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RACHEL ATKINSON

Alternative Worship: Post-Modern or Post-Mission Church?

Rachel Atkinson here offers an overview and critique of the alternative worship movement. She outlines its roots and then focuses attention on four of its central characteristics – the concerns for contextualisation, experience, multi-sensory worship and participation. Finally, she evaluates its contribution to the church while also offering some serious challenges concerning its attitude and practice in relation to mission in the world.

The term 'alternative worship' is potentially applicable to a range of contemporary expressions of worship, but has come to refer to a particular genre of worship services in Britain, New Zealand, Australia and America. Although diverse in content and style, alternative worship events share a common desire to bring 'the authentic message of Christ to bear on life in postmodernity'.¹ In doing so they usually combine 'mixed-media technology and techniques with an eclectic use of the worship traditions of the church'.² The extensive use of the historic resources of the Church renders the designation 'alternative worship' (alt.worship) somewhat imprecise, but the term is nevertheless used to describe a particular form of worship, sometimes expressed through occasional or regular services, and sometimes through alt.worship groups which are emerging as distinct communities both within existing denominations and as post-denominational gatherings. This article briefly looks at alt.worship's roots, examines in some detail its shoots, before concluding with an evaluation of its fruits.

Alternative worship: the roots

The Nine O'Clock Service

The beginnings of the alt.worship movement can be traced back to the Nine O'Clock Service (NOS) in the late 1980's. NOS grew out of the 'Nairn Street Community', a small charismatic evangelical fellowship group attached to St Thomas's Crookes in Sheffield. They were keen to contextualise their faith for night club culture and offered a 'combination of radical Christian discipleship and worship expressed in the new multi-media format that was becoming state of the art club culture'.³ Initially motivated by mission, NOS was successful in reaching non-Christian young adults, experienced fast and significant growth and acted as a unintentional catalyst for several other alternative worship services, although NOS itself developed an increasingly isolationist mentality.⁴

1 Roberts 1999: 3.

2 Baker 2003: xiv.

3 Roberts 1999: 10.

4 Howard 1996: 27f.

By the early 1990s there was a clear shift in the theology and spirituality of NOS, away from its charismatic evangelical roots to a theology influenced by the creation spirituality of Matthew Fox. Graham Cray believes that this move from theological orthodoxy 'went hand in hand with the adopting of certain postmodern philosophical assumptions'.⁵ Certainly these changing theological and ideological convictions were reflected in the community's liturgy, such as the 'Planetary Mass' of 1993.⁶ In 1995 NOS collapsed in a storm of publicity following the revelation of systematic sexual abuse by its leader, Chris Brain. The tragic demise of this flagship group, although due to abuse of power and lack of accountability rather than the adoption of alternative liturgy *per se*, left a legacy of suspicion about alt.worship in many quarters. NOS's pioneering experiments in creative, contextualised expressions of worship had however stimulated and inspired many within the embryonic alt.worship movement.

Post-Evangelicalism

A second major root of alt.worship came from those who were dissatisfied with the culture of the charismatic churches they belonged to, many of whom were part of the house church movement. The *Harry* arts festival and *Holy Joe's* alternative worship gatherings, both initiated by Dave Tomlinson, 'adopted a very experimental approach to worship, which – while remaining experiential – explored the use of symbol, story and discussion in a way unheard of in mainstream charismatic worship'.⁷ They appealed primarily to 'second-generation charismatics' who felt restricted by the culture of the churches in which they had grown up. The emerging values and thinking of these groups was reflected in *The Post-Evangelical*, published in 1995, in which Dave Tomlinson critiqued the culture of many evangelical and charismatic churches as being strongly influenced by the values of modernity and thus increasingly irrelevant to a post-modern generation. The book presents a very selective analysis of evangelical and charismatic culture and much of it is highly reactionary. Nevertheless, Tomlinson's basic contention 'that post-evangelicals tend to be people who identify culturally more with postmodernity ... than with modernity, and that this has a significant bearing on the way that they approach and understand the Christian faith'⁸ implies the necessity of contextualising faith and worship for a post-modern world. This thinking resonated with and significantly impacted many involved in alt.worship.

Emerging Church

In terms of the wider context in which alt.worship developed, the rise of the so-called 'emerging church' movement is significant. Since the late 1990s a variety of new expressions of church have been emerging, both from post-modernity and from existing forms of church. Stuart Murray notes that 'what is emerging is young, fluid, diverse, provisional and still developing',⁹ but from cell churches to cyber churches, these emerging groups share a common desire to provide 'culturally authentic'¹⁰ forms of church. Alt.worship, while certainly not synonymous with emerging church, is part of this movement.

5 Cited in Hilborn 1997: 128.

6 See Howard 1996: 93ff.

7 Roberts 1999: 11.

8 Tomlinson 1995: 76.

9 Murray 2004: 93.

10 Moynagh 2004: 24.

Other Factors

Additionally, it is important to note that since the late 1930s many Christian groups had been re-discovering and appreciating the historic traditions of the Church: the Iona and Taizé communities drew extensively on liturgical, aesthetic and symbolic resources for their spirituality and worship, and more recently Robert Webber has demonstrated how 'classical Christianity' (100-600 AD) yields important resources for contemporary faith and mission.¹¹ This new willingness to embrace the 'colour, gesture and ritual in worship practice'¹² commonly associated with higher church traditions represented an important shift for Protestant evangelicals and contributed significantly to the worship style developed within alt.worship groups. Finally, the Greenbelt Arts Festival provided a forum in which such worship could be practised and progressed, as the festival's 'radical theological agenda, commitment to social justice and the arts, made it a natural home base for alternative worship.'¹³

Summary

A number of factors have contributed to the development of alt.worship, but a desire for contextually relevant worship and a disillusionment with some forms of existing church can both be clearly and consistently seen in the roots of the movement, and both have affected its growth. This inevitably leads to questions about whether alt.worship has become an authentic missional response to post-modern culture or 'a haven for the disaffected'.¹⁴ An exploration of four key features of the movement – contextualisation, experience, multi-sensory worship and participation – will help to inform this discussion and offer insights into the extent of its contribution to mission in a post-modern world.

Alternative worship: the shoots

Towards contextualisation

'I'm on a journey exploring how faith connects with contemporary culture'¹⁵

The desire to connect Christian faith and worship with post-modern culture is one of the defining characteristics of the alt.worship movement. This is expressed on many levels. Stylistically, alt.worship makes extensive use of the music, art forms, and communication mediums of contemporary culture. However, it seeks to go beyond culturally relevant presentation to engage more deeply with the outlook and ethos of post-modern culture. For instance, 'post-modern hermeneutics' such as juxtaposition¹⁶ are evident in alt.worship events and post-modern values such as participation, inclusion and non-hierarchical leadership are emphasised in its communities. The depth of engagement with post-modern culture means that 'it is possible to describe the whole alternative worship scene as an attempt to inculturate Christian worship and church life'.¹⁷ However, the extent to which such inculturation represents a move towards authentic, missional contextualization is less clear.

11 Webber 1999: 14.

12 Baker 2003: ix.

13 Baker 2003: ix.

14 Lings 2001: 17.

15 Jonny Baker's 'One-line Bio' at www.Jonnybakerblogs.com (accessed on 13.4.2006)

16 Baker 2003: xiv-xvi

17 Roberts 1999: 17f.

There is no real consensus about the meaning and process of 'contextualization' among missiologists, but Hesselgrave and Rommen define it as 'the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts'.¹⁸ Their work suggests that contextualization has a number of defining features. *Firstly*, contextualization involves a missionary motivation which, although evident among some alt.worship practitioners,¹⁹ is not a dominant feature of the movement. Rather, for many alt.worship groups the primary incentive is to produce culturally relevant worship for Christians who struggle to express their faith within existing churches. This results in a strong emphasis on current participants as the starting point for 'reframing' worship. *The Prodigal Project* encourages prospective alt.worshippers to 'start with who you are and work at growing a pattern of worship that is meaningful and authentic to you'²⁰ rather than 'on behalf of some imagined third person who is out there somewhere, and who might come in...'.²¹ As well as betraying an inadequate understanding of worship (given that the starting point for authentic worship is the character of God and not the culture of the worshipper), this approach implies a lack of missional motivation. Alt.worship groups may contend that their culture is synonymous with the receptor or target culture. However, Andrew Lord argues that 'as the Spirit drives ordinary church members *outwards* to share the gospel, so the gospel message becomes contextualised'.²² As few alt.worship groups specify a missionary destination as the context for inculturation, we may conclude that while providing contextually relevant worship for those within the movement, they rarely demonstrate the kind of missional motivation and engagement which are fundamental to authentic contextualization.

A *second* facet of contextualization relates to the verbal communication of the Christian message. David Bebbington identifies evangelism as one of evangelicalism's defining features.²³ It is perhaps as a result of their rejection of evangelical culture, as well as their identification with post-modern values, that alt.worship groups are often 'uncomfortable with any aggressive or blatant evangelism, as directive and narrow'.²⁴ However, while seeking to adopt more theologically authentic and culturally appropriate methods of communication, many alt.worship groups seem to have sacrificed a clear and distinctive message. The strong rhetoric against evangelical culture within the movement means that, like post-evangelicalism, it often 'seems to be defined more by what it has rejected than by what it has embraced'.²⁵ This, coupled with a post-modern reticence about appearing dogmatic, obscures the communication of an unambiguous, positive gospel message. Furthermore, the task of helping people 'to discover faith through a church made up of some people unconvinced that it works'²⁶ presents obvious challenges for evangelism!

18 Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989: 200.

19 Draper and Draper 2000: 23.

20 Riddell, Kirkpatrick, and Pierson 2000: 76.

21 Riddell, Kirkpatrick, and Pierson 2000: 46.

22 Lord 2005: 95. Italics added.

23 Bebbington 1989, chapter 1. Two of his four defining 'evangelical characteristics' relate to evangelism – 'conversionism' and 'activism'.

24 Lings 2001: 21

25 Hilborn 1997: 9.

26 Lings 2001: 19.

A *final* aspect of contextualisation is that the contextualized gospel always challenges as well as embraces aspects of the culture in which it is incarnated. It does so in ways which are both verbal and nonverbal. While alt.worship has actively engaged with many aspects of post-modernism, it may be open to the accusation of having uncritically embraced other aspects of the culture, such as consumerism. For example, in opting out of existing churches to create expressions of worship which cohere more closely with their own cultural preferences, many alt.worship groups have exercised consumer choices which could both fragment the Church and militate against developing Christian maturity in their own members. Similarly, while Tim Lomax and Michael Moynagh argue that 'Liquid Worship' is relevant in a culture which values diversity and choice,²⁷ some evidence of counter-cultural challenge is also important to ensure that we do not 'subtly train people to become consumers of worship.'²⁸ Certainly, contextualization of the gospel for a post-modern culture will involve a recognition that consumerism is operating. This must, however, co-exist with a willingness to issue the counter-cultural challenge of a biblical vision of worship which is not consumed for self but offered to God in the context of a multi-cultural faith community which reflects and looks forward to the Kingdom of God, albeit inadequately. Alt.worship groups, because of their active engagement with culture, have the potential to function as doorways to the Kingdom for post-modern seekers. However, 'once people connect with a Christian community, the challenge to see discipleship as a lifelong commitment rather than another consumer choice will be an important and difficult one'.²⁹ In such a climate, the place of alt.worship within the wider church will be critical.

Alt.worship represents a creative and thoughtful attempt to inculturate worship within post-modernity. It takes seriously the need to express faith in ways which deeply engage the culture and as such has enormous potential for reaching post-modern people. However, the reactionary roots of the movement mean that currently its primary ministry is to those 'who have been bruised but keep following Jesus'.³⁰ The strong sense of disillusionment in many alt.worship groups is 'corrosive of any spirituality'³¹ and has resulted in a tendency for them to become 'over intellectual, angry, introspective, volatile and lacking in a strategic approach to mission'.³² The lack of a strong missionary motivation is regrettable and, combined with a somewhat ambiguous message and a reticence to challenge aspects of the culture which might be considered incompatible with Christian values, this has severely limited the alt.worship movement's evangelistic impact in the culture of post-modernity, despite their development of an inculturated style of worship.

Towards experience

When I go to mass ... I sometimes look at the faces of the ragged queue advancing up the aisle. What I see there is a hunger for participation in mystery, not a quest for understanding.³³

One aspect of post-modern culture with which alt.worship has engaged is the move from rational to experiential ways of knowing. It is commonly recognised that while

27 Lomax and Moynagh 2004: 6.

28 Kimball 2004: 228.

29 Baker 2004: 90.

30 Dedication in Riddell, Kirkpatrick, and Pierson 2000.

31 Cray 1997: 9.

32 Roberts 1999: 3.

33 Riddell 2004: 80.

there is a growing spiritual quest among post-moderns, their desire for 'experience, not dogma'³⁴ renders the primarily cerebral, verbal worship of many evangelical churches increasingly ineffective as a means of communicating with this generation. By contrast, the use of sacrament, ritual and symbol in worship provides a vehicle through which participants may experience the mystery of God. Alt.worship groups, along with many other church traditions, have made use of these resources.

Experience of God takes precedence over theological explanation in alt.worship and, while this approach connects effectively with post-modern people, the parameters within which such experience is encouraged lie within a clearly defined, and somewhat limiting, theological framework. Alt.worship groups consistently define themselves as 'post-charismatic'. They share the emphasis on experience which is central to charismatic spirituality, but differ in their understanding of how such spiritual encounter occurs. Charismatics characteristically expect to experience 'the immanence of God through particular transcendent experiences'.³⁵ They therefore tend to emphasise 'ecstatic experience'. Alt.worship 'relocates God back within the physical domain, so to experience God means to encounter him in and through the created things around – symbolically, iconically, sacramentally'.³⁶

This emphasis on experiencing the transcendence of God through 'a holistic and earthed spirituality'³⁷ issues from a rediscovery of the doctrine of creation and provides a healthy corrective to the ecstatic excesses of some parts of the charismatic movement. However, the outright rejection of charismatic worship³⁸ suggests a very partial understanding and experience both of Church tradition³⁹ and of contemporary charismatic spirituality, which in many forms retains an emphasis on ritual and symbolism alongside more 'supernatural' experiences. Once again, this betrays the reactionary roots of the alt.worship movement. It also limits the ways in which participants are encouraged to encounter God; while experience in general is emphasised certain types of experience are clearly resisted. The rejection of charismatic spirituality potentially restricts the contribution of alt.worship groups to Christian mission. Historically, the charismata have played a significant role in the mission and growth of the Church and Andrew Lord therefore concludes, in his discussion about the transcendence and immanence of God in 'experiential mission', that:

Both are essential to mission and we should be careful not to over-separate these two characteristics of movements in mission. Prophetic movements need to acknowledge God's involvement in creation, otherwise they become irrelevant. Contextual movements need to acknowledge their relationship to the transcendent God, otherwise they can lose their Christian distinctiveness.⁴⁰

The tendency towards incarnational and sacramental theology within alt.worship groups, while potentially excluding ecstatic experiences of God, has led to a helpful

34 Draper and Draper 2000: 37.

35 Lord 2005: 85.

36 Roberts 1999: 18.

37 Murray 2004: 88.

38 Jonny Baker's sarcasm at the expense of charismatic worship style is characteristic of many associated with alt.worship. He writes 'not sure what pictures steve or adam took but there was a great photo opportunity

with all the grace punters with their hands in the air looking like a bunch of keen charismatics – hahahaha! can't wait to see that' (www.Jonnybaker.blogs.com)

39 Many of the historic traditions of the Church on which alt.worship draws had a strong charismatic dimension.

40 Lord 2005: 89.

emphasis on sacrament, ritual and symbol in worship. This is expressed most clearly in their emphasis on, and understanding of, the Eucharist.⁴¹ In many evangelical churches, Holy Communion has been reduced to little more than a rehearsal of the passion narrative, but Robert Webber advocates a sacramental (rather than purely memorialist) understanding of the Eucharist in which 'the active saving and healing presence of Christ'⁴² is mediated. Many alt.worship groups have adopted this position which places them in a strong position to minister to post-moderns who value experience, although Graham Cray cautions that 'there is a danger that post-modern people seek experience for its own sake, that they become no more than sensation gatherers.'⁴³ In view of this, it is important to acknowledge that the Eucharist is not solely an experience of God. It is an enactment of the Christian meta-narrative of salvation and, as such, it is a subversive act in a relativist, post-modern society. In providing a vehicle through which God might be encountered and experienced in ways which transcend the rational, the Eucharist has the potential to impact post-modern people powerfully and many alt.worship groups have recognized this.

The sacramental theology of the alt.worship movement is further expressed in their inclusion of other ritual and symbolic actions in worship. Pete Ward argues that there is a 'growing appreciation of the significance of ritual for worship and spirituality in postmodernity'.⁴⁴ Alt.worship events often reflect this, frequently possessing a strong sense of ritual as they are carefully constructed to 'create a context where people can engage with God'.⁴⁵ They also include individual ritual and symbolic actions, many of which are contemporary interpretations of historic Christian rituals. The Labyrinth,⁴⁶ a form of meditative prayer walk based on an ancient form of pre-Christian ritual which Christians later adopted, is commonly used by alt.worship groups and highlights fundamental questions about the role of ritual within worship. Brian and Kevin Draper, who developed the alt.worship movement's prototype Labyrinth, assert that 'it is in some way a symbol of an encounter with a holy God'.⁴⁷ Jonny Baker is more explicit, suggesting that the ritual acts integral to the Labyrinth effect actual spiritual change:

The act of walking around the Labyrinth with God, rather than the usual rushing along in urban life, doesn't merely communicate the need to slow down. It generates a slowed-down person aware of God's presence in life. The simple act of dropping a stone in water to let go of pressures and concerns at the 'letting go' station does not merely communicate the need to let go. It produces a person freed from pressure in and through the act itself.⁴⁸

Engagement in ritual acts certainly moves participants beyond explanation and exhortation to experience, but the suggestion that such acts automatically mediate the presence of God to produce ongoing spiritual change is dubious. Rituals have an inherent anthropological power and within alt.worship they 'are often quite deliberately designed for the impact they will have on the worshippers present'.⁴⁹

41 See for instance Kimball 2004: 94f for a discussion about the centrality of the Eucharist in alt.worship.

42 Webber 1999: 110.

43 Cray 1999: 88.

44 Ward 2004: 11.

45 Dawn 2004: 36.

46 See www.labyrinth.org.uk

47 Draper and Draper 2000: 33.

48 Baker 2004: 92.

49 Roberts 1999: 17.

This design does not necessarily exclude God's action and Jonny Baker concludes that 'from a theological point of view, as well as recognizing the power of ritualization, the transforming effect is more than just a constructed experience. It is also affected by the Holy Spirit of God, whose presence is real'.⁵⁰ However, in implying that spiritual transformation is necessarily effected through such ritual acts, Baker potentially over-emphasises their inherent power. In contrast to the sacramental rite of the Eucharist where, by virtue of his promise, 'the risen Christ is made present...in a unique manner and to a unique degree',⁵¹ the newly-devised ritual acts of alt.worship groups, while probably containing helpful symbolic elements, cannot be portrayed as having a guarantee of divine action.

Certainly, symbols have an important role in Christian worship, providing an emotional, imaginative, intuitive language through which we may experience God. Webber posits that in 'symbolic ways God's presence and truth are mediated to us. In...symbolic actions we take the known and lift it to the unknown so that it is returned to us as the mystery of the transcendent.'⁵² Mike Riddell concurs that 'the symbol is sluicing a pathway to ultimate reality...which is the category of transcendence.'⁵³ Symbolic and ritual acts in worship therefore create the *possibility* of an encounter with God. They *can* provide a powerful means of communicating, enacting or responding in faith to spiritual truth. However, to equate them with the spiritual transactions which they symbolise places too little emphasis both on the Spirit's action and on the faith response required from the participant, ultimately compromising the freedom of the Holy Spirit.

Despite a possible over-emphasis on ritual's spiritual power divorced from the action of a transcendent God, alt.worship groups have played a useful role in the restoration of experiential and symbolic language to the church. In the culture of post modernity we are seeing a shift from conceptual to symbolic language. This presents a challenge for large sections of the Protestant church who indwell a rational, 'word-orientated culture inherited from the Enlightenment'.⁵⁴ By contrast, Stanley Grenz argues that 'a postmodern articulation of the gospel is post-rationalistic'.⁵⁵ This will require a recovery of experiential faith and of symbolic communication which both reflects the orthodoxy of historic Christian faith and connects with the contemporary world. Alt.worship groups have clearly appreciated this. If their emphasis on experience were widened to allow the possibility of the type of power encounters which have historically been integral to the mission of the Church, and if their use of sacrament, ritual and symbol were to be combined with stronger missional intentions, these elements would present great potential for reaching an experiential, post-modern generation of spiritual searchers. As Mike Riddell concludes, 'if we can overcome our neurotic need to explain and regulate, the church's long experience with ritual and symbol might stand us in good stead to become spiritual midwives'.⁵⁶

50 Baker 2004: 93.

51 Colwell 2005: 163.

52 Webber 1999: 107.

53 Riddell 2004: 77.

54 Webber 1999: 100.

55 Grenz 1996: 171.

56 Riddell 2004: 84.

Towards multi-sensory worship

There may be things to look at, touch and do, a chance to wander around and explore, write things down or simply sit or lie still. Meditation, discussions, readings and prayers may be said, written or read.

Just don't expect a sermon.⁵⁷

Closely linked with an appreciation of ritual and symbol is the move towards multi-sensory worship. The experiential dimension of post-modern culture is partly expressed in its emphasis on aesthetic and auditory forms of communication (which tend to engage the emotions) rather than more didactic, cerebral methods. Alt.worship engages with this audio-visual culture by making extensive use of music (although there is usually little or no communal singing), visual images experienced through projections, videos and installations, and verbal images constructed through poetry, liturgy and narrative. A mixture of traditional and contemporary examples of these media is usually included, so 'multimedia images may be juxtaposed with ancient chants and techno music'.⁵⁸ Priority is certainly given to images and sounds over didactic communication, with any 'sermon' being presented in short fragments or excluded altogether. This stands in marked contrast to the worship experienced in many evangelical churches, where the centrality of the sermon and the frequent suppression of visual images persist as a legacy of the Reformation.⁵⁹

This renewed emphasis on supra-rational forms of communication provides an important resource for Christian worship in offering a 'medium through which to interact with the divine'.⁶⁰ Images have the ability to communicate truth in a different but equally effective way to the 'abstract conceptual argument of a Pauline letter'⁶¹ or the expository sermon. They are 'capable both of considerable precision of meaning and of compressing a wealth of meaning into a brief space by evoking a range of associations'.⁶² They *may* communicate rational truths, but their engagement with the imagination means that they also have the ability to impact people at a deeper, emotional and spiritual level. This is perhaps particularly evident in Eastern ecclesiastical art, which is less representative and more symbolic than its Western counterpart. Icons, which are used extensively by alt.worship groups, do not seek to represent Christ's appearance or activities accurately, but to symbolize truth about his person and works and to lead the worshipper into an experience with him, so that 'what the Gospel proclaims to us by words, the icon also *proclaims and renders present* for us by color'.⁶³ For Orthodox Christians, the icon is both instructive and sacramental. Alt.worshippers, along with many evangelical Christians, have adopted a similar perspective (not only on icons, but on a range of aesthetic experiences) based on 'an 'incarnational' approach to theology, which *sees – and experiences –* God in the things around us, whether that be icons, pictures, music, our natural surroundings ...and so on'.⁶⁴

57 'About Grace' (www.freshworship.org), accessed on 28.4.2006.

58 Riddell, Kirkpatrick, and Pierson 2000: 70.

59 David Hilborn demonstrates how this 'expository model is being overthrown by alternative worshippers keen to return to a 'pre-modern' emphasis on ritual, mystery and communality in worship' Hilborn 1997: 151.

60 Draper and Draper 2000: 39.

61 Bauckham 1993: 22.

62 Bauckham 1993: 22.

63 The Great Council of 869-870 cited in Quenot 2002: 79.

64 Draper and Draper 2000: 26.

Alt.worship groups have discovered that 'visuals are one of the most powerful tools of communication at this point in history'⁶⁵ and have much to teach the wider church in this respect. However, from a missional perspective, further reflection may be required on the type of images which might effectively communicate Christ not only within the Church but also 'to the spiritually illiterate'.⁶⁶

Richard Bauckham argues convincingly that the power of the images in the New Testament book of Revelation lies in their 'pervasive allusion to the Old Testament' coupled with their 'cultural resonances in the minds of contemporary readers'.⁶⁷ This suggests that the construction of truly powerful spiritual images is complex. Those that communicate effectively will be both rooted in the biblical tradition and shaped by contemporary culture. Alt.worship groups have certainly excelled at using culturally resonant images, and the traditional Christian symbols they draw on may have strong currency with worshippers who possess a Christian heritage. They would, however, probably communicate less powerfully with un-churched people who lack a Christian framework of interpretation. Unless we argue that Christian symbols have an inherent power, we must recognise that, in a post-Christian culture, traditional and biblical symbols of faith have largely lost their meaning. Therefore, while it is generally true that images communicate effectively with post-modern people, some interpretation may be needed to accompany the use of complex Christian symbols (such as icons) if they are to be used evangelistically.

Jeremy Begbie's contention that the arts should not necessarily replace didactic communication but that 'they have a legitimate place alongside and in conversation with those more familiar methods'⁶⁸ offers a helpful way forward here. While Christian preaching and teaching may need to be presented in more culturally appropriate ways, some form of didactic communication seems a necessary accompaniment to the use of aesthetic media if churches are to engage in effective evangelism and discipleship in a post-modern, post-Christian culture. One contribution of the alt.worship movement, along with other emerging church groups, has been to challenge cerebral teaching as the only, or even the most fruitful way of developing spirituality. Images may have particular potency for worship as they communicate truth, engage emotions and have an ability to purge and refurbish the Christian imagination 'with alternative visions of how the world is and will be'.⁶⁹ All the arts provide rich resources for Christian worship and spirituality, and, as experiential media are particularly effective in engaging post-modern people, Jeremy Begbie concludes that:

As the western Churches face the enormous challenge of how the faith 'once delivered' is going to be redelivered in a society increasingly alienated from the institutional Church and increasingly ignorant about the Christian faith, to neglect the arts' potential would be curious, perhaps even irresponsible.⁷⁰

Towards participation

Alt.worship ... is a reclaiming of the liturgical ground by ordinary people. For although in the 21st century there is less actual power vested in a priestly class, ordinary worshippers still find themselves disempowered in church.⁷¹

65 Draper and Draper 2000: 38.
 66 Draper and Draper 2000: 76.
 67 Bauckham 1993: 19.
 68 Begbie 2000: xii.
 69 Bauckham 1993: 17.

70 Begbie 2000: xiii.
 71 Maggi Dawn, 'Alt.worship: is it coming of age?' at www.sevenmagazine.org (accessed on 13.4.2006)

Another defining feature and helpful contribution of alt.worship is its commitment to participation in worship. This is again expressed on a variety of levels. Most alt.worship events have 'dispensed with linear seating arrangements'.⁷² Worship may take place in the round, café style or using a random seating arrangement. Similarly, there is a rejection of worship which is led from the front by 'a single figurehead'⁷³ in favour of multi-voiced participation. Prepared contributions are made from within the congregation to indicate that 'alternative worship is a creative event arising from a community of Christians'⁷⁴ rather than something imposed by a leader on a congregation. In community settings these philosophical foundations translate into a resistance to hierarchical, authoritarian and individual leadership and a favouring of team leadership and community hermeneutics. Again, although not entirely innovative, this approach represents both a reaction against the style of some brands of evangelical worship as well as a genuine embracing of post-modern values. It indicates an appreciation by alt.worship groups that 'the elements that comprise our worship speak volumes about our theology'.⁷⁵ In giving thoughtful attention to the construction of their worship and communities, alt.worship groups are rejecting one set of messages and communicating another.

One message that can be communicated by this approach to worship is that meaning is determined by individual participants rather than imposed by a leader. The sheer volume of visual and auditory stimuli, with little prescribed interpretation, forces worshippers to construct their own meanings. This philosophy resonates strongly with the post-modern hermeneutics of relativism and will appeal to those for whom authoritarian imposition of truth claims is anathema. However, there are clear dangers inherent in this approach concerning the preservation of Christian orthodoxy. While no form of worship can guarantee that the intended message equates to the received message, without the provision of substantial hermeneutical clues the dangers of misinterpretation increase and would almost certainly be compounded in an evangelistic setting. Brian and Kevin Draper's 'commitment to an ethos of the priesthood of all pilgrims'⁷⁶ sounds appealing but it lacks biblical and theological authenticity. Certainly, a church which can reach post-moderns must be a community that *embraces* spiritual seekers alongside committed disciples of Christ. It must have learned to communicate in ways which take account of the post-modern worldview. However, to capitulate too far to the relativism of post-modernity risks leaving the Church without a distinctive message and leaving believers without the distinctive priestly role of worship, intercession and representing God to others.

Linked to the emphasis on participation and inclusion is a concern for holism. Alt.worship is not viewed as a bridge into church but as church itself. In this respect the separation between evangelism and worship, which issued from the dualistic worldview of modernism, is removed. Spiritual seekers are invited to participate in inculturated worship rather than being annexed into an evangelistic programme. This acknowledges that worship – which offers the possibility of 'participation in the life of God'⁷⁷ – provides an important evangelistic resource in the experiential

72 Draper and Draper 2000: 30.

73 Riddell, Kirkpatrick, and Pierson 2000: 70.

74 Roberts 1999: 14.

75 Draper and Draper 2000: 18.

76 Draper and Draper 2000: 30.

77 Riddell 1998: 143

era of post-modernity. It also raises serious questions about the relationship between worship and evangelism.

Arguing for the importance of worship in evangelism, Sally Morgenthaler contends that this is the missing piece in most churches' evangelism. She asks 'why would we want to deny unbelievers access to something that is as potentially life-changing, healing, and beneficial as an experience of true worship?'.⁷⁸ Alan Kreider, however, points out that in the era of pre-Christendom there was no evangelistic intent in worship. He argues that worship's contribution to evangelism lay solely in its effect on believers:

Worship, to which pagans were denied admission, was all important in the spread of the church. It was important, not because it was attractive, but because its rites and practices – whether by design or intuition – made a difference in the lives and communities of the worshippers. It performed the function of re-forming those pagans who joined the church into Christians, into distinctive people who lived in a way that was recognisably in the tradition of Jesus Christ⁷⁹

Ultimately, of course, authentic Christian worship exists neither for evangelism nor edification, but to glorify God. However, Sally Morgenthaler argues that both of these are natural by-products of worship and John Drane concurs. Speaking specifically about the integration of worship and evangelism he concludes that 'authentic worship...attracts people to follow Christ, because it...provides a context in which the whole of the human personality can begin to respond to everything that God is. And that, surely, is what evangelism is all about'.⁸⁰ This recognition that worship provides an important resource for mission is particularly important in the experiential world of post-modernity. The alt.worship movement has contributed to this perspective by implicitly issuing a challenge to the separation of worship, evangelism and discipleship in their pursuit of participative, inclusive worship.

In addition to participative worship events, some alt.worship groups are developing into communities where the same values of inclusion and participation are evident. Relationships are emphasised above roles, 'belonging' to the community takes precedence over 'believing' particular doctrines. This has great evangelistic potential among a generation who value relationships. Stanley Grenz posits that 'a Christian gospel for a postmodern age will invite others to become participants in the community of those whose highest loyalty is to the God revealed in Christ'.⁸¹ However, enthusiasm for the missional possibilities of alt.worship communities must be balanced by a recognition that many of those included within these groups are not pre-Christians but post-evangelicals. They are not on a journey towards faith, but away from an inherited form of faith towards a reconstructed type.

Additionally, the inclusivity of alt.worship communities is extremely limited. The commitment to gender equality is not reflected in the primarily male constituency of the movement. The nature of alt.worship makes the inclusion of children challenging and its intellectual, post-modern style has limited appeal to anyone

78 Morgenthaler 1995: 84.

79 Kreider 1995: 10.

80 Drane 1997: 144.

81 Grenz 1996: 169.

other than educated Westerners. Furthermore, while claiming to be ‘tolerant of groups who choose to worship differently’,⁸² their rhetoric suggests a selective tolerance. Just as post-modernism rejects modernism, so alt.worship, heavily influenced by post-evangelicalism, rejects evangelical and charismatic styles of worship. Andrew Walker has argued convincingly that ‘the Church in communion is the icon of the Holy Trinity. It is the picture of God which we hold up to the world’.⁸³ While the desire to build community that is evident within alt.worship groups is fundamental to mission, and particularly to mission in a post-modern world, the homogeneity of these groups seriously mars the image of God which they project. Moreover, although their chosen worship style values participation, its limited cultural appeal creates an exclusivity in alt.worship events and communities which severely limits the scope of their mission potential.

Alternative worship: the fruits

The alt.worship movement is a ‘small, fragile animal’.⁸⁴ Its groups are diverse in nature and style, but usually appeal principally to those who are influenced by post-modern culture and dissatisfied with the predominantly modernist culture and worship style of many evangelical and charismatic churches. They often include disappointed, damaged or disillusioned Christians who comprise part of the huge exodus from existing churches, either to other forms of Christian community or to a ‘churchless faith’.⁸⁵ As such, they exercise an important, but very limited ministry. Alt.worship groups also tend to be homogenous. They are comprised almost exclusively of Westerners who share similarities in terms of culture, age, education, ecclesiastical background and socio-economic status (alt.worship groups and the wider emerging church movement seem to mainly attract middle class worshippers). Additionally, a typical alt.worship group demonstrates little desire to reach beyond its own culture or to expand, for ‘to grow beyond a unit size of 50 would do violence to its nature’.⁸⁶ Although this commitment to intimate community has great missional potential it may equally demonstrate a lack of evangelistic impetus.

Despite the limited reach of the alt.worship movement, its influence has been significant in challenging the wider church to engage with contemporary culture, and in offering creative resources for doing so. However, it is clear that ‘mission is not a naturally high priority’⁸⁷ for alt.worship groups. They confess to being ‘a bit vague...if not downright defensive’ about conversion growth and ‘talk much more about ‘journey’ than ‘conversion’’.⁸⁸ This coheres with post-modern approaches to evangelism, but also betrays the post-evangelical roots of the movement. Evangelicals, while happy to use the language of journey, would also expect the journey to have a destination of conversion!

The strong reactionary element within alt.worship groups, coupled with a lack of explicit mission intentions, means that they currently have little evangelistic impact. If they are to realise their potential for mission in a post-modern culture these issues must be addressed.

82 Riddell, Kirkpatrick, and Pierson 2000: 71.

83 Walker 1996: 200.

84 Lings 2001: 3.

85 This phrase was popularised by Jamieson 2002.

86 Lings 2001: 23.

87 Lings 2001: 21.

88 Riddell, Kirkpatrick, and Pierson 2000: 128.

Firstly, alt. worship groups will need to develop a missionary identity. David Hilborn's 'vision of a 'postmodern evangelicalism'⁸⁹ offers a helpful way forward here. Rather than rejecting the theological heritage along with the culture of evangelicalism, as many post-evangelicals have done, 'postmodern evangelicalism' offers a vision for contextualized, post-modern worship and church life which retains the distinctively missional instincts of evangelicalism. It therefore provides a strong basis for contextual mission.

Secondly, alt. worship groups which seek to be missional will need to recognise their place within the wider church. If they choose to live 'in healthy interdependence with other ways of being church',⁹⁰ the hurts which threaten to poison their ministry could be healed, their consumerist tendencies could be challenged, their creative spirituality could enrich existing churches and their unique mission could be recognised and celebrated as part of the mission of the wider church. In short, alt. worship groups have great missional potential, particularly in their pursuit of inculturated worship and their desire to build authentic Christian communities. These elements will, however, need to be combined with a higher degree of self-reflection, stronger evangelistic intentions and a greater sense of participation in the mission of the wider church if such groups are to become effective missional communities in the post-modern world.

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89 Hilborn 1997: 8.

90 Lings 2001: 25.

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