C3 Church and the Digital Reformation: Invented Traditions and Post-Modernity

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Religion plays an important role in society today. While there is discourse about its continued reliance on tradition and its inability to change, and indeed its collapse (Malpas, 2005), religious practise has not died out. Much social and political debate is centred around religious issues (like abortion and euthanasia), and many fundamentalist groups are enjoying resurgence (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). How, then, have religious institutions, in particular Christianity, managed to keep their practises and teachings relevant to their audiences as time passes? Has a religious institution ever been able to do so? Beckham suggests that "Even traditional Churches would like to become less isolated from the world in which it lives and more relevant to the needs of society" (1997, p.26-27). Beckham's suggestion will be addressed in this essay with reference to the C3 Church, a Pentecostal Christian church founded in Australia in 2008. The essay will examine the way churches have adapted their traditions in the past, before comparing that to the C3 Church and its place in today's fast-paced, post-modern society.

Tradition can be defined as being something that makes reference to the past while imposing fixed and often formalised practises (Hobsbawm, 1993). Many religious traditions can be described in this way, as some Christian rites and rituals such as the sermon, baptism and communion have been in practise for centuries. Emperor Constantine's "Cathedral Paradigm" (315 AD), where "People go to a building (cathedral) on a special day of the week (Sunday) and someone (a priest, or today a pastor) does something to them (teaching, preaching, absolution or healing) or for them (a ritual or entertainment) for a price (offerings)" (in Beckham, 1997, p.40) is an example of the beginnings of traditional practises within Christianity. Beckham (1997) suggests that these practises are commonplace in most Christian churches today, and are seen as the "traditional" way to interact with Christianity. Interestingly, Constantine's Cathedral Paradigm also can serve as an example of one of Hobsbawm's important ideas, the concept of an "invented tradition" (1993). An invented tradition is "a process of formalisation and ritualisation [of traditions] with reference to the past" (1993, p.4). In other words, Hobsbawm suggests that traditions can be put through a process of change or adjustment to make traditions more relevant to respondents, while also maintaining its historical integrity. Prior to Constantine's Emperorship, Christianity was a religion that was practised underground. Constantine was known as the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity, and in 313 AD passed the Edict Of Milan which allowed for the tolerance of all religions across the Roman Empire. After this, Christianity joined mainstream religious practise and became much more aligned with political systems. As a result the Church became more geared towards financial gain, giving rise to paid professional ministers and missionaries, and the idea of communion. The Paradigm also sparked interest and emphasis on developing church structure (Beckham, 1997). In short, as Christianity grew in popularity, the Church drifted away from its spiritual, organic routes and became much more of a religious organisation (Beckham, 1997; Talos, 2008).

Constantine's "traditional" church paradigm has been (and is still) relevant to Christian practises all throughout history. This invented tradition has now become a mainstream tradition, and is not the only example of this happening in the Christian world in the past. Hobsbawm's process of inventing traditions can be applied to Christianity throughout history. One poignant instance of this is Henry VIII's Reformation of the Catholic church in 16th century England, where he established the Church of England in retaliation to the Catholic Church, sparking a wave of Protestantism across England.

Henry established a new church where he, the monarch, would become the Head of the Church. This diverted the power away from the Pope based in Rome, and handed it to the state, whose duty it was to oversee the running of the Church in England. Immediate changes included the legality of divorce, as well as the closing down of Catholic monasteries all across England, but in the long run it introduced a new way of practising Christianity - "The Anglican Way of Christianity" (Toon, 2007). Again, Henry's actions are an example of a tradition being put through a process of modification to suit a new context – an invented tradition. Protestantism was more relevant to the English people, who were becoming more and more disenfranchised with the Papacy. This can explain why the Reformation was not met with particular hostility. Today, the Anglican church is one of the most powerful and influential churches in the Christian world, and is based upon the invented traditions that arose in the 16th century.

Moving forward in history to the modernist period, Hobsbawm's theory can be further applied to Christian organisations. Lyotard designates the term "modernity" to any thought or advancement that still relies upon some kind of societal "metadiscourse" or "metanarrative" (1979). Indeed, within the period of modernist thinking, many of the advancements still legitimised themselves within discourses of rationality and enlightenment. Despite this, modernist theorists still demanded, often with hostility, that religion be able to adapt itself to changing conditions (Barnett, 2004).
Enlightenment thinkers typically drove their analysis of religion with increased thoughts regarding secularisation and reason. It was during the enlightenment that religious tolerance increased, as did a reverence and thirst for knowledge and understanding (Barnett, 2004). Barnett suggests that deist movements during the enlightenment (that is, looking at the natural world without the influence of organised religion) could have caused churches to re-model the way they reach out to people in that era. Churches embracing the idea of "theism" is one such example. Theism was defined by Betts as "a desperate attempt to make sure religion remained unattached to any supernatural myth" (1993). As deism was becoming more popular amongst thinkers in England and France, Christian organisations used Theism as a way to keep their teachings as consistent with societal norms as possible, in order to keep them relevant to those norms. This is an example of Beckham's hypothesis that even traditional churches would like to become less isolated from the world and more relevant to society (1997).

Radical social movements, too, treated religion in a way that demanded it be altered to suit a certain worldview. From a fascist viewpoint (Mussolini in Bronner, 2005), religion was strongly connected to the State. Fascist regimes such as Mussolini's Italy stressed that "man [must be] viewed in his immanent relation to a higher law, endowed with an objective will, transcending the individual and raising him to conscious membership of a spiritual society" (Mussolini in Bronner, 2005). Relationships with the church were expected to be upheld for the good of the nation, where each person would be a part of a single and spiritual collective. Religion was thus treated as something that would be forced upon the people in order for them to re-fashion themselves in the mould of the nation. It almost suggests that man's

interaction with religion was aimed at a spiritual connection with a nation and its leader rather than one with God. This can be seen as an invented tradition forced upon religion on order to avoid total isolation or destruction.

On the other end of the political and social spectrum, Marx's Communist Manifesto (1848) treats religion completely differently. Marx and Engel suggest religion and politics have been used as veils to disguise the brutal exploitation practised by the bourgeoisie throughout history. The Communist Manifesto therefore rejects the idea that religious traditions should be upheld within society (Marx & Engel, 1848). This is another example of an approach to religion in history that seeks to force religious organisations to change in order to conform to the regime. In this case, Communism would seek abolish its presence completely, thus allowing all people to be free from class struggles. In a sense, it is attempting to invent traditions in the rejection of religion as an entity.

The writing above reveals many different examples of how religion can adapt to changing circumstances in society. But what about the society of today, one that has transformed into a fast-paced, information packed digital age? Today's society is built largely around postmodernism, which is described as such by Morley: "All discussions of postmodernism implies an attempt to suggest some kind of watershed or transition from an earlier period, or way of understanding, or acting in, or on, the world" (1996, p50). Jencks suggests that postmodernism is omnipresent in all aspects of our society today, especially in the arts. He says that we are past the point of merely accepting or rejecting it as just another "ism", and that is here to stay (1996).

Postmodernism as a whole rejects the grand metanarratives that have defined our past, and encourages new ways of thinking about the world (Lyotard, 1979). A metanarrative is described by Lyotard as an underlying discourse that influences the thoughts of the people. In his work The postmodern condition, he uses the example of the Enlightenment metanarrative, "in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end - universal peace." He says that all knowledge, truth and justice is legitimised by such grand narratives, and stresses that these narratives are "being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements" (1972, in Jenkins, ed. 1997, p.36-7).

How can religion adapt itself to a culture that encourages the rejection of these underlying discourses, when religion relies on metanarratives as a source of legitimisation?

The C3 Church may have the answer. Founded in 2008, C3 attempts to reignite the way people interact with Christianity by combining the values of a physical worship space, and an online one. This online presence, and the way worshippers can interact with it, is an example of how religious traditions can be adapted to suit the nature of today's postmodern society.

One important aspect that has defined postmodern culture is the digital revolution. We live in the Digital Age, where social media and online interaction has become the fabric of our lives (Castells, 2009). Much of our communication has been diverted to the online medium, and social networking sites are allowing the creation of virtual communities which have revolutionised the way we relate to and interact with the people around us (Parks, 2011). The C3 Church, through their website, has embraced the digital revolution, which is an example of religious organisations adapting to suit the norms of society.

The website itself provides links to social networking sites such as "Facebook", "Twitter" and "Instagram", as well as encouraging the downloading of videos on "Youtube" and podcasts on "iTunes". These are all seen as new, innovative ways with which to interact with the church, fully utilising the digital revolution. There is even the ability for users to access "Pastor Tweets", which diverts the user to a live feed on "Twitter" of all of the pastors associated with the church, and those that "follow" them. This is an embracing of the aspect of postmodern culture that focuses on self expression, where there is more individual judgement within society (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). This means that the church can now communicate to people on a more personal level, and permits a person to form their own individual judgement on the practises of the church. This suggests that the C3 Church's presence on social media makes it less invasive than traditional churches because it provides easy accessibility, and the freedom of whether or not to respond to the material being posted. The fact that the C3 Church gives people this choice heightens its appeal as both a friendly , open organisation and a new, interactive, digital environment.

The interactive nature of the website suggest that the C3 Church is attempting to revolutionise and expand its importance to the wider society. The C3 Church website also introduces a new way of giving communion, a traditional church practise, through the "Online Giving" section of the site. The link takes users to a page where monetary and residential details would be provided, and the option to enter an amount of money to donate to the church. Not only is this another example of how a church may adapt a traditional practice into the modern day, it also gives us an idea of who the church is trying to relate to and reach out to in the community. Helland (2005) argues that religious websites are changing the way that people interact with religion, and the type of communication that is put forward on a religious website affects the religious environment. C3's focus on social media suggests that they are pitching their religion to a younger demographic. Ragas and Roberts (2009) suggest that organisations need to find new ways of setting agendas in today's fast-paced communicative environment. By allowing for interactivity and presenting a social media presence, the C3 Church is clearly suggesting that its agenda is aimed at increasing the accessibility of its religious practise. It also puts forward the question of whether "armchair religion" from home can truly replace traditional, face to face methods of religious practise.

Religion provides a model of understanding our place in the universe, and also provides a model for guiding our activity as humans. According to Geertz (1966), the only way religious worldviews can be truly accepted and embraced is through active practice; people need to "do" the religion (Geertz 1966, Helland 2005). That is adhering to the basic principles that were mapped out in 315 AD by Emperor Constantine and his Cathedral Paradigm. The C3 Church, however, has provided new ways of "doing" the religion, through accessibility of video sermons, as well as downloadable versions of C3 Church resources, books and traditional scriptures. But can this really be counted as active religious practice? Helland (2005) says that determining whether online activity on a religious website is or is not religious is problematic. The C3 Church, though, still has a large number of physical worship spaces. The organisation uses its website as much to support its these places, and does not aim to totally replace them. The website actively encourages visitors to attend their many church locations across Australia and the world. The C3 Church is effectively embracing advances in technology to bolster traditional ways of "doing" religion, as well as providing on the go access to further resources. This combination could indeed serve to heighten the relevance of religion to a modern audience.

C3's worship spaces, however, have still been modified and adapted to suit the way a postmodern audience would prefer to interact with them. In the videos on the website, C3's Oxford Falls "Campus" is the featured location. Instead of stained glass windows and pews as we might see in a typical traditional church setting, we see an auditorium with a stage, lights, microphones, display screens and electronic keyboards. This comfortable, modern and technological setting suits the desires of restless modern audiences. The C3 Church in Ryde, as well as other C3 locations across the globe, is located in a building that was formerly an office area. The untraditional nature of these locations further serves to raise appeal and relevance in a postmodern world.

Music also plays a large part in the C3 Church's adaptation into postmodern culture. The C3 Church is an Evangelical church, where music is considered an important medium for people to connect with God. Evangelists have consistently embraced new technology and cultural norms to "Evangelise the masses." Evangelists have borrowed popular music elements to create appealing and uplifting musical numbers that are aimed at attracting youth to the church (Gormly, 2003). C3 is no different, releasing regular contemporary Christian CD albums. Gormly argues that this borrowing of popular culture by Evangelists is paradoxical in the sense that they use elements of popular culture to draw young audiences, before condemning mainstream popular culture for its corrupting ways (2003). This can be attributed to the idea of "detournement", which is "the appropriation of existing cultural fragments in such a way as to alter and invert their meaning" (Novotny, 1997, p.100). Appropriation is a major concept within postmodern theory, and ironically, Evangelists like the C3 Church have adopted such a practise in order to condemn it.

This raises the question as to whether Churches are really accepting elements of postmodern culture, or whether they are just using them to attract audiences. There are indeed arguments that suggest that the postmodern and religion can never accept each other. The way Lyotard defines the postmodern, "incredulity toward Metanarratives" (1979, in Jenkins (ed.), 1994, p.36), is an example of this. Religion has always relied on metanarratives as religion is a source and a model for legitimacy (Geertz, 1966), and incredulity towards these could lead to its downfall.

Of course, the evangelical movement has not shown incredulity toward the metanarratives it associates with. Rather, it has modified its interaction with them, through utilisation of the digital age, to ensure their continued relevance to society. Therefore, it can be seen that Hobsbawm's process of inventing traditions is pivotal to the survival of religion. While religion may not embrace the deep theoretical frameworks of postmodernity as defined by Lyotard (1979), it is hard for religion not to adopt certain aspects of its culture (Malpas, 2005). As we have seen through investigation of the C3 Church, religion uses this to its advantage, constantly updating its interaction with tradition in order to avoid societal isolation (Beckham, 1997). Because of this, it can be concluded that traditional values can comfortably coexist and interact with the greater part of postmodern society.

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