

Emerging Christian Faith: Deconstruction, Reconstruction, Prayer & Theology

Introduction – The Christian Journey of Faith

For some time now, I have been reflecting on the spiritual journey that many of us have undertaken and that many more are making. The gap between traditional forms of church and contemporary culture continues to expand, and many who turn to the Emerging Church are increasingly dechurched, as well as people who are not yet Christian (unchurched). What is most apparent is that there is a progression of spiritual journeying....

Many have written on how faith is a journey of life with many stages. There are key stages in the transition from a simple form of faith to a more complex form that can cope with the inconsistencies of life, (Fowler describes these stages in some detail, calling the simple faith stage 1 & 2, and the more complex stages 3 and 4. See notes below). For some it is about questioning the faith they received as a child, for others it is about frustration about the faith they received from Sunday school or courses such as Alpha, for others it is academic study or a family crisis. For others like myself who had no Christian faith formation as a child or young adult, it is the quest for an authentic Christian faith that makes sense of the complex real world we live in. Whatever the cause, it can be a painfully hard thing to face; the doubts and the unknowns. It requires you to ask dangerous and far reaching questions in the search for God. It requires you to face your own disappointments particularly around the word 'church'. In many ways it is about part of you dying and a new part of you coming to life.

However, I would argue that we are most definitely not the first to face this, and there is something about the struggle of faith starting with Abraham, through the Prophets and the Exodus, to John the Baptist and Jesus. All struggled with a God that seemed at times very present and then very absent. In Jesus we see a cycle of spiritual growth, that patterns a sense of growth, crucifixion and resurrection. In the disciples, we see this in the way they started with simple faith, which is then led by Christ into confusion and crisis, and then built into the first Christians seeking to live in a complex world with a complex faith....

In the same way, I sense that Christians called to the Emerging Church have to make a particular journey of death and new life as a cyclical way of life. Today the gap between church and culture often creates a tension for those passionate about encultured Christianity. Many of us struggle to keep up with ourselves, let alone God!!

As with Alan Jamieson's research (see booklist below), I am concerned that we lay down some markers for a way through what is essentially a very difficult journey. I also believe that this is a specific calling by God, to a particular vocation to be Christian in a postmodern and consumerist society.

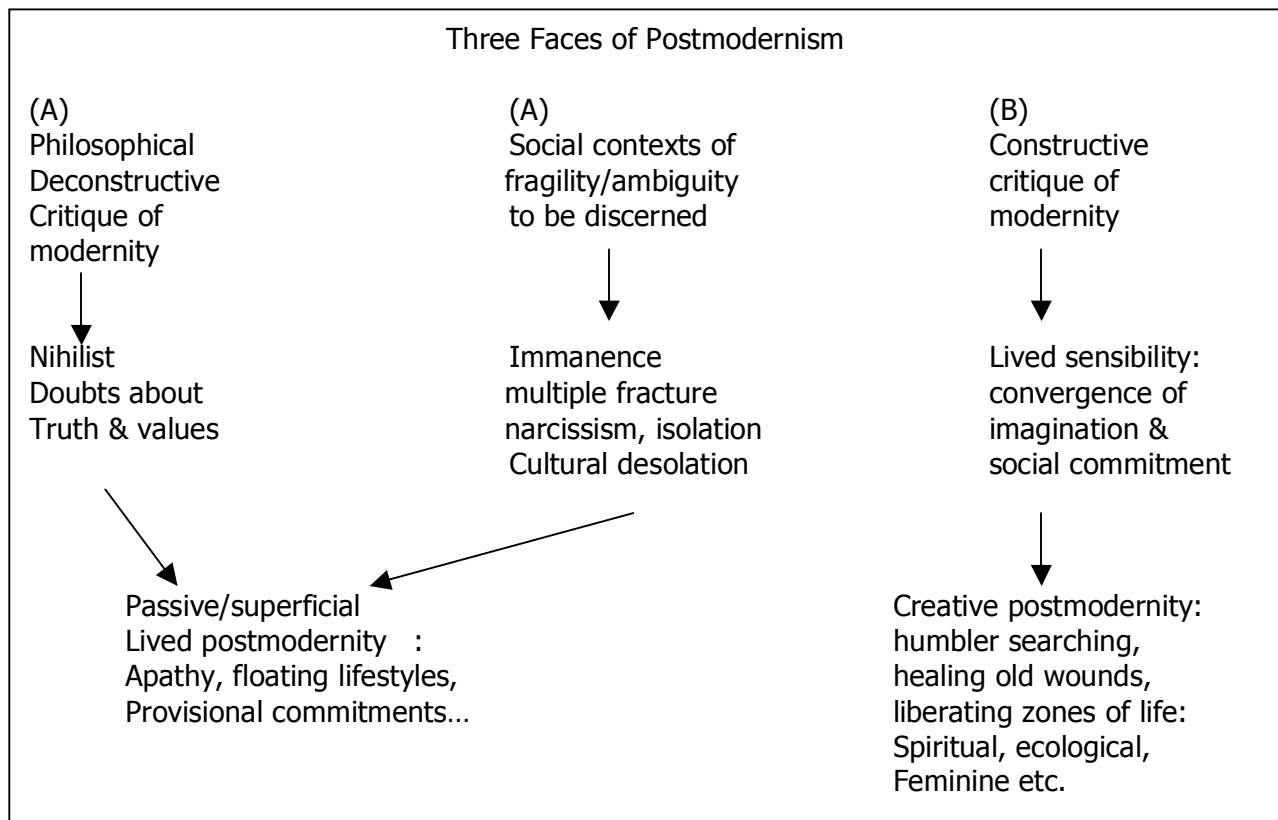
I have been concerned, that many on this journey have gone down a route that leads to a very cynical, overly-deconstructive approach, where nothing positive seems to be

graspable, with the result that some have ended up losing their faith through an ever downward cycle of fragmentation and loss. I do not think that it needs to be the whole story; this can be a starting phase of something more constructive. So I have put these thoughts down on paper in order to (hopefully) benefit people who either have been or are going through, the pain of deconstruction. It is also my belief that this process can and will lead to reconstruction of faith for those living in postmodern contexts. I am going to call this "emerging faith".

Now in Postmodernism, there are two rival strains of thought – one which we will call 'hard postmodernism' and the other has been called 'creative postmodernism'. The first, a distinctly philosophical approach which I mentioned in the introduction, relates deconstruction to a process that is very 'head'-based (intellectual/cerebral) with very little 'heart' involvement. It is very cynical and very untrusting of anything and everything. I would go so far as to say that, as a process, it becomes deeply dehumanising and distorting if it remains the only way forward. When people get stuck in this form of deconstruction, self-preoccupation and 'bitterness' take over – to point that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is a scenario that I have witnessed far too often - too many friends lose faith by hard forms of postmodernist critiques, and I feel distinctly uncomfortable with its nihilistic destructive approach.

The second form ('creative postmodernism') is far more healthy, and akin to a deconstruct/reconstruct approach. In this scenario, people engage both head and heart, and are influenced by the thoughts, experiences, dialogue and interaction with others. For me, it is this second stream we should be directing fellow spiritual travellers towards, rather than the mire of hard postmodernism.

Helpfully Gallagher identifies three streams of postmodernity: one being 'radical' postmodernity, based on a head-driven philosophical search, the second, sociological search and the third, creative postmodernity, (M P Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols*, 2003, 106).



Two of these approaches are about Deconstruction (A) and one is Reconstruction (B). To get from (A) to (B) is a painful journey, and one that many in the Emerging church have made, are making or are about to make. It is common knowledge that any fundamental shift in the way we go about life will inevitably involve some pain, and is therefore something that requires the support of those around you.

Jamieson points out the importance of helping people to shift from (A) to (B) where possible, which may take years. Without support people can just lose faith or reject Christianity in favour for more "pic-n-mix" approaches. However, it is hoped that most will make it through!! We in Moot are passionate about helping people through this.

Deconstruction

Many who have grown up in Christian families with a strong sense of family and traditional forms of church, hit a crisis in their late teen's/20s in reaction to family or work crisis, or through study. Upon arrival at this scenario they realise that, up to that point, they have had quite simplistic understandings of faith that were dissonant with our contemporary culture of complexity.

Personally, I believe that these experiences are God-led – as we are challenged to go deeper with God, and to move from immature forms of faith to deeper, more mature ones.

Rightly, people begin to question what they believe and why they believe it. The world becomes less black-and-white, and more grey, as solutions are not as simple as they once seemed.

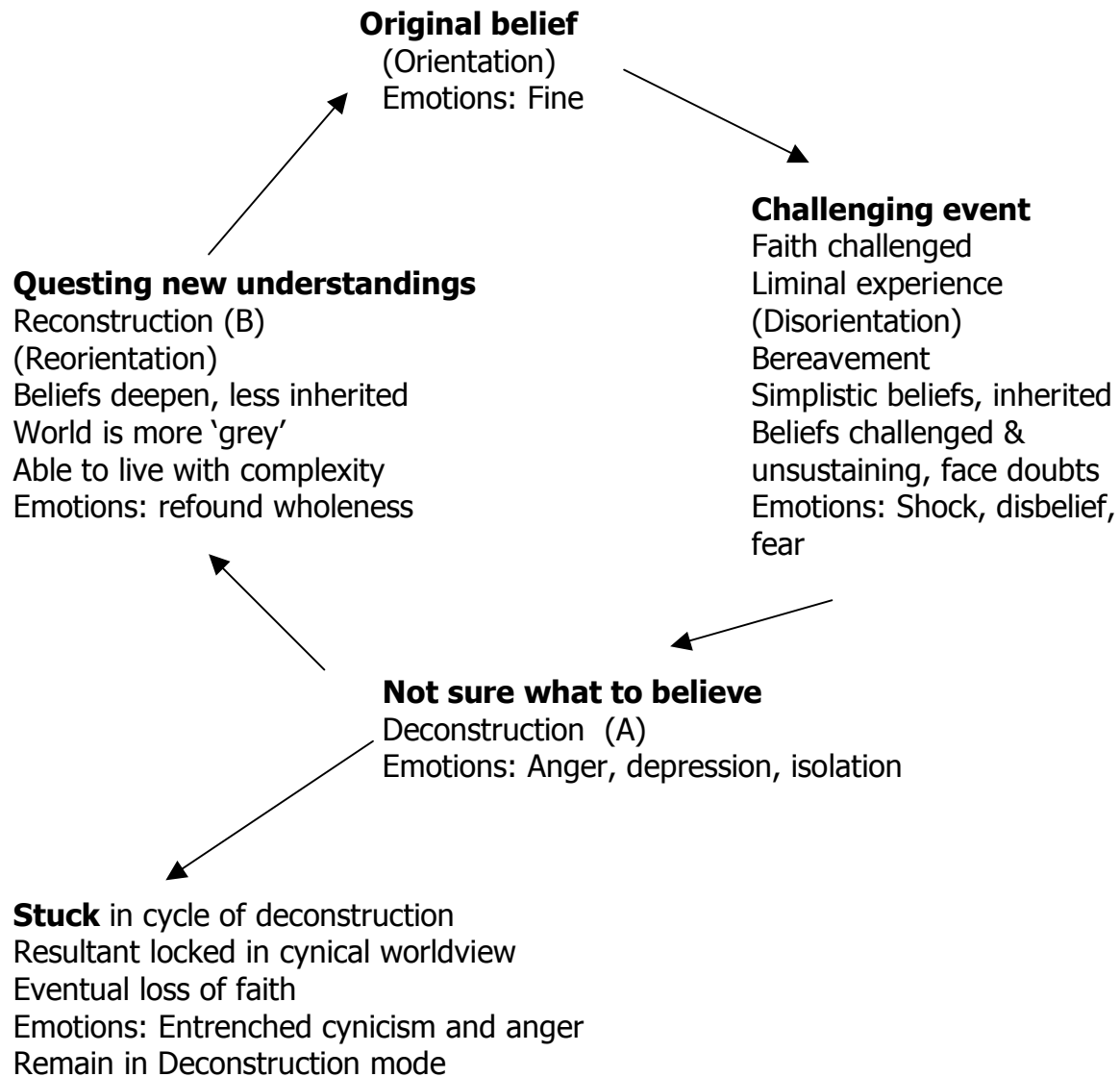
In Post-modernity, a time of cultural shift, these crises can often be experienced as liminal moments - times of inner conflict that can have positive or negative results. As A Jamieson reports, this is the beginning of a process, which relates to Fowler's Stages of Faith.

The greatest mistake that people in 'deconstruction mode' make, is to stop praying. The reasons given for stopping praying are usually some form of objection to the mechanics and purpose of prayer. Rather than persevering with it or finding alternative methods of prayer, it has become the first casualty of deconstruction. The approach to faith turns into an exercise in philosophical truth claims rather than a relationship to the divine. It has always appeared to me the greatest irony, that at the time people most need to be able to turn to relationship with God, they turn away as if faith is some form of consumer choice or philosophical truth. It is neither of these. Faith is about relationship to God, and prayer - which may be silent, it may be doubting, it may feel awkward or any number of different things. But it is nonetheless vital for those who journey through.

Some doubt that they will ever reconstruct, and this is certainly true if they are not praying; people can get so locked into themselves that their image of God becomes an extension of their own egos and superegos. God will never be acceptable in these terms or criteria. Prayer takes you beyond yourself and your limitations; it enables you to listen and encounter the God that is beyond, and not defined by us.

Deconstruction is vital for us to throw off simplistic understandings of God and the purposes of the divine, to get away from the Disney version of Christianity painted into children's bibles; nice smiley best-friend Jesus. This is not Christianity, and deconstruction held with prayer can help us hear and encounter the real Jesus and the real Godhead. As our friend Pete Rollins would say and Mesiter Erkhart "God rid me of God", as these inner projections of God are not God and distort our ability to discern the God beyond.

The other area that is not acknowledged during deconstruction is deep anger. Often people seem very unaware of what a deeply emotional experience this stage of faith is. Doubt and deconstruction create a sense and experience of bereavement. Whatever drove the individual into deconstruction leaves them bereaved of their simplistic faith and understandings of God. That Jesus is not simply your best friend, and that prayer does not prevent suffering, creates at first distress, fear and many tears, followed by anger and deep raging, and then sadness or feeling down before any kind of move towards resolution and reconstruction is possible. This is clearly the cycle of bereavement. When you are in the middle of it, reconstruction feels impossible.



Reconstruction

As I suggested in the first diagram above, reconstruction is about refinding a faith that you can believe in. Not simplistic, but plausible and believable - born out of a real relationship with God in the here and now. This is what I have called an emerging faith. It is a reframed passion for God, living in a grey world where though nothing is black and white, we can still exist and act with a degree of certainty. It is about head and heart and not rejection of the heart, it is about refound awe and mystery. It is not a retreat to primitive understandings. Importantly it includes some form of spiritual intimacy with God.

Questing does not stop, it continues, but it may do so in community or utilising a spiritual director. Life is never easy, but in this stage it becomes more centred. Faith then becomes rich, embodied, with more feminist understandings of the world we live in and community. There is a vision for nurture and experiment of creativity and permission-giving.

The importance of Prayer through out this emerging faith journey

Many of us have fixed ideas of what prayer should be. I never quite know where these ideas come from, but they are almost always accompanied by feelings of guilt. For some reason we have reduced prayer to something quite 'twee' and unresourcing. We need to throw out many misconceptions.

Prayer is anything that is about encounter with God. It is not just speaking audibly or conversing with God in your head. It can be silence, it can be shouting at God, it can be listening to music, it can be writing things and giving them to God, it can be about expressing your frustrations, it can be a conversation with friends, it can be forms of meditation and contemplation. Whatever form it takes, prayer is basically that which relates to the relationship between God and you. What is important is that it is personal. When you are really hurting, prayer can be a means of expression, even when God feels dead or absent. There is something called the 'I Thou' relationship, that says whether we know it or not, we get something of our identity and being from relationship to and with God even if that relationship currently involves us running away. Why do I believe this? Because I do not think we are ever really independent or abandoned. The fact that this may or may not be acknowledged or realised by us makes no difference.

Too often, our experience of prayer is about sending up a heavenly shopping list. When the expected reply does not come, we are disappointed. There are real dangers of projecting our consumer selves into prayer – which is about God delivering our every need. I do think prayer is answered but almost never in ways we were expecting or anticipating. Often prayer leads to more painful decisions or choices. We were never promised a happy life, or that we would not suffer. Jesus promised only that we would not be overcome – why? Because whether we like it or not, pain and suffering are part of what it means to be human, by our own creation and brokenness. The Bible and indeed church history is full of examples of pain, lamentation, and the way of the cross for those who choose to be Christian.

It is through our of experience of God, and (I would argue) more mystical forms of prayer, that we can grow in encounter with God, and live with all the inconsistencies that life throws up for us.

Prayer & Theology

Given this new (or should I say old?) understanding of prayer, it is possible to re-engage in developing a spiritual way of life, resourced by encounter with the divine. As your experience grows, it will become easier to articulate what this form of faith feels like. Much has been written that may become a resource, written by others that can further you on your re-requesting of faith. For example:

The mystics & prayer
Henri Nouwen
Mike Riddell

Key Resources to help you through

There are a number of key texts that I know have helped me and other people on their spiritual journey from deconstruction to reconstruction, I list some of them

Exploring Deconstruction

- The Post Evangelical Dave Tomlinson
- After Religion: Generation X & the search for meaning Gordon Lynch
- The Spiritual Journey Mike Riddell
- A Churchless Faith Alan Jamieson

Seeing what faith can look like constructively

- Threshold to the Future Mike Riddell
- The Emerging Church Ryan Bolger

Daily Devotionals & Prayer resources when going through deconstruction to reconstruction.

- Listen to your life Frederick Buechner
- Northumbria Community Daily Prayer Northumbria Community

Moot resources

Check out the foundations and grey space sections of the moot website, as there are stories of hope and exploration there too also.