

# Marks of the Emerging Church:

## An overview by Pete Rollins

What follows is a brief overview of what I covered in the 'Marks of the Emerging Church' study day. It signals the development of a *(quasi)theological dis-course*<sup>1</sup> that might prove useful for understanding the far-reaching significance of those groups that would *rightly pass* for emerging churches<sup>2</sup>. This is not a theoretical system that seeks to affect praxis but rather a theoretical reflection upon already existing praxis. Please also note that this is only a brief overview of the primary conclusions offered on the day, it is not a description of the main arguments (for that you will need to buy the CD – or, if you live somewhere nice, invite me over). Also, a big thanks to Moot for putting this day on and supplying me with drinks when I forgot my wallet (honest guys, I did forget it).

## Seminar 1: How (not) to speak of God

The main arguments in this seminar include,

**The theology engaged in by the emerging church is not one that speaks of God but rather a type of *quasi-theology* that prevents God from being spoken**

Here we began with the post-modern critique of modernism<sup>3</sup> and the common misperception that, by listening to the insights of the great 'masters of suspicion'<sup>4</sup>, we are necessarily led to reject the belief in a transcendent God. We looked at how this has led some Christians to turn and run from post-modernism in an attempt to retain their love of transcendence while others have welcomed this 'death of God', seeking to develop a purely immanent Christianity wholly embedded in this world.

In contrast to these we explored how the post-modern critique does not necessarily lead to the end of God but can actually reinvigorate the church by helping us to reclaim the pre-Enlightenment understanding that theology will always be tainted by such things as our psychological makeup, cultural context and educational background and that it was never supposed to somehow describe God – something that is little more than conceptual idolatry. Instead of theology being that which defines God such thinking helps us to acknowledge that

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<sup>1</sup> A dis-course is a discourse that knowingly sends one off course, not providing what the words seek to describe

<sup>2</sup> Note the deliberate ploy to avoid saying 'for those groups that *are* emerging churches'

<sup>3</sup> Described as the third stage in the move from affirmation to negation to the negation of negation – and thus the relativising of relativism.

<sup>4</sup> Like Feuerbach's claim that theology is anthropology, Freud's argument that our views of God are projections grounded in the unconscious and Marx's insights upon how economic factors influence our supposedly objective theologies.

theology, at its height, is actually a discourse which prevents God from being spoken – it affirms a silence operating in the midst of speech that is not the result of faithlessness but rather a direct result of deep commitment to the God who cannot be reduced to words.

**This quasi-theology does not therefore describe God but is understood  
as that which is formed in the aftermath of God**

While this quasi-theology does not define God it arises in the *aftermath of God*. For although the post-modern critique helps to draw out the extent to which our words reflect who we are (thus cutting at the roots of an Enlightenment faith which would claim that our words can reflect God), this critique does not necessarily point toward an end of God. Rather it refers us back to the mystical idea that God, although not revealed by our words, has impacted our lives and thus compelled us to theologise in the first place. Our reflections upon God are thus provisional attempts to wrestle with the all-consuming fires of an experience which ultimately melts all our concepts away.

Here the revelation central to Christianity is not seen as the opposite of concealment but has concealment built into its heart – in emerging church thought God is neither made known in revelation, nor remains unknown but is made known as unknown. This is similar to Anselm's claim that God is not simply the greatest conceivable being (Descartes), nor beyond conception (Feuerbach) but *conceived as that which is beyond conception*. Hence the project dating back to Nietzsche's death of God need not be seen as a bad thing but may actually be the accomplishment of Meister Eckhart's famous request 'I pray God quit me of god' – a prayer that acknowledges how our concept of God is not God. The result is not the end of theology but the embracing of a fractured theology made up of wounded words.

**This leads us to a re-awakening of the idea that God is apocalyptic**

Next we explored how immanence and transcendence do not express two opposite points in a diffuse spectrum but rather one and the same point. By thinking of revelation as the opposite of concealment, Enlightenment thinking also saw immanence as the opposite of transcendence. However we can see that God remains transcendent *amidst* immanence precisely because God is hyper-present. God is so present we are overcome and left breathless (like looking at the sun and going blind). The emerging church thus reclaims God as apocalyptic (literally meaning the unprecedented, unexpected, utterly unknown incoming of that which cannot be grasped). The theology of the emerging church is therefore one by which we attempt not to speak of God at the very moment that we speak of God – our religious words are thus ruptured by a silence operating in their heart.

**The emerging church embraces the idea that we are all heretics and thus engages in an a/theistic, iconic dis-course**

The next thing we looked at is how this approach draws out the idea that theism must embrace atheism. Because of God's hyper-present transcendence and the wounded nature of our words we are brought to a place where we embrace a healthy disbelief in what we believe, acknowledging that we are all heretics. The emerging church thus engages in an a/theistic dis-course which realises that are words forever fall short of that toward which they aim. Thus we hold lightly to our affirmations – again not out of a lack of faith but rather as a direct consequence of faith. The fractured, fragile quasi-theology of the emerging church should not then be (mis)understood as a sign of weakness, for its powerlessness is actually a sign of a resolute commitment to the one who has a power beyond conception.

The emerging churches fractured theology and ruptured religion is not then an idol (pretending to make God manifest to our minds as an aesthetic idol makes God manifest to our eyes) but rather an icon (a way of thinking that leads us into a contemplation of the one who lies beyond all words).

## Seminar 2: Inhabiting the God shaped hole

This seminar included the following reflections,

### **The emerging church acknowledges that religious believers possess a God-shaped hole in their being**

Here we began by exploring how the desire for God, far from being evidence that we do not know God, is precisely that sign which informs us that we do. Augustine argues that we would only seek God if God had already made Himself known to us. He argued that we only seek to understand what we already love, for why else would we attempt to understand it, and we could only love God because God had made Himself known – thus when we begin to search for God we come to find that we are only searching because God first quickened our hearts with God's presence. Thus, instead of genuine religious desire being a void that exists before God appears, it is seen as that which results in the aftermath of God.

This helps us understand why the psalmist writes, 'those who *desire* God lack no good thing' and the gospels tell us to 'seek first the kingdom'. Here seeking and desiring are placed over and against having and possessing.

With this in mind we considered the verses that speak of asking, seeking and knocking. In general we think of seeking as that which comes before finding and initially the verse would seem to imply this. However the scripture would be better translated in the present continuous tense i.e. seeking and finding share a more intimate relationship than mere cause and effect and are actually married together – *seeking is evidence of having found*. The believer, far from once having a God shaped hole in their being that is now filled, is one who has a God shaped hole formed in the aftermath of God.

### **The emerging church acknowledges truth as a soteriological event**

This thinking leads the emerging church to a fresh and challenging look at the question 'what is truth'? The Greek understanding of truth views it as that which can be empirically and/or logically verified or falsified. In other words, as a descriptive proposition that we attain after a philosophical or scientific procedure. This view has somewhat eclipsed the Hebraic idea of truth as that which is connected with the liberation and transformation of the individual – truth as that which offers healing and salvation.

The idea that truth is that which offers liberation renders some Bible stories much more intelligible, for throughout the biblical text there are multiple instances in which people

seemingly 'lie' for the sake of truth<sup>5</sup>. Truth is thus not necessarily connected with empirical correctness. Here we can begin to understand the biblical notion of knowing the truth and being set free by the truth – for knowledge is here connected with existential encounter and truth with a person who transforms.

### **The emerging church engages in a powerless discourse**

By embracing the above insights the emerging church finds itself in the position of being able to develop a way of speaking that does not attempt to define their beloved but rather which encourages others to seek this beloved for themselves. This approach was contrasted with 'power' discourses. A power discourse is any way of communicating which seeks to compel the other. This power discourse has two primary modes that have often been called (1) apologetics (2) power evangelism. The first of these uses reason in order to convince the other that Christianity is compelling and must be accepted while the second uses the miraculous to compel the other to believe.

These power discourses of word and wonder attempt to present faith in such a way that rejection, if not impossible, is utterly irrational. In this way, the acceptance or rejection of the system is based not upon love or a feeling of overwhelming seduction but rather upon cold evidence that stands secure regardless of the motive and desires of the individual.

Unlike the traditional mode of preaching, which seeks to persuade and clarify (closing thought down by telling people what they ought to think), powerless discourses are designed to open up thought. This powerless discourse can be seen at work in Jesus' parables, which can only be understood by those 'with ears to hear'. Instead of religious discourse being a drink that is designed to satisfy our thirst for answers, Jesus made his teaching salty, evoking thirst. Instead of offering a scientific explanation that would convince all, or publicising the miracles he did so as to compel his listeners, Jesus engaged in a poetic discourse that spoke to the heart of those who would listen. The emerging church acknowledges this powerless mode of communication and thus engages with a quasi-theology that provides a sacred space for God to give God – for, as Augustine argues, the only one who can give God is God.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, at the beginning of Exodus we read of two Egyptian midwives who refuse to carry out the Pharaoh's command that all male infants must be put to death, 'The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 'When you help the Hebrew woman in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live'. The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, 'Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?' The midwives answered Pharaoh, 'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive'. *So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became more numerous*'