

# *A Kaleidoscopic Carnival*

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This article examines the ways in which a globalised and post-modern society has led to the fragmentation and consequent hybridisation of traditions – namely, religion – with other frameworks of meaning. It firstly traces the religious traditions in St Stephen’s Anglican Church then refracts these through post-modern lenses in order to highlight the textured and multi-traditional fragments which compose our current culture. In a world that is continually transforming its cultural landscape, Federico Fellini’s notions of a kaleidoscopic carnival captures the shifting dimensions of this society and acts as the base upon which the interplay between notions of tradition and post-modernity occur, whilst the contrasting uses of the site of St Stephen’s as a church and music venue acts as the lens which bring these notions into the focus of the present moment. This article also draws upon theorists such as Baudrillard and Lyotard to examine the breakdown of the metanarrative of religion and to ultimately challenge the concept of tradition as fixed to a particular culture and time.

**Keywords:** post-modern, society, hybridisation, tradition, religion, metanarrative

According to Federico Fellini, nothing in this world is pure and everything is a “post-modern carnival” (Jencks 2007, pg 100). How, then, does tradition survive in a society that prides itself in constant reinvention and immediacy? Where amongst the shifting, tumbling shards and colours of our kaleidoscopic carnival does tradition hold onto? Framed within this metaphor of a kaleidoscopic carnival, this article is an exploration into the interplay between tradition and post-modernity in St Stephen’s Anglican Church. In being used as both a place of worship and a popular Russian Vodka endorsed music venue, St Stephen’s demonstrates fragments of old and new, conservative and hedonistic, and combines these to achieve a kaleidoscope of experience. This article aims to convey the continual presence of traditions aided rather than eroded by post-modernism evident in the site of St Stephen’s, whilst critically analysing the ideas which construct these concepts – in particular, the concept and construction of tradition as unable to transcend time and culture. It achieves this by firstly establishing the site of St Stephen’s before employing a recurring juxtaposition between the ways in which religious traditions manifest themselves in the site and how they fragment and hybridise to form neo traditions in the presence of a music venue. Additionally, the article also explores the implications of neo traditions on individuals and society.

The stone tower and spire of St Stephen’s Anglican Church loom into view. Above, the skies are overcast and sunlight occasionally filters through dark, shifting clouds. Weathered headstones peep out among tufts of grass and statues of silent sleeping angels, and beyond the sandstone walls and arched windows all is quiet. To imagine anything other than the reflective silence which wraps around the site is difficult – perhaps a quiet mass, a small congregation – but anything more and the sheer reverence of silence dispels the thought before it has time to settle into consciousness.

But surprisingly, this landscape is transformed every month or so.

St Stephen's comes alive with voices, people, music, multicoloured light, smoke machines. A stage is set up in the space before the altar, the pews are pushed back, and international and local musicians perform for dozens of cheering fans. Amidst the music and cameras it is easy to forget the weathered headstones lying in the darkness outside. The serene silence which blankets the church in the daytime is chased away by beams of coloured light.

Then as day breaks, a gentle stillness descends upon St Stephen's once again as it returns to a place of worship. Only to retransform into a music venue for the "Live at the Chapel" event. This fragmentation and continual alternation between the traditional use as a church and the contemporary use as a music venue can evidently be regarded as post-modern, however it is important to trace the historical and religious traditions which construct the site of St Stephen's before they are refracted through post-modern lenses.

The architecture of St Stephen's Anglican Church is a reflection of the historical and social context in which it was constructed. Built in the later part of the nineteenth century, its arched stone traced windows, decorated towers and cruciform plan clearly follow the conventions of the Gothic Revival Architectural Movement. This movement, dated back as early as the eighteenth century, attempted to revive the architectural style of the Gothic period, and consequently conveys a nostalgia for the past – for the Gothic and medieval eras – as it contrasts with the neoclassical architecture prevalent during the time (Aldrich 1994). In being constructed within this movement, the structure of St Stephen's Anglican Church also reflects the movement's philosophical, social and political paradigms. It conveys a reawakening of spirituality, a resistance against the context of industrialisation and urbanisation, and a value for traditional conservatism. Therefore, from a historical and architectural perspective, notions of tradition clearly weave themselves throughout the arched windows and decorated towers as "cultural patterns that evoke or testify to continuity with the past" (Blackburn 2008) manifest themselves in the site.

Examining the traditions which inhibit and construct St Stephen's also leads us to the metanarrative of religion. Durkheim writes that religion is handed down by tradition and formulated for a whole group (Heelas 1998) – that is, the conventions and social forms of religion (in this case Christianity) – have become institutionalised over time. For some, this is a validation of their authority as they have become so established, so integrated in the collective psyche and memory of society that they are accepted knowledge. Foucault calls this discourse (). In St Stephen's Anglican Church, the discourses of religion evidently operate within the site, as discursive religious symbols manifest themselves in the cruciform floor plan, the church organ and the residing cemetery, but also in the structure of the liturgies and masses. The presence of these Christian traditions is an indication of the power of the Christian metanarrative, reminding us that our society, like many Western societies, was formed upon Christian values and beliefs.

However taking into consideration St Stephen's double use as a music venue, questions arise over the relevance and importance of religion in contemporary society. As demonstrated in the traditions found in St Stephen's, religion is *present* in this current moment, however is it *significant*? Due to the construction of the primitivist discourse, religion is regarded as archaic and crumbling. Traditions are "old fashioned, an altogether undesirable condition" (Cowlshaw 2009, pg 188) – something which the modern has left behind and which has consequently eroded over time. In a society that is globalised, capitalised and consumer oriented, most see religion and its traditions as irrelevant and incompatible. However in St Stephen's, the fragments of tradition and modern coalescing to form a unified site reflect a

historical and cultural pastiche that indicates the ability of traditions to shift and adapt rather than remain stagnant. It is fluid, much like the “liquid modernity” (Elliott 2008, pg 123) that comprises our culture and economy.

This new perspective of tradition as hybridising to form neo-traditions therefore conveys a new sense regarding the significance of religion – religion, in possessing the ability to modify its traditions, retains its significance through reinvention. Rather than crumbling through the shifts in time it transforms along with it. It is important to note that this modification and reinvention is not a concept limited only to the kaleidoscopic nature of post-modernity. As Smart writes, “extraordinary changes have occurred in the fabric of religions in the modern period” (Heelas 1998, pg 86). In terms of modern Christianity in the West, scientific discoveries challenged mainstream interpretations of the Bible and prompted a more non literal approach, whilst democratic movements undermined the influence of the Church and gave individuals greater freedom and power. Additionally, religions offer different presentations to different audiences in any one setting, as demonstrated through the differentiation of Christianity into different sects and denominations during the period of the Reformation (Heelas 1998). Hence, religion as a tradition has always been required to accommodate the socio-cultural and economic landscapes which surrounded it despite the tendency of post-modern writers to apply post-modern theories and ideologies to the study of religion, and as such, has retained a type of significance as it integrates itself into society.

Within St Stephen’s Anglican Church the combination of its different functions – different ‘pieces’ – reveals that in this constantly changing landscape nothing is pure and everything is a “post-modern carnival” (Jencks 2007) – a range of fragments and traditions reflecting to create a kaleidoscope of experience. The acceleration of modernity, of technology, of events and media has propelled us to fly free of the referential notion of history which has otherwise compartmentalised cultures and traditions to particular moments in time (Baudrillard 1994). History is now suspended, the world no longer has a universal structure that can be mapped, and it is within this historical and cultural “carnavalesque” (Heelas 1998, pg 104) landscape of post-modernism that traditions survive as walls and boundaries are collapsed. No longer confined to particular cultures, societies or moments in history, fragments of traditions are free to merge with a range of other cultural phenomena (the music venue). The fact that St Stephen’s was not architecturally constructed within post-modern ideologies, that it incidentally rather than deliberately fashions itself after post-modern paradigms, reveals that our society is very much post-modern.

This has revelation has multiple socio-cultural and philosophical implications. Firstly, the “willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks of meaning” (Heelas 1998, pg 4) and the celebration of irony and juxtaposition characteristic of post-modernity indicate society’s shift from an integrated culture to many fragmented taste cultures, from a purist sensibility to a kaleidoscopic, cosmopolitan sensibility that is receptive to different and differing influences. As post-modernism is “modernism in its self critical phase” (Jencks 2007, pg 25), this increasing cosmopolitanism is reflective of the effects of globalisation catalysed by products of modernity – shifts in technology and modes of production –which enables instantaneous communication and interaction across national boundaries. In this case social boundaries, that of religion and entertainment, are crossed but in this post-modern carnival it is considered normal. Due to these post-modern ideologies evident in architecture and art we will continue to look back to the past, draw upon intertextuality, and incorporate it with the present. Our society then, is one of cultural hybridity. The link between the constantly transforming “liquid modernity” (Elliott 2008, quoting Bauman, pg 123) of

globalisation and the fragmentation and hybridisation of post-modernism also indicates that rather than being its antithesis, post-modernism “feeds parasitically on modernism” (Clegg 2011)– our society has not left the modern behind, but rather compounds it into its existence.

The transcendence of a traditionally religious space in St Stephen’s also reflects the abandonment of over-arching grand narratives. Re-examining Baudrillard’s point about the vanishing of history, the world is seen to lose its sense and tumble into chaos as grand narratives are broken down and questions arise into the concept of a universal truth. Without the authoritative narratives, or forms of traditions, providing truth existing institutional structures are dismantled and destabilised (Lyotard 1997). Everything becomes scattered – the concept of time, the eschatological structure of history, the metadiscourses. In consequence, religion becomes deregulated, no longer bound by an over arching religious narrative, and operates apart from the disciplines of the church. With this “absolute freedom” (Heelas 1998, pg 56), the kaleidoscope of our society becomes more textured, however some argue against this deregulation, this ‘erosion’ of traditional spaces and customs. Although the alteration between a place of worship and a music venue in St Stephen’s reflects the post-modern culture in which we presently live, many are critical of this kaleidoscopic culture. As Bauman (1991) writes, this culture is dominated by rapid (preferably inconsequential and episodic) change, individual enjoyment and consumer choice. Featherstone (1991, pg 5) adds that there is emphasis on “sensory overload, aesthetic immersion, the dreamlike perceptions of de-centred subjects”. With the episodic use of the church, the sensory overload of the music concerts, the aesthetic immersion into culture and the almost surreal de-centring of the subject (church), it is evident that Bauman’s and Featherstone’s critiques of post-modern culture are valid. Bauman’s use of the word consumer here is particularly significant as it is evident that in St Stephen’s Anglican Church religion has been commoditised, merging with and conforming to the capitalist system through its use as a sponsored music venue (Marx 1848). This has economic and social impacts which can be seen as part of the post-modern condition as post-modernity is “inaugurated by the progressive triumph of the market” (Heelas 1998, pg 190), which reinforces the capitalist ideologies that dominate our current culture.

Bauman’s and Featherstone’s critiques of the hybridisation characteristic of post-modernity can be interpreted through the “loss discourse” (Heelas 1998, pg 189). The construction of tradition as pertaining to a particular culture in a specific time frame has resulted in assimilation being regarded “entirely as a process of loss, the erosion of valuable, unique, sometimes ancient traditions” (Cowlshaw 2009, pg 188). This negative connotation manifests the idea of detraditionalisation – “the erosion of tradition in society in general and in religion in particular” (Bowker 2000) which places emphasis on religion as “systems which protect information” (Bowker 2000) from generation to generation and which provides secure traditional boundaries. Detraditionalisation sees the disintegration of the religious metanarrative as a disintegration of religion. From this perspective, religion has become “dominated by... individual enjoyment and consumer choice” (Bauman 1991, pg 278), and traditions are regarded as not only stagnant but also unyielding – it either remains, or it disintegrates. However our cosmopolitan and carnivalesque society, with its scattered patterns coalescing, is one of “invention and reinvention of traditions, not one of detraditionalisation” (Heelas 1998, pg 87). The rise of the New Age movement provides a myriad of alternative religions which borrow elements from established religions and combine them to form new meaning and traditions. Hence religion and traditions are not disintegrating – rather they are becoming increasingly fragmented, reinventing themselves to form new hybrids of meaning. Additionally, the notion of living across time in a greater

dimension than one period as portrayed through the timelessness of St Stephen's – the continual loop between notions of the past and contemporary society rather than a progression forward to a music venue – and transcendence of traditional spaces serve to reinforce the continuity of traditions.

From this exploration into the interplay between the notions of tradition and post-modernity in St Stephen's Anglican Church, it is evident that a redefining of the term tradition is needed in order to accommodate its ability to transcend cultures and times. As indicated in the blending of old and new in St Stephen's, our society has deviated away from the archaic and stagnant discourse of tradition, and this is due to changed cultural landscapes, disintegrating social relations brought about by globalisation and the breakdown of meta narratives bringing about a shift in ways of thinking. As Smart writes, "we are as busy as ever retraditionalizing" (Heelas 1998, pg 86), and examining this statement further provides great insight into the society in which we currently live. After exploring the hybridisation of traditions, it is evident that our society has become more kaleidoscopic in its sensibility, yet questions of why we are redefining and reinventing traditions linger over this kaleidoscopic carnival.

Such questions bring us back to the characteristics of post-modernism. Amidst the turbulence and scattering of the concept of time, eschatological structure of history and the metadiscourses, manifests the concept of individualisation. The notion of a unified, objective social reality that simply exists is argued to be "the product of the discourse of the Enlightenment metanarrative" (Heelas 1998, pg 103). Signified meanings are therefore destabilised and become arbitrary – as Latour (1993) expresses, society is constructed by humans yet it "surpasses us infinitely" (pg 32). In actively constructing their realities individuals are free to choose their own truths, and instead of the reliance on authoritative narratives truth is "seen in terms of 'what works for me'" (Heelas 1998, pg 5). Authority rests with the individual rather than discourses of knowledge or an author – or more specifically, God as an author – which results in a decline in the institutional determination of life choices (Berry 2004). In a society and culture that emphasises freedom and choice, God becomes "crossed-out" (Latour 1993, pg 32) – absent. As indicated by the deregulation of religion, there is no longer an obligation to operate within boundaries, rather individuals are encouraged to "exercise their 'autonomy' to draw on what has diffused through the culture" (Heelas 1998, pg 5). Hence, it becomes easier for individuals to reconstruct or abandon what they perceive as traditions as they select their own versions of available religious traditions.

The apparent ease with which individuals fragment and hybridise traditions conveys the reflexive identity which comprises our socio-cultural landscape. Identity is regarded to be both shaped and bound up by history, and therefore the vanishing of history – the coherent unfolding of causes and effects which constitute a reality – consequently leaves identities in crisis. As previous meta narratives have broken down and traditions have now become fluid, identities become "clouds of language narrative elements" (Heelas 1998, pg 60)– free to be reassembled and reconfigured through a range of language combinations. They are, in other terms, part of the post-modern self. This revelation is indicative of our economic condition as due to the transformations and interconnectedness of globalisation – a key catalyst of post-modernity – our economy has not only become flexible, mobile and networked, but there now exists an emphasis on "ceaseless reinvention [of the self]" (Elliott 2008, pg 117) to accommodate this fluctuating economy. Much like the kaleidoscope which frames our society, our identities are also fragmented and multidimensional.

From exploring the site of St Stephen's Anglican Church through the frameworks of tradition and post-modernity as a manifestation of the current society, it is clear that our culture has not abandoned nor eroded tradition. Rather, "it lives on in the present...and at first sight hidden beneath the present's contradictory and more prominent features, it is still alive and active" (Macmillan 2009, quoting Collingwood, pg 43). In St Stephen's, religious traditions coalesce with modern pop culture to form a historical and cultural pastiche – a kind of multi textured kaleidoscopic carnival that allows traditions to fragment and merge freely with other frameworks of meaning . This ability to transcend time and culture has multiple socio-cultural, philosophical and economic implications that greatly illuminate the present moment in which we live, however above all it offers a new perspective into the concept and construction of the tradition discourse. What, then, is tradition in this carnivalesque and at times chaotic world? Tradition is something which is passed down but also reinterpreted and projected back, and these projections may reinforce dominant discourses, challenge them, or in the case of St Stephen's, do both simultaneously.

### Notes on contributor

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