

Doug Gay: Response (abridged) to *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*, by Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel

I'm glad of the chance to be included in this conversation - and I want to join others in paying tribute to Gladys and Gerardo for their impressive work in the conduct of this research and the production of the book.

I want to say a little about my own route into this conversation, move on to offer some responses and reactions to the book and close by setting out some questions that I am left with, which I hope will help to fuel the conversation we are here to have today.

I sometimes find myself, not always enthusiastically, making the confession of a 50 something - that I used to be in a band... when I was in my 20s. It's the kind of reminiscence which is often accompanied ironically by the phrase 'back in the day'... There are echoes of that experience and the feeling which go along with it in this attempt to locate myself in relation to the topic.

Back in the day, I was very involved in what was first a 'no name' phenomenon - which fairly quickly came to be described in the UK as the Alternative Worship movement and subsequently, from perhaps the late 1990s, began to be subsumed under the label of the Emerging Church, a description which had gained strong currency in the USA and which became a new broad identifier for what was going on.

I can therefore specify the meaning of 'back in the day' very precisely - the group which would become Glasgow's Late Late Service, of which I was a founder member, took shape over the winter of 1989-90 - we had been inspired by the example of an innovative group based in Sheffield, England - operating from 1986 onwards - which was called the Nine O'Clock Service. In case anyone is worried I am not going to attempt any kind of detailed history, but I did want to set some kind of time frame around the conversation.

From 1989 onwards, the Late Late Service led worship services at Greenbelt Festival in the UK, which offered a key site for others to encounter alternative worship.

I was in the room - or rather the tent - leading worship the day Pete Rollins got converted - or perhaps de-converted - like the vivid and skilful story teller he is, Pete narrates that experience as a key turning point for him, which opened up a new set of possibilities in his own thinking and practice and led directly to the creation of Ikon in the year 2000.

I was involved with LLS for 6 years, then I moved to London where I helped to establish another emerging congregation called Host and worked within that for a further 7 years before returning to Scotland.

It was therefore after some 20 years of involvement, after co-authoring a book on Alternative Worship with Jonny Baker which was published in 2003, that I sat down to write *Remixing The Church* which was published by SCM Press in 2011.

I'm grateful to Gladys and Gerardo for the generous references to *Remixing The Church* in their book. If you're interested, I have a few copies with me which we could bargain for, but you never heard me say that. And you should of course make sure you have bought their book first....

My book was written at a time when I felt that people were already beginning to bury the terms emerging and emergent - so I wrote to praise them, not to bury them - to reflect on my own journey of involvement - and to try to interpret the movement to a wider ecclesial and academic public within theology/study of religion - a public which I felt had often been skeptical about it.

My praise was not uncritical - and I did suggest then that the emerging label might well be outliving its usefulness and be already beginning to disappear from use.

My work was open about the fact that it was a personal theological reflection on my experience as a practitioner within and an interpreter of the alt worship and emerging church movement and that it was primarily focused on the UK.

In the book I named four sources which had fed the emerging church movement or sensibility (I had some reservations about describing it as a movement), which I identified as evangelicalism, the charismatic renewal, the ecumenical movement and the liturgical movement.

I then set out five moves which I claimed were characteristic of an emerging ecclesiology: auditing, retrieval, unbundling, supplementing and remixing - suggesting that they formed a kind of hermeneutical spiral which helped both practitioners and observers to understand what had been going on.

Finally, I charted the diversity of the emerging phenomenon using a simple matrix which tried to make visible the stark differences between the various groups which were associated with the term emerging in terms of ethos, polity and theology.

From 2012 onwards, I thought and spoke about the emerging church much less. Behind that lay academic pressure to move on to a new research topic, but also

changes in the context of my own practice and involvement. However, although I spent less time on it, I was very aware that I continued to be someone who was marked by it, formed by and in some ways haunted by it. I want to return to this last point later.

It was therefore with a great deal of interest and real fascination in fact that I have been led back into serious reflection on the emerging church by the publication of *The Deconstructed Church*.

What Gladys and Gerardo have done, bringing a different academic methodology to bear on the topic and reporting on ethnographic studies of emerging groups and networks, is to add very significantly to the depth and detail of our understanding of 'emerging Christianity' - and to offer perceptive and provocative new lines of interpretation, drawing on theoretical frameworks from the sociology and psychology of religion.

I have found this book a fascinating and an unsettling read - something of a troubling of the waters for me.

Their analysis draws on a number of contested and contestable terms in philosophy and sociology and engagement with the book must therefore involve engagement with these terms and the ways they are deployed in interpreting the religious phenomena. Some of this detailed engagement invites a deeper literacy in sociological theory than I would lay claim to and I willingly defer to others in this room who can offer more help than I can in this field.

Just as Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas's important study *The Spiritual Revolution* invited and provoked a broad engagement with Charles Taylor's account of the subjective turn in western societies, so Ganiel and Marti's work in *Deconstructing The Church* invites us to engage with the significance of Ulrich Beck's work for the sociology of religion. One of the unanswered questions for me arising from the book is how far Woodhead and Heelas's appropriation of Taylor is compatible with and complementary to the approach adopted here.

The authors' debts to Beck are repeatedly signaled and acknowledged throughout the book - in particular we are invited to see the possibilities which come with:

- the overarching concept of religious individualisation
- a sociological/social psychology account of pluralism at work in pluralist institutions
- the formation of the religious self through the enactment of strategic religiosity
- ideas of co-operative egoism and religious cosmopolitanism

Alongside the theoretical borrowing from Beck, we need to note the authors' appropriation of the concept of institutional entrepreneurship and their innovative development of it in relation to the sociology of religion.

Chapter 6 of the book on 'Following Jesus in the Real World' stood out for me as perhaps the section of the book with the thinnest relationship to sociological theory. The exception would be the discussion of Kester Brewin's appropriation of Hakim Bey's work on *Temporary Autonomous Zones*, but overall it was less clear to me what kind of distinctive sociological hermeneutic was being brought to the material in this chapter.

As well as critical evaluation of these lenses and filters from sociological theory, a response to this book has to involve some critical pressure on how the authors deploy the term 'deconstruction'. As well as figuring in the book's title, this is one of the most commonly used terms across the whole book and while the introduction of key terms in sociological theory is usually accompanied by a crisp summary of how they are understood and used by the authors - this is not true of deconstruction.

Perhaps the assumption here is that this is not necessary - after all, we all know what deconstruction means right?

My skepticism about this is rooted in two observations: one is the intriguing way in which the language of deconstruction and indeed of postmodernism have been disappearing from the discourse of the academy over the past five to ten years - language which once featured in almost every AAR paper and which seemed indispensable, is being quietly dispensed with across many disciplines. Which may be another way in which this book is intentionally troubling the waters?

The second thought is that prior to its vanishing act from the academy, deconstruction had been one of the most widely abused and overused terms in academic discourse and popular discourse which was influenced by the academy.

Given the importance of this term to the book as a whole - I think we should ask some further questions about how it is being used.

- how far is talk of "Emerging Christians deconstructing their previous, personal faith" (p59) invoking Derridean deconstruction as a hermeneutical method for interpreting the lives of their subjects?
- how far is it being used in a rougher, vaguer and more popular sense to simply mean questioning and rethinking identity and practice in ways which feel disorientating?
- how far is this an ethnographic result, which is telling us this is how the people we are writing about talk about themselves and understand their own practice?

For example on p58 Kathy Escobar talks about "entering deconstruction" in the way other people might talk about entering therapy.

- how far does the language of deconstruction disrupt the discourse of this book as sociology and how does it relate to your appropriation of Beck's understanding of reflexivity and individualization? (Deconstruction has a hungry reputation as a beast that eats all of its children...)
- is the claim being made here that deconstruction is an intentional and strategic mode of reflexivity - and that Emerging Christians exemplify that - is it a new way of working on ourselves?
- if this is the claim, that it is a new (and valuable?) way of working on ourselves, how does it relate to the way the language of deconstruction is now being sidelined within the academy?

I am left wishing that the book could have been more explicit and perhaps more reflexive about how this term has been used?

There is so much more I want to say - but time is limited ...

Finally - the future of emerging Christianity - the hero of this book is of course, not really the emerging church, but is sociology itself - the emerging church is simply a case study of religious change. It is interesting that the authors as sociologists, offer a more positive reading of the movement and its future - "it is remarkably well adapted to persist, even thrive, as a viable religious alternative in the West" p195 I was surprised by how surprising I found that conclusion - we need, I think, to talk about that!

Doug Gay.