

**Review of 'The Complex Christ' by Kester Brewin  
By Ian Mobsby**

This important and in some ways unique book, in the now growing library on emergent/emerging church comes out of the experiences of Kester as a member of the Vaux Alternative worship community. As such it is a momentous achievement. The purpose of this brief review is to explore how Kester's book approaches the complex issue of being 'church' in the future.

The Church is and always will be something of a paradox; Martyn Percy puts this better than I can when he said:

*Ecclesiologicaly speaking, the Church stands in the gap between power and the powerless, between strength and weakness, between absolutism and outright vacuity. As the social transcendent community, a particular kind of body, it has knowledge but not certainty, boundaries but not limits, is discerning but open, is for other and others but not for itself. It is allowed boundaries and borders, but not barriers.*  
(M Percy, *Power & the Church*, 1998)

Much of Kester Brewin's book "A Complex Christ" resonates with this bizarre calling for being the church in a fluid post-modern age. He wrestles with exploring the role and form of 'church', particularly the 'body of Christ' and how it relates to recent advances in knowledge. He artistically explores the organisational and social opportunities born out of developments in technology, socio-anthropological enquiry, systems theory and the study of animal organisational behaviour.

At times the writing is narrative and sometimes argument. As narrative it is poetic, prophetic, extremely challenging, hard, gentle and always persuasive. Initially I struggled to interpret such a book. There was a lot I agreed with strongly and bits of it I disagreed with strongly – Why did it evoke such a strong reaction either way? I am sure that at times the writing is polemical, but in a way that focuses the mind on facing the very real issues of our times. Rightly, it is never an easy read.

Andrew Jones, or tall-skinny-kiwi helped me with this when he presented his thoughts at a conference in Sheffield, backing up his post-modern poetic narrative by making connections with biblical wisdom literature quotes. It dawned on me that Kester's book was drawing on this genre of a form of wisdom literature for our current times. Wisdom literature of the Old Testament is an ancient form of writing and thinking written to supplement the scriptures of the day for a people group displaced from the land they were used to and therefore disorientated or 'liminal', who then sought to make sense of their faith in the new culture as 'resident aliens'. This was essential, as the new context had distanced the sacred scriptures requiring a different approach of interpretation to make them meaningful. In many ways we in the 'post-Christian' west are in such a liminal situation, where technology, the speed of life and socio-cultural change has rendered us 'strangers in a new land'.

Taken as such, Kester's book reframes our contemporary situation. It helps us approach the scriptures and church tradition in a more meaningful way for the context of our current times. Rightly it promotes connection with the true Christian faith narrative that we have inherited and are charged to pass on to the next generation in a very new context.

The truth is, that in the last 2000 years the Church has changed continually through every period of history. However, our current situation is pretty unique due to the speed of change and the affect of the global market. Our current crisis is more to do with the gap between contemporary culture and the church, which continues to widen. It is a gap or rather a growing ravine that goes as deep as paradigm, language, social organisation and hope. The church is not just out of step, it is often a museum for a past way of life. Kester rightly calls for this to end – as a sign of repentance for such a failure.

Here, like prophetic writing, Kester's book is an artistic and prophetic interpretation of the potential views for the future. You don't have to take it all literally, with all wisdom tradition texts, the individual and faith communities must interpret what they hold to be truth from false through discernment.

I recognise in this book the journey of people like me who have come from a Charismatic Evangelical background who have changed through the experience of alternative worship, who now seek a more culturally inclusive way of being the 'body of Christ' in reaction to a church that is often irrelevant, out dated and in retreat. It's passion has become incarnational and en-cultured.

There is with all change, the potential danger of promoting a designer religion that lacks authenticity if we move too close to secular culture and away from the central truths of the Christian faith. However, in Kester's book, his focus on generosity, gift giving, openness to the Spirit, participation in the Kingdom of God and Christ in the city, are all evidence of authentic Christian spirituality. It unfolds a form of living born out of praxis of a particular alternative worship community in London.

My only criticism, is that there isn't much ecclesiology, a matter that Kester and I have debated on various blogs!! and I know we continue to healthily disagree. Both Andrew Walker and Martyn Percy have been critical of new forms of church coming out of the 'charismatic movement' for the lack of exploration of the theology of church – which they predict has the following implication:

*It has no way of preventing schism, lacks depth of discernment, always puts experience over knowledge, colludes with social abrogation, and may well be a spent force in a new millennium. (M Percy, 1998)*

*For a western world that is increasingly privatised and individualistic, a post modern...form of religion has no guarantee of longevity...it becomes fashion-conscious, short term and culturally relative. (M Percy, 1998)*

These are real problems if 'fresh expressions' or as Kester puts it 'emergent church' is really going to flourish. The major mistake of Protestantism is that they saw getting on with mission as a priority and that church just happens. This is the view that Pete Ward often puts when talking about 'Liquid Church'. It is my experience that healthy church never 'just happens' but needs to be carefully built. Dave Tomlinson began the new pursuit for theology with 'the post-evangelical', which other than Pete Ward's book, are the few that engage with some form of ecclesiology. We need more theological and explicitly ecclesiological exploration for emergent forms of church seeking to be authentically Christian and citizens of a post-modern world.

It is my hope that Kesters' book stimulates dialogue in the fresh expressions of church to explore an authentic ecclesiology to root this progression of the Church into authentically Christian experimental forms, otherwise this new venture is in danger of becoming a fad or having insufficient substance to sustain the body of Christ in all the complexity of life.

Kester's emphasis of the work of Jonny Baker on 'trickster' is important in its playful connection with the many forms of the more established or solid forms of current church. Again, it is prophetic in its playfulness which brings a well-needed correction to much of the drudgery and unnecessary clutter. A well-needed spring-cleaning. However, as with the ancient myth, trickster left to its own devices can have cult tendencies and represent a negative force if not checked with a sense of responsibility, generosity, and meekness.

Lastly, I confess to being uncomfortable about change 'always' needing to be bottom up. This again is the narrow view of Protestantism. Change is change whether it is 'side ways', 'top down' or 'bottom up'. It has more to do with context, particularly church context. I will be the first to say that change in church terms is painfully and frustratingly slow. In my own context this remains the number one debilitating issue, so again Kester is right to say that prevention of change or innovation is a major problem.

Kester's book is a brave book, not unlike Dave Tomlinson's and Pete Ward's books in it's 'raising the head above the parapet'. Not unsurprisingly it has received major criticism from the more conservative and solid parts of the church, but I stand by Kester and the central message of this book. Like the comments on the 'Complex Christ blog', I commend this book that gives me hope and resonates with much of my own thoughts and feelings, and hope that the issues I raise regarding ecclesiology, help to give us the tools that we need...

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