

A Complex Christ for an Emerging Urban World

Bill Clinton is perhaps not the most obvious place to start an article about emerging church (and perhaps I shouldn't have been quite so surprised to hear something quite profound coming from the mouth of a former US president) but in a recent interview on the BBC's *Panorama* program, Clinton said something that really caught my ear. In a series of answers to questions about his thoughts on the war in Iraq he said that he thought that unilateralism was always a mistake, and that he had always considered a key test of any of his policies was the extent to which they 'aided the movement towards a more interdependent world.'

Regardless of the extent to which that was actually true in practice, what made me sit up and listen was this desire for interdependence springing up in yet another place. I had just put down a copy of a flyer for a series of events at the Institute of Contemporary Arts entitled *E-merge*:

"Presented as an integrated performance, the event involves presentations from the collaborating team and subsequent demonstrations of the performance system that communicates rules to different networked groups of dancers, musicians, creative technologies and audiences. These will be linked live, via purpose built innovative software and hardware technologies. Each group will influence and respond to each other's activities on stage in real time, demonstrating the powers of Emergence and generating living art organisms."

Integration, Collaboration, Network... It seems that the principles of interdependence, of collaboration and integration of previously discrete disciplines or power-blocks is infecting every aspect of our lives, from politics, to art, to science, to technology, sociology... and, as I argue in my book 'The Complex Christ', theology. The more I listened out for it, the more I began to recognise the frequencies of emergence and it's associated science of 'complexity' resonating in more and more diverse areas.

Complexity is all about systems that are effectively self-organising. Because of their interdependent, networked structures, they don't need top-down hierarchies to evolve. Rather, through sharing information at a low level (as opposed to channelling it up and down to some 'queen bee' controller) these systems are highly adaptable, flexible and dynamic. Our brains are an excellent example of such a system: there is no one 'super-cell' telling all the others what to do. Ant colonies are built around the same principles. There is no 'queen ant' passing instructions about what work needs doing; individual ants work this out for themselves by interacting with each other. Other examples of systems that show similarly 'complex', bottom-up structures are our cities, where nobody sits around making sure enough bread will be brought into London each day, and the internet – an information system specifically designed to have no centre, and thus be indestructible in the event of nuclear holocaust.

It was initially through thoughts about organisation and leadership that steered us at Vaux to explore these concepts. As a community of artists, urban planners, policy makers, educators and writers we too began to see how the ideas spilled over and beyond traditional disciplinary lines.

In Claude Levi-Strauss' classic anthropology *The Raw and the Cooked*, he explores culture of the Brazilian Bororo tribe through their myths about food, water and the stars. He begins with one 'key myth', and carefully plots and codes all the other myths from this foundation, creating a wonderful 'symphony', as he puts it, out of this root melody. It is only at the end of the book that he subverts the reader by explaining that in fact it was irrelevant which myth was the 'key myth', and that all the others could equally have been chosen. Regardless of one's starting point, it appears that one could explore the same ground.

This has been our experience of dealing with 'complexity' and 'emergence' within Vaux. We began to unearth and share our experiences of 'hearing' complex frequencies resonating in our different disciplines: a shift from mainstream political party membership to grassroots campaigning, from schools as places simply to impart facts to resource centres for all learning in the community, from cities as purely economic beasts networked communities where place and locality are vital... And from a top-down, Temple bound God to the emergent, complex Christ.

This was the sound resonating through all of these things: the ison, the elemental frequency, the universal background radio noise of the Spirit. While scientists in the fifties claimed new

'discoveries' of complexity, two thousand years previous, God had undergone a radical metamorphosis, a re-emergence that saw 'Him' vanish from the high, hard entombing Temple and re-incarnate as a single sperm, with only enough energy to breach the walls of a tiny ovum. Living for a short time, even this life was extinguished. In a desperate attempt to control this divinity going critical, we put Christ to death, unaware that this very act broke the phial, smashed the glass and released the virus of the Spirit.

This is what we celebrate when we break the bread and share the wine: Christ's body, centralised, located physically in one place, is broken and distributed amongst the gathering of believers who then disperse. The elements are internalised, made invisible. The distributed body is thus taken out to infect the community. Unseen. Not controlled by a temple, not dictated by a hierarchy. The network of the Spirit is spreading like yeast through dough. It cannot be pared from the community it lives among, it cannot be singled out and destroyed, branded sacred or secular.

Christ's 'complexity' forces us to radically re-assess the boundaries of what we call church. Which power structures and hierarchies are really relevant? How can we distinguish who is 'in' or 'out', what is 'clean' or 'dirty', what is 'true' or 'untrue'. Without the dictators we so easily default to we are forced to take mature responsibility for our development as communities of believers, and consider our place in an emergent world. It is my belief that in doing so we will see this virtuous circle appearing:

In the move from Old to New Testaments we see God re-emerging as a bottom-up, complex divinity, and the body of Christ as a distributed network of the Spirit.

The cities we live in are complex, emergent structures.

The city is the place where the divine and the human are most clearly seen in partnership: human hands take divine soil and build structures of stone and glass.

Thus the city is the very place where a complex, emergent church can find its most natural habitat.

It seems to me that the alternative worship movement is perhaps the natural locus for the development of worshipping communities based on these principles. We are not there yet – indeed, it would be foolish to equate many of the 'emerging church' activities we hear about with this Emergent Church that I believe we must seek.

The science is still new, and, given that places such as the ICA are still exploring, the ideas still fresh. This is not a time for train-spotting culture and following twenty years later. It is time to be the train. To begin to model creative, emergent, complex communities of faith rooted in the urban experience to the rest of the world. A world which, as Clinton recognised, is still trying to find an interdependent way forward from the ruins left by unilateralist hierarchies, in just the same way as many Christians are trying to find a conjunctive way forward from the narrowly focused fundamentalist experiences that have ultimately left them needing more. An emergent faith is not wishy-washy liberalism by another name. It is a serious attempt to move beyond hard-line positions to a place where we understand the interdependence and inter-relation of things. We must therefore ensure that the back-drop to our movement is not a limp screen of 'trendy post-modernism' lit by a dim tea-light of reactionary flight, but a serious engagement with culture and thought, resonating with the ison of the Spirit that calls the body again to re-imagination and re-configuration based on God's radical, bottom-up principles.

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