might be incarnationally embedded in the culture, and take whatever steps may be necessary to re-imagine church life.

He has deliberately included stories; story is central to the gospel, and reaches places and refreshes parts that abstract reasoning can never touch. 'Cognitive analysis may be highly valued in the rarefied atmosphere of the academy, but story is the stuff of life'. Academic detachment can serve as a convenient way of not facing up to reality...

1. Culture

Theological training in C20th focussed on the challenges to the church – historical reliability of the bible, arguments about science and religion. But by the end of the C20th, the notion of foundational wisdom in the inherited philosophical sense was no longer regarded as the touchstone of what might be meaningful and true. Rational engagement with what had been regarded as objective truth as replaced by relevance as a key criterion by which the value of anything was not to be judged. People now find themselves with neither the time nor the inclination for the religious pursuits of their forebears – faith has to connect with issues of lifestyle.

The gap between the culture of the Church and the lived experience even of its members has been widening. Church has been correspondingly declining – recent figs give it till mid C21st. The figs are different in USA – but are collected by opinion polls not hard evidence, and people are more likely to say they attend church than to actually turn up on a given Sunday. It's probably nearer 20% than 60%.

Reasons for decline? No single explanation. But loss of confidence in the Church among those who are self-consciously searching for spiritual meaning and purpose in life is a key factor. A McDonaldized form of church worked in a rationalized society (but was it an authentic contextualisation of the gospel?). But we are now less tolerant of rationalized structures – at least for our inner lives, even if we accept it in the workplace and in civic life.

We have worked hard to understand all this. Modernism – for generations our forebears took it for granted that there was an over-arching structure and rationality to life, all of it grounded in big ideas about ultimate reality and the ways in which that reality could be understood and reflected upon – rational certainty, manifested in scientific and technological progress. In many ways it was an outworking of concepts that had been there in ancient Greek philosophy and Roman pragmatism – maybe it's more deeply rooted than our simple 'Enlightenment' explanations suggest; and maybe rooted within the historic Christian tradition itself?

Postmodernism is more of a mood and a force than a philosophy – it doesn't offer any coherent world view. Opinions on lifestyle issues now tend to be handed from the bottom up not the top down.

Ordinary people have to deal with 4 significant experiences:

1. **The realisation that nothing seems to work the way it once did** – change is visibly fast, and the Church seems well past its sell-by date, 'something between a hobby with too many rules and a totalitarian regime' – Martyr

Percy. *Church is what some others do. It is noticed sadly, in their terms, not only as an alien and expensive building that I wouldn't know what to do in, worse, it is occupied by people I wouldn't be seen dead with' –*
George Lings

2. **The realisation that the way Western people have lived is not the only possible way to be**, nor is it the only one that looks as if it might lead to a fulfilled and meaningful life.
3. **The frequently expressed desire to be 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'**.
4. **A consciousness that we live in fearful times.** Martin Rees (Astronomer Royal and Camb prof): *I think the odds are no better than fifty-fifty that our present civilisation on Earth will survive to the end of the present century (Our Final Century).* The level of depression among young people is 10x greater than for those born before 1915, even though they lived through major life traumas. 20-50% of teens and 20s are estimated to suffer from depression in some form.

Daniel Pink offers a way of looking at cultural change. W society has evolved through 3 ages – the Agricultural Age, the Industrial Age, the Information Age. He believes we are now entering the Conceptual Age. The Agricultural Age is a rural economy, a known community of people – and what we now recognize as a worship service has its origins in this period. It works for people who do not need to interact in church because they already know each other. The Industrial Age changed not just work patterns but human relationships – traditional ways of being demised. New forms of church grew to match it – Methodism, Congregationalists, Baptists – ways of being church that met the needs of educationally disadvantaged people. The Information Age created a 24/7 workplace, mobility boomed, family relationships fragmented. *Evidence suggests the reason for non-participation in the life of the Church is not related to .. secularization but is rooted in the institutionalized nature of the Church, which has become disconnected from the realities of people's lives to such an extent that the Gospel itself looks like a foreign product, packaged in some alien environment to meet the needs of a society that is quite different from what we know and experience.* We move now into the Conceptual Age. People are economically well off, but trapped in a living hell of personal insecurity – not just individuals but the whole of society. Contrast the expansive optimism of the Victorian age, when nothing seemed too difficult. The ideology of modernity is being killed by the contrast between its bland teaching that we are moving ever onward and upward and the reality of events which are brutal, barbarian and malignant (Thomas Oden). John Shore: 'a person without hope is, or always becomes, more animal than human'. Challenges for us in this context:

- Hope is at the heart of the gospel – have we got any, for use here rather than there?
- Hedonism is the way in which many people confront and deal with life today, and in one sense that set of behaviours and rituals actually is their spirituality – what would it mean for that to be transformed and redeemed?

2. Community

This chapter considers the impact of cultural change on the way we experience life and find our place in the wider context in which we live. Douglas Copeland: 'People without lives like to hang out with other people who don't have lives' – eg in soap operas and reality TV programmes. *The one big question facing us today is the redefinition of community.. The fragmentation of relationships is now taken for granted as a normal part of life.*

- 2001 census – 32% of homes are single occupancy; 25% population are single
- People are more lonely than ever before – in USA people sign up for 'cuddle parties' – offering nonsexual hugging to the lonely.
- Starter marriage now not a joke but a reality
- Loneliness is not just absence of friends; 'the homeless mind' (Pieter Berger)
- Widespread disillusionment with institutions that used to provide framework of meaning and relationship

Community was first threatened by the rise of suburbs – leafy spreadoutness, instead of the jumbled proximity of the inner city (we have Neighbourhood Watch schemes instead of relationships). Fear now inclines us to avoid public spaces. The visual environment of a suburb is less stimulating. In cities all this is leading to the emergence of 'urban tribes' (Berger) – networks of similarly minded people, searching together for a story. It should be easy for the Church to offer community into this context; but in fact often we are closed, with meetings but no fellowship, keeping up appearances but crying for love inside. Cp book 'Crowded pews and lonely people'. We need to work at creating community.

Most growing churches continue to take it for granted that the inherited pattern of gathering in congregations will remain at the centre of church life – but it's becoming obvious that the reinvigoration of Christian community along traditional lines is unlikely to be meaningful for anyone who is not already within the orbit of the church. These are... stale expressions of church! Kester Brewin argues that instead of trying to import culture into church and make it 'cool', we need instead to become 'wombs of the divine' and completely rebirth the Church into a host culture. The emerging church is trying to do this – on a foundation of 'identifying with Jesus', not as an object of belief but as an example to be followed. This is a bigger shift than most people realise.

We need to dream an alternative future, to be organic and connected, spiritual and incarnational, inclusive and welcoming, ancient and future, creating and imagining.

- *Following Jesus as a pioneer and icon of .. wholeness will create spaces for authentic journeying with others who find themselves attracted by these values, backed up by a conviction that faithfulness is defined more by reference to a close walk with the Master than by membership in an organization.*
- There is a difference between welcoming others into our own communities, and creating a space that is inclusive. Our culture is creating more and more barriers to protect ourselves from others; but the kind of suspicion that govts now applaud is contrary to the gospel
- Douglas Coupland – 'either our lives become stories, or there's no way to get through them'. Jesus invited people into the bigger story that is the kingdom of God.
- A gospel-centred community will be a space in which the human and divine can meet in creative encounter. We need to engage with people in 'third spaces' – places between work and home where people can meet.

3. Mission

Much of the Church's problems seem to stem from the fact that .. the ways of being church that we now have match the concerns of only a certain kind of person, at a time when the culture is more openly diverse than it has ever been. In McDonalization he described 7 kinds of people group, each with their own challenges and opportunities:

- The desperate poor
- Hedonists
- Traditionalists
- Spiritual searchers
- Corporate achievers
- Secularists – but worth noting that the 72% of those defining selves Christian in the 2001 census were responding to a *voluntary* question; and that there is a website entitled 'Atheists for Jesus'. A secular definition of spirituality is 'a way of being in the world, a sense of one's place in the cosmos, a relationship to that which extends beyond ourselves' – Michael Shermer (scientist and atheist)
- Apathetic – probably includes most of those who ticked the 'Christian' box.

'Lifestyle spirituality' is a growing problem – looking for everyday experiences and situations that are uplifting and satisfying.

Those who ask the question 'How to live?' – (ie about behaving) are the younger / emerging generation, born into the Conceptual Age, postmodern in their approach. They respond to Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Gospels, Revelation. Those who ask the question 'what to believe?' – (ie about believing) are older / traditional generation, living in the Agricultural / Industrial age, modern in their approach. They respond to Romans. Those who ask the question 'Can I be sure?' – (ie about belonging) are transitional / charismatic generation, born in the Information age, familiar with cultural change. They respond to Acts and Corinthians.

Drane thinks of the Christian tradition as being like a jazz band – all instruments playing together, but now one now another taking the lead; at particular historical moments, different aspects of Scripture and tradition have been pre-eminent, their pre-eminence being determined by their ability to speak into the cultural needs of the moment.

Today's people are more afraid of living than they are of dying – cp the rising suicide rates among the young. Spiritual meaning now starts with lifestyle issues; *the entry point into Christian faith will not begin with*

doctrine or apologetics (Alpha), but with practices such as prayer, meditation, healing and other things that begin with the agenda of those who are asking the questions of purpose and identity, rather than with the agenda of the Church. Richard Rohr summarises: 'Christians do not think their way into a new life; they live their way into a new kind of thinking'. Stuart Murray advises us to stop praying for revival – it creates unrealistic expectations that foster disillusionment and hinder contextual missionary engagement.

4. Ministry

In England, 25% of churchgoers worship in 4% of churches (congregations of over 400). 75% of churches have 100 or fewer members. Clergy morale is low – a sense of disempowerment and bereavement, because the skills once deemed important now seem irrelevant, and because the church in which we were trained to minister no longer seems to exist. Many have been trained as pastors/teachers, and have no idea how to operate in the missional context which now prevails. 'The thing that surprises me is not that a large number of clergy are angry and disillusioned but that so many are still sane'.. We run CME days etc, but 'for someone whose entire professional expertise is not being called into question, a one-day seminar even 2 or 3 times a year is not going to begin to address the matter'.

Drane asked people attending a conference if they had adult children who no longer attended Church; and suggested they ask them what it would take for them to return. All came back and reported that the problem was not the seating, sermons, liturgy, but with the acrimonious way in which church people related to one another...

How can we look at leadership in the Church? Two ways. We can challenge the practicalities of what church leaders do on a daily basis; and we can ask a more fundamental set of questions about the nature of the Church and through that identify what tasks need to be done and the ethos and attitudes that should characterise our ministry.

What is the Church about? What's its purpose? If we charged, what would we charge for? Pine and Gilmore suggest that you are what you charge for:

- If you charge for stuff, then you are in the commodity business
- If you charge for tangible things, then you are in the goods business
- If you charge for the activities you execute, then you are in the service business
- If you charge for the time customers spend with you, then you are in the experience business.
- If you charge for the demonstrated outcome the customer achieves, then you are in the transformation business

Drane suggests that most churches see themselves as operating somewhere between the service business and the experience business – we offer certain activities, and we give people our time. But surely we should be in the transformation business. It's a risky choice – it involves an act of faith in the product. It matches the concept of grace – freely given and responded to with thanks. So: *What is the 'product' that the Church is offering, to those presently outside the Church as well as to its own members? Have we lost sight of some fundamental reasons why the Church exists at all, and is it because we have lost confidence in the transformational power of the Gospel that we tend to focus on other things? And is that related to the repeated claim from spiritual searchers, that they want to be 'spiritual' but not 'religious' (because they do not see the Church as being in the transformation business, whereas other spiritual pathways evidently are, or seem to be?*

We have a narrow understanding of leadership styles – mostly hero or servant. So-called servant leadership has been artificially created out of passages that aren't to do with leadership – eg Jesus washing the disciples' feet. It tends to regard ministry primarily as pastoral support and care-giving, has no deep roots in the Christian tradition, and is a relatively recent phenomenon. It often leads to a situation in which there is no leadership at all. Heroic leadership descends into bossiness, with those who disagree with the leader becoming marginalised and abused. Congregations tend to buy into the idea that leadership is a limited commodity, to be exercised only by a few special individuals, with most people being not leaders but followers. The result is that congregations develop an unhealthy dependency on their clergy, and choose as lay leaders those who will dispel their anxieties rather than the creative ones who will inspire and empower them to move in new directions. A biblical model of leadership involves everyone, and makes for a community

that can shape its own future under God, while expecting itself to be restructured and changed in the process. It relies on developing shared vision – which should be transformation. Once you have that, it's not hard for people to identify their own purpose and value within the church, and to start to engage wholeheartedly in the life of faith.

So the minister is not to be seen as expert. The consumer model of ready-made solutions in the form of strategies and programmes, marketed as the latest trendy thing that every growing church needs to engage with, is not the way forward. The old paradigm, which placed ministers on a pedestal, has no future (and this isn't to do with churchmanship); we no longer hold to the division between those who know it all and those who need it all. We need to do things differently. Einstein: 'insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results'... Are our top-down styles of ministry part of the problem? Are we encouraging those in the Church to regard themselves as consumers of religious goodies purveyed by professionals, and in the process creating that disempowerment and dependency that leads to the isolation and over-work experienced by many ministers?

Moving ahead:

- Taking Jesus as our model for ministry – he always started where people were at, taking seriously their lived experience (stories), and then inviting them to see things in the light of the bigger story of what God is doing
- We will need to start with the brokenness of people, looking to see where God is at work in that, and explore ways of connecting with the bible narratives through the reality of our own experience – this is what Jesus did.

Michelangelo carved David out of a block of marble rejected by other sculptors as flawed... Jesus helps people become what they were made to be.

- We need to be not *relevant* but *incarnational* –the quest for relevance often ends up with the Church affirming the very aspects of the culture that are causing people so much anxiety in the first place
- We need to be disciple making communities
- We need to avoid the dumbing down of worship (songs about me, my needs, my relationship with Christ)

5. Theology

Theology needs rehabilitating. The Word became flesh and lived amongst us – Jesus is theology personified. Doing theology is a relational enterprise – which finds confirmation in Jesus, who taught relationally rather than propositionally. And yet we have discovered how to do theology without any reference to persons and their needs, how to move from a Jesus of the gospels (challenging us to behave like him) to a Jesus of the creeds (with whom we can agree or disagree at will). Drane regards himself as a 'practical theologian' (a term first coined by Schleiermacher); academic theology is often like the emperor's new clothes – pontificating about things that nobody else cares about, expressed in language that nobody else can understand. *Far from excluding our own personalities and commitments as illegitimate parts of the process of theological reflection, we should begin from who we are, who we wish to be, who we are becoming. Our baggage is not a liability, but can become a key asset in the search for truth.* We need to look for new ways of engaging with the culture if the Christian voice is to be heard as anything other than an outmoded hangover from the past that knows the answers to all the questions that nobody is actually asking. We need a 'wisdom' way of doing it, one which draws in my reading, my tradition, my life experience, my passions. It is now widely recognised that 'there can be no learning that does not begin with experience' (Peter Jarvis).

Daniel Pink suggests that the people who will make a difference in the Conceptual Age are the creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, meaning makers; artists, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers. Others associate these qualities with the 'creative class'. Creative class people demand authenticity, holistic learning experiences, collaborative working between women and men. The parish priest is no longer the only educated person in the community, and s/he no longer has the time, in this period of discontinuous cultural change, to become competent in ancient languages and worldviews.

We need to do as David did – eschewing the traditional armour in favour of a stone. How can we recycle the valuable materials from the past, and reshape them into a serviceable tool for the future? We need to travel through life with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, reading the newspaper through the message of the Bible (Barth).