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Chapter 1 Culture

A Personal Perspective

According to Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, my previous book *The McDonaldization of the Church* ‘created quite a stir’ and is ‘must-read material’.¹ More recently, it featured on a list as one of the six most influential books on emerging church.² It is of course every author’s dream that others will respond to their work in that way, which no doubt has something to do with my reasons for referring to them here. They were not the only ones, though. Sociologist George Ritzer, who first coined the term

¹ Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, *The Shape of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson 2003), 231.

² http://www.emergentkiwi.org.nz/archives/my_most_significant_emerging_and_missional_books.php#more

'McDonaldization' to describe a certain form of over-rationalized life, was another scholar who warmed to my work and soon included extracts from it in his widely-read *McDonaldization Reader*,³ and when the two of us presented a seminar together at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, hundreds of people turned up to eavesdrop on our conversations. In the earlier part of my life, Christians generally connected me with the Bible, because they had come across my name through books on the Old and New Testaments that still remain exceedingly popular in the reading lists of theological colleges and seminaries right across the world.⁴ But for the 21st century, I have had to live with the label of McDonaldization – to such an extent that when I visited as guest preacher a church where I had previously been a member, and then preached a sermon based on the lectionary reading for the day, the senior minister expressed some surprise that I was still interested in Scripture, and even more taken aback that I was seeking to integrate it with what he regarded as my new-found fascination with the social sciences. His perception of my spiritual pilgrimage was not quite accurate, however, as my interest in the Bible had always been driven by a concern for its contemporary relevance, even as long ago as when I was a student, as I shall explain in more detail in chapter 5. Conversely, my understanding of the cultural challenges facing the church had always been filtered through the insights of Scripture and the wider Christian tradition. There is no doubt, however, that my engagement with what I identified as the McDonaldization of the church has had a more far-reaching impact on my life than ever I anticipated, and has opened up many opportunities for innovative ministry that might otherwise have passed me by. That was not the first book I had written on the theme of church and culture,⁵ but it turned out to be the right book at the right time. Though the start of the new millennium was not marked by any of the apocalyptic crises that had been predicted by the doom-mongers, the two or three year time frame that covered the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st did offer an opportunity for us all to reflect on where we have come from, who we now are, and where we might go in the future. I was not consciously thinking of it in those terms at the time, but with hindsight I think that writing *The McDonaldization of the Church* filled that role for me, offering a sort of mid-life assessment of the church as I had experienced it, and my hopes and aspirations for the future.

By then, I had been actively involved in church life for many years, initially in local contexts, but then from the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s I found myself thrust into the role of a leader in national and international events. For much of that period I had both chaired and been a member of a number of significant ecumenical committees in the UK. It was a time of rapid change, as ways of being that had served our forebears well for centuries were questioned and, in many cases, discarded. What was taking place in the wider culture was bound to impinge on the life of the church, though it was some time before church leaders woke up to that reality and started to engage with its implications. But those with the vision to see it understood that structures and procedures that had apparently stood the test of time would no

³ John Drane, 'The Church and the Iron Cage', in George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: the Reader* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press 2002), 151-157; John Drane, 'From Creeds to Burgers: religious control, spiritual search, and the future of the world', in George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: the Reader* 2nd ed (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press 2006), 197-202.

⁴ John Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament* 2nd ed (Oxford: Lion 2000); *Introducing the New Testament* 2nd ed (Oxford: Lion 1999); *Introducing the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2005).

⁵ John Drane, *Faith in a Changing Culture* (London: HarperCollins 1997) and *Cultural Change & Biblical Faith* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2000).

longer work in the new emerging cultural environment – indeed, that the whole fabric of faith was being stretched and tested in a way that was well beyond the previous experience of any of us. The idea that Christian faith might be challenged, and the church discredited, was nothing new. From its inception, the church faced enemies who wanted to destroy it. But in the more recent past the attempts to undermine the church's credibility had tended to be mostly of an intellectual nature, focusing on things like the historical reliability of the Bible or arguments about science and religion. Though there was by no means one single opinion on an appropriately Christian response to such questions, church leaders knew how to engage with these and similar topics, because traditional theological education had embraced them, often to such an extent that newly-qualified graduates complained with some justice that they knew more about academic opinions on the Bible than they did about the actual text of scripture itself. But by the end of the 20th century, the notion of foundational wisdom in the inherited philosophical sense was no longer regarded as the touchstone of what might be meaningful and true. That meant the ground was shifting in upheavals of seismic proportions, as the rules of the game were rewritten to accommodate new ways of seeing things. Rational engagement with what had been regarded as objective truth was replaced by relevance as a key criterion by which the value of anything was now to be judged. Wrestling with increasingly pressurized lifestyles, and challenged by the near-meltdown of traditional institutional structures, not to mention a growing awareness of the need to live more harmoniously with the rest of the world, people in the Global North found themselves with neither the time nor the inclination for the religious pursuits of their forebears.⁶ To be meaningful – and therefore worth pursuing – faith had to connect more obviously with the issues of lifestyle with which we now had to wrestle, and that meant it had to relate to this life here and now and not just to some esoteric notion of life in another world.

Faced with this new agenda (and what I have described here is only the tip of a very large cultural iceberg), the churches soon found themselves struggling, because the gap between the culture of the church and the lived experience even of its members was expanding almost on a daily basis. Growing numbers of young people found little that spoke to them, and either left the church or never connected with it in the first place. As will be suggested in later chapters, there are good reasons for supposing that their disillusionment was not directly connected with the Gospel as such, but rather they were unable to get beyond the institutional structures and systems in which the message had been embodied. Now as we move toward the end of the first decade of the 21st century, an even more threatening trend has emerged, as middle-aged people find themselves growing weary of the ways of congregations to which they have belonged for much of their lives, and in many cases these are people who have hitherto been actively involved either as lay leaders or in full-time ministry.⁷ Though this is not the whole picture, and there are also some more hopeful signs, the facts still make depressing reading. If nothing changes, then present statistical indicators suggest that the Church in Wales (Anglican) will be unsustainable by 2020, the United Reformed Church will disappear in 2022, the Church of Scotland by 2033, and the British Methodist Church will have zero

⁶ Throughout this book, I have used the term 'Global North' to denote Europe, North America, Australasia, and other industrialized nations that together form the 'rich North' over against the developing countries of the 'Global South'. When referring to the ideology that informs such countries, however, I have used the more traditional term, 'Western'.

⁷ Cf. Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (London: SPCK 2002).

membership by 2037.⁸ By contrast, the situation is very different in the Global South, and some church leaders are inclined to believe that we can look there to reinvent the church in other once-Christian cultures. It would be foolish to imagine that we have nothing to learn from the phenomenal growth of the Christian community in places like Africa, China, parts of south-east Asia, and South America – and it is notable that in most parts of the Global North the only churches that are growing are those whose ministry is predominantly among immigrant populations from these other parts of the world. But the reasons for the growth of such churches are very varied, and not all of them can easily be correlated with the current concerns of the majority population in the Global North. Spiritual desires are not the only component, and in many parts of the world other factors such as increased literacy, the birth rate, and globalization are all playing a part in the growth of the church, and in some cases may be more significant than religious faith in and of itself. The rapid movement of people driven by war and economic migration has brought non-traditional forms of Christian devotion into many cities in Europe, North America, and Australasia. But the growth of such congregations will not make a significant difference to the overall fate of the church in these places. Wherever we look, it is the same scenario, albeit with regional variations. The contours of the landscape are different in the USA, where church membership can still call forth some degree of civic approval (and where the diversity of Christian denominations has always been far greater than in Europe), though even there the future is much less secure than it looks from the outside, especially among the mainline denominations. Regular attendance at American churches has conventionally been placed at around 60% of the population, but the outlook is far less certain than that sort of statistic might suggest. There are various reasons for this. One factor that is more important than it might seem is the way that church attendance in the US has traditionally been counted, through opinion polls rather than by the use of hard statistical evidence. In the sort of religiously observant culture that the US still is, when people are asked if they have been to church on the previous Sunday, they are more likely to say yes than no, which inevitably tends to distort the real picture. In those cases where more exact measurements of church membership and attendance have been gathered, the American figure turns out to be nearer 20% than 60%, though with enormous variations from one state to another. Research conducted early in 2007 showed that roughly 100 million Americans, or about 34% of the population, have no connection with any church at all.⁹ That is still way better than the figures for any other country in the Global North (including neighbouring Canada), but it hardly means that American churches can rest on their laurels. By definition, a free market enterprise culture does not encourage even short-term loyalty, and recent research has documented the growing popularity of new forms of faith activity among American Christians (things like home churches, marketplace ministries, and cyberchurch), with one commentator predicting that even those who are committed to regular prayer, Bible reading and spiritual direction will in future be doing so without any formal connection with congregational life.¹⁰ Moreover, the diversity is not limited to pragmatic considerations, but extends to significant, and

⁸ These calculations are based on figures presented in the annual series, *UKCH Religious Trends*, ed Peter Brierley (London: Christian Research). See also <http://www.christian-research.org.uk/intro.htm>

⁹ <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrowPreview&BarnaUpdateID=267>

¹⁰ George Barna, *Revolution* (Ventura CA: Barna Research 2005).

maybe incompatible, understandings of the nature of God and God's relationship to the world and its people.¹¹

In reflecting on the reasons for all this, there is only one absolutely indisputable fact, and that is that there is no single or simple explanation that can be given. Such serious decline in an institution that has defined the Western world since the days of the Roman emperor Constantine (AD 280-337) has not come about overnight, nor is it likely that, being in the midst of it as we are, any one of us now living will be able to discern all the details of the big cultural picture. There is no doubt that in the second half of the 20th century the processes identified as McDonaldization played a significant part, as people who felt oppressed by the over-rationalization of the workplace sought a space of renewal, only to find that the churches offered the same sort of homogenized and rigidly structured culture that they were trying to escape, and as a consequence many headed off in the direction of so-called 'alternative' spiritualities and therapies in the search for personal wholeness.¹² It is impossible to exaggerate the part played in church decline by the loss of confidence in the church among those who are self-consciously searching for spiritual meaning and purpose in life.

I have argued elsewhere that, though the categories of McDonaldization offer us an exceedingly useful tool for understanding the predicament in which the church now finds itself, the attitudes and mindsets that underpin such over-rationalized ways of being are not actually a 20th century invention, but can be traced in embryonic form back through the history of Christendom and ultimately to the Roman empire.¹³ If there is any truth in that claim, then we have to admit that a McDonaldized form of church seems to have been pretty successful (at least in terms of numbers and influence) for a very long time. To use missiological jargon, that form of church was clearly well contextualized in a highly rationalized society – though whether it was also an authentic contextualization of the Gospel is now widely regarded as a matter of opinion. Making such value judgments on the past is always easy with the benefit of hindsight, but whatever we think of our Christian forebears there can be no question that one of the reasons the church has hit upon hard times now is because the culture has changed in such a way that we are less tolerant of rationalized structures, at least in those areas of life where we can exercise our own free choice. At the same time, we have a cultural ambivalence about all this, and we both love and hate McDonaldization. We deplore it in terms of our inner and private personal lives while at the same time accepting it as an unavoidable everyday reality in the workplace and in civic life. Even there, though, there is a widespread recognition that we should be trying to give a more human face to the structures created by McDonaldized thinking, but paradoxically we generally tackle even that through the development of yet more rationalized systems! However, in those aspects of life

¹¹ See Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, *American Piety in the 21st Century: New insights to the depth and complexity of religion in the US* (Waco TX: Baylor University 2006). Available for free download at www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf

¹² The categories to which I refer are efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, as identified by George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press 1993). Though I make several references to this in relation to church life in this book, I am not providing a summary of my thinking on this theme as it has been articulated more comprehensively in *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2000).

¹³ John Drane, 'From Creeds to Burgers: religious control, spiritual search, and the future of the world', in James R Beckford & John Walliss, *Theorising Religion* (London: Ashgate 2006), 120-131.

where we do not need to be submissive to such restrictions, we tend to make different choices - and that includes church (indeed, religious belief more widely), for reasons that are again not hard to identify. There is much to be said in favour of the Reformation insistence that Christian belief is essentially a personal matter between an individual and God, but equally there can be no doubt that (notwithstanding the efforts of Calvin and others to encourage a corporate dimension to faith) what is personal has easily transformed itself into something private in a way that, in a consumerist culture, means it is relegated to a leisure activity for those who happen to be interested in such things. Not only has this led to a marginalization of faith as being the concern only of a particular interest group, but it has also helped to create an environment in which people find themselves both mystified and threatened by other religious traditions that take it for granted that faith ought to be a holistic matter that infuses and informs every aspect of life. One of the ironies of current political moves to create an inclusive society in which all faiths can flourish is that the underlying secular agenda of the political chattering classes assumes that all cultures are provisional and relative, and therefore equally unimportant and meaningless. It is an easy matter to appear to accept everything if it is all relative and of no ultimate consequence, and it should surprise no-one that the representatives of faiths such as Islam, which do still have a holistic view of life, should be suspicious of this sort of 'openness' as being just another example of a bankrupt Western culture seeking to colonize the rest of the world through the relativizing of all truth claims.¹⁴

The triumph of pragmatism

In recent years, Christians have expended an enormous amount of energy in the effort to engage with all this. The most common approach has been to try and understand the question from an intellectual, philosophical angle, by identifying and analyzing the worldview that has come to dominate in the Global North. Tackling the matter in this way itself raises some interesting questions about the church and its predicament. It suggests that we believe that this culture actually has a coherent worldview comparable with the foundational certainties of the past; and it also implies that there is some underlying set of such principles that drive and inform the multifarious ways in which we now seek to live the good life. Neither of these assumptions can be accepted without more reflection. The average person in the street may not have been able to articulate it very precisely, but for generations our forebears took it for granted that there was an overarching structure and rationality to life, all of it grounded in big ideas about ultimate reality and the ways in which that reality could be understood and reflected upon. The worldview of modernity was characterized by this sort of rational certainty, and its practical outcomes were made possible through scientific and technological progress. This way of looking at life is often characterized as the outcome of 'the Enlightenment', and it is regularly blamed for most of the cultural woes that we are wrestling with today. Even popular celebrities get in on the act. British TV chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's *River Cottage Meat Book* opens with a whole chapter on the philosophy of food, tracing what the author believes to be our unhealthy attitudes back to the influence of René Descartes (1596-1650) and his successors.¹⁵ Christians are no different, and in the search for an instant scapegoat, have often been inclined to blame 'the Enlightenment' for all the church's problems.

¹⁴ Cf Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other* (London: Pluto Press 1998).

¹⁵ Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, *The River Cottage Meat Book* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 2004), 12-19.

Actually, the concept of ‘the Enlightenment’ is itself a problematic and contested category, and at the very least it is not as self-contained as the use of that single word implies. In many ways, it was simply an outworking of concepts that had been there all along in ancient Greek philosophy and Roman pragmatism. But by apportioning all the blame to that intellectual movement which swept through Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, we have also shielded ourselves from the uncomfortable possibility that the values represented by that terminology might actually be deeply rooted within the historic Christian tradition itself.

This is not the place to take a detour into the Enlightenment and its history. However we perceive it, the highly differentiated social structure that it produced is still familiar to most of us, if only by hearsay from previous generations of our own families. Its quintessential heyday, at least in a British context, was the Victorian and Edwardian eras (roughly mid-19th century to the time of World War 1), when everyone and everything (including God and the church) had a place, and everyone knew what their place was. Today, that kind of society has gone. When I first wrote that last sentence, I put the word ‘forever’ at the end of it. But nothing lasts forever, and history has a habit of repeating itself. It is at least possible that Western people, faced with a culture that is becoming ever more meaningless almost on a daily basis, and struggling with the personal anxieties which that induces, may yet choose to revert to a worldview of certainties in the form of some kind of spiritual pathway that makes strident lifestyle demands on its followers.

As things are today, however, I am not at all convinced that most people in the Global North have any sort of coherent worldview, and the lack of any meaningful frame of reference within which to understand ourselves or the world is one of the biggest challenges we face if our civilization is not to implode on itself. The popular pundits, of course, insist that we are now living in a ‘post-modern’ world. Christians, even more than others, seem to have caught onto this way of speaking – as if having the right words with which to describe the culture will somehow ensure that we know how to live effectively within it. But just attaching a label to it does not by itself offer a sufficient explanation of what is going on. In any case, the terminology itself is ambiguous, and quite apart from discussions about the reality that it may be intended to signify, a baffling array of different words are currently in vogue: postmodernism (or post-modernism), postmodernity (also sometimes with a hyphen), post-Christian, secular, post-secular, late modernity, liquid modernity, post-Christendom, and many others. Those who use these terms do not always define them carefully, and in some cases I suspect that people use them without having much idea of what they mean. This evident lack of clarity is one reason why we ought to regard these nostrums with a degree of scepticism. The more likely reality is that we have no idea what is going on in the culture. At the same time, having a single word can be helpful, just so long as we realize that any term we adopt is going to be at best provisional, and quite possibly misleading or inaccurate. For simplicity’s sake, I still use this language, though my preference is to speak of post-modernity, with a hyphen, which is intended to indicate that this is not a precise definition – still less a ‘worldview’ – but rather is a shorthand way of referring to the chaos into which things descended once the previous worldview of modernity began to be questioned and rejected. Martyn Percy grasps the reality of this when he observes that whatever post-modernity is, it is ‘not a systematic philosophical system; it is more of a mood and a socio-cultural force.’¹⁶

¹⁶ Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005), 6.

Future generations will be better placed than us to discern whether post-modernity turns out to be anything more substantial than that, though on the basis of all the available evidence right now it strikes me as unlikely that either ‘post-modernity’ or any of the other terms in common use represent any sort of coherent worldview in the sense with which past generations would have used the word. I suspect that our concern about terminology at this point is a smokescreen that enables us to conceal our much deeper fear of what is unknown. By putting a label on whatever is going on, we can convince ourselves that we know what it is, and behind that is the thought that if we are able to name it correctly, we might also be able to control it. Unfortunately this is just wishful thinking, and Western culture is in a much bigger mess than most of us would like to acknowledge.

That is not to say that today’s people are (to use a traditional word) irrational. But both the source and the nature of today’s rationality are different from that of previous generations. One reason why it is so difficult to get a handle on the deeply-held values of contemporary Western culture is that the way in which culture is formed has itself undergone a radical change, even since the start of the 21st century. For a thousand years and more, cultural norms in a hierarchical society were established by the agenda that was set by philosophers, politicians and generals (who were often the same people), and everyone else simply accepted their ideas. If ordinary people held different opinions, they had no significant forum in which to express them. The rise of democracy was an attempt to address this, by giving everyone a voice, but even here the agenda was limited to whatever was on offer from the intellectual and political establishment of the day, because democratic choice never offers complete freedom but only the opportunity to choose between whatever alternatives are made available. Over the last forty years or so, there has been a gradual shift of awareness in relation to the nature of personal freedom, but the development of the internet and the worldwide web has, within the last decade, quite literally given a voice to everyone with access to a computer. Not only have blog sites, bulletin boards and other forms of digital dialogue given a voice to those who would otherwise never be heard, but the entire phenomenon has become a channel for subverting the existing systems. It can be argued that this has merely created a different sort of élite, depending now not on accidents of birth, inheritance, or education, but on ownership of or access to a computer and the internet. Whether or not that is true, it is certainly the case that these new media have given a platform to a greater number of ordinary people than ever before, and opinions on significant lifestyle issues are no longer handed down from those who are supposed to know, but are more likely to be aired first among ordinary people, and then politicians and others begin to take notice. This new reality does not prevent some academics from continuing to behave as if they were still the trend-setters, but that attitude can now only be sustained by a resolutely head-in-the-sand approach that deliberately disconnects itself from the feelings and opinions of the wider population.¹⁷

In relation to the church’s future, then, it seems to me that the reality with which we should be engaging is more about lifestyles and personal perspectives than about anything we might call a ‘worldview’. Or, let me express it in a different way that redefines ‘worldview’: what if our everyday life and experience actually *is* our worldview? What happens if we prioritize experience over and above reason? The traditional answer offered by a modernist mindset would be that we are on a slippery

¹⁷ Cf Peter L Berger (ed), *The Desecularization of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999).

slope indeed, because the authenticity of experience could never be taken for granted but was always to be tested by reference to the canons of rationality. That is actually an unnecessary dichotomy, especially in a Christian frame of reference, because both experience and rationality are intrinsic parts of the human psyche, which in a Biblical frame of reference is itself ‘made in the image of God’ (Genesis 1:27). In any case, few people are all experience and no reason. A more common way of processing life’s reality is to reflect on the meaning of what happens, asking questions about the way in which disparate experiences connect together, if indeed they do. Though that process transgresses the philosophical norms of the past, I suspect that most people have always understood life in this way, and the only reason we fail to recognize it is because those voices from the past that we know about are not the voices of ordinary individuals, but of élites of various kinds.¹⁸ We will return in a later chapter to this theme of how we process reality, because it seems to me to be of considerable importance in relation to understanding how we might be appropriately Christian in today’s world. For now, though, we can use it to explore the question of what is going on in the culture.

New experiences, new questions

Until relatively recently, cultural analysts have generally eschewed popular (or folk) culture as a way of truly understanding what is going on in society.¹⁹ But if we emphasize the primacy of high culture (by which I mean the preferences of the intellectual chattering classes), we are likely to miss some of the most significant movements of our time – especially when viewed from a Christian perspective, which ought to prioritize what is personal and relational over and above what is abstract and analytical. Approaching the subject from this angle, we can identify four significant experiences that people have to deal with in everyday life, that are formative in relation to personal attitudes, and which Christians ought therefore to be taking seriously. First of all is the fact that everyday life presents us with the realization that *nothing seems to work the way it once did*. I am reminded of this every morning in life when I get out of bed and make breakfast, because the experience is totally different from anything that my own grandparents could have imagined (or, for that matter, my parents in their earlier years). I rise in a room that, no matter what the season or the outside temperature, is likely to be at a comfortable temperature, whereas my grandparents never had any sort of air conditioning system (whether heating or cooling) in their entire lives, and (living, as they did, in a generally cold climate) could only have imagined what a warm house might feel like. Beyond that, if they were to come into my kitchen today, they might as well be on another planet, because I doubt that they would know how to carry out any of the simple operations involved in something as straightforward as making breakfast. The food itself has changed remarkably little, but the way it is now prepared might require the use of a microwave oven – and even something as simple as getting water at the kitchen sink works in a different way than in my grandparents’ home: they had functional taps with a knob to be turned, whereas mine has a fancy faucet with a handle to lift. The idea that I might watch breakfast TV, and that the electric kettle will turn itself off as it boils, or that a machine would make the coffee while I take a shower, would likewise be beyond anything they could have imagined – while the idea that I might

¹⁸ For an application of the consequences of this to the way we do theology, see Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2002).

¹⁹ Cf Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005), 1-19.

simultaneously be exchanging email messages with friends or receiving on a cell-phone pictures of what others are doing on the other side of the world would only ever have been in the realms of unimaginable science fiction. The same would be true of almost any household activity, including cleaning and laundry. However, we do not need to go back a couple of generations to appreciate this. I got my first computer in the early 1990s, and it seemed like a miracle at the time. But by comparison with today's machines it was huge, slow, and difficult to use, because even a word processing program required the memorization of countless keystrokes in order to make anything happen. Its entire capacity was less than 1% of what I now have on a memory card that is the same size as a small postage stamp.

In a world of such rapid change, in which the pace of change itself is speeding up all the time, it is not only transient operations such as heating, cooking, or computing that no longer work according to old paradigms. Life itself – the way we live it as well as the way we understand it – has changed, and continues to do so. If a computer that was state-of-the-art fifteen years ago is now a museum piece, how can we expect anything else to be long lasting? In particular, why should anyone imagine that the answers of our grandparents' generation to the most profound questions about the meaning of life should still make sense today, when our questions are so different? In most cultures of the Global South the wisdom of older people is still generally valued, but in a society where relationships themselves are increasingly fragmented we are less likely to embrace the truth that inspired even our own immediate forebears. In this context, the church is perceived as just one more thing that – whatever its usefulness to previous generations – is now well and truly past its sell-by date, 'something between a hobby with too many rules and a totalitarian regime'.²⁰ Anglican researcher George Lings is not being cynical, but merely telling it how it is, when he writes that for many people

Church is what some others do. It is noticed sadly, in their terms, not only as an alien and expensive building that I wouldn't know what to do in, worse, it is occupied by people I wouldn't be seen dead with.²¹

A second significant experience for people today is the growing realization that *the way Western people have lived is not the only possible way to be*, nor is it the only one that looks as if it might lead to a fulfilled and meaningful life. A couple of generations ago, faiths other than Christianity were beyond the experience of most people in the Global North, whereas today they are on almost everyone's doorstep. But this is only one aspect of the diversity that we now experience in everyday life. Within the Christian church itself, there is an awareness that there are many different ways of worshipping, and of doing theology. The rise of Pentecostalism, growing from literally nothing at the beginning of the 20th century to be one of the major strands of the world church today, is just one aspect of that.²² And within the wider culture, the nature of leadership has changed, not only in the fact that women now share it with men, but in the realization that leadership itself need not be defined by reference to the sort of hierarchical models inherited from the past. All these factors have fed into the rise of New Spirituality, which is the term I now prefer for what

²⁰ Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005), 29.

²¹ George Lings, *Living Proof – a new way of being church?* (Sheffield: Church Army 1999), 13.

²² Cf Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: the rise of Pentecostal spirituality and the reshaping of religion in the 21st century* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley 1995).

would previously have been labeled 'New Age'. Traditional religions tend to be led by recognized authorities who exercise control over the beliefs and behaviour of their followers, and the same is generally true for New Religious Movements (by which I mean organizationally structured groups such as Scientology, the Unification Church, and so on).²³ But New Spirituality creates a space for us all to explore our own pathway, and assumes that – especially in spiritual matters – there can be no experts who know it all, only pilgrims who can share what they have learned in the course of their own journey through life.

The third notable feature of everyday post-modernity stems directly from that, in *the frequently expressed desire to be 'spiritual' rather than religious*. The reasons why this has come about are complex and contested,²⁴ but the phenomenon cannot be ignored in relation to what it might now mean to be Christian. An ethnographic study over an extended period of the spiritual and religious life of Kendal, a small town on the fringe of the English Lake District, demonstrated not only the reality of this shift, but also suggested that the rising interest in what the authors of that report called 'the holistic milieu' could be paralleled by a corresponding decline in adherence to the 'congregational domain' offered in the local churches.²⁵ Twenty years ago, Shirley Maclaine intuited the same conclusion, when she claimed that 'Your religions teach religion – not spirituality'.²⁶ It is certainly the case that, at the same time as the UK churches (of all denominations) have experienced significant decline, there has been a measurable growth in the popularity of new forms of experiential spirituality, whether that be through the study of the sort of arcane texts popularized by Dan Brown's novel, *The DaVinci Code*,²⁷ or by experimenting with techniques to enhance spiritual awareness, or buying into so-called 'complementary' or 'alternative' healing therapies and so on. Moreover, a much publicized research project carried out by David Hay and Kate Hunt at the turn of the millennium revealed that such spiritual experience is apparently not restricted to those with an overt faith commitment, but is widespread within sections of the population that think of themselves as 'secular'.²⁸ George Ritzer succinctly expressed one of the reasons why we are so concerned to find that special experience which will make sense of life:

Human beings, equipped with a wide array of skills and abilities, are asked to perform a limited number of highly simplified tasks over and over ... [are] forced to deny their humanity and act in a robot-like manner.²⁹

When I first came across that statement, I realized that it could be applied as easily to church life as to any of the other rationalized systems with which we struggle in

²³ For discussions of this phenomenon, see (from a Christian perspective) John A Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1995) and (from a sociological angle) Bryan Wilson & Jamie Cresswell (eds), *New Religious Movements: challenge and response* (London: Routledge 1999), Stephen J Hunt, *Alternative Religions: a sociological introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2003), 89-130.

²⁴ Cf John Drane *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual? The Rise of New Spirituality and the Mission of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2005), 1-40.

²⁵ Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005).

²⁶ Shirley Maclaine, *Out on a Limb* (London: Bantam 1986), 198.

²⁷ Dan Brown, *The DaVinci Code* (New York: Doubleday 2003).

²⁸ David Hay & Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Centre for the Study of Human Relations 2000).

²⁹ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks CA: Pine Forge Press 1993), 26

everyday life, which is why I then wrote a book about it. I will suggest in a later chapter that the church is not really as ‘unspiritual’ as some people claim, and that the real problem is that we tend to operate with limited definitions of what ‘spirituality’ might entail. In the process of doing so, we too easily exclude whole areas of life that others would regard as the entry point for the spiritual search – hence the widely held perception among those people who ponder such things, that Christians are ‘not spiritual’. There is a mission issue here, for surely those individuals who already believe that something ‘spiritual’ is important for a wholesome life are more likely to be interested in the Gospel than those who are avowed atheists or agnostics, which means that our ability to reach these people will play a key role in sustaining the church of the future.³⁰

A fourth characteristic of everyday life – and one that is growing in importance all the time – is *a consciousness that we live in fearful times*. Martin Rees is no scaremongering fundamentalist (he is the Astronomer Royal, and a professor at the University of Cambridge), but in his book *Our Final Century* he paints a bleak picture:

I think the odds are no better than fifty-fifty that our present civilisation on Earth will survive to the end of the present century ... What happens here on Earth, in this century, could conceivably make the difference between a near eternity filled with ever more complex and subtle forms of life and one filled with nothing but base matter.³¹

The book makes depressing reading, as he lists all the possible ways in which the ultimate doomsday scenario might be played out, all of which are far more scary than they might otherwise seem, because they involve human error rather than deliberate actions on the part of either governments or criminals. Nevertheless, the presence of indiscriminate killers on the streets of cities around the world is reminding us of the fragility of human existence. Then even beyond issues of personal safety, there are big questions about the future of the planet itself. Though some still question the reality of global warming, all the signs are that something is happening to the climate as seasons change in ways that could hardly have been predicted a generation ago. Politicians right across the world now recognize that if we continue to ignore this issue there could be a catastrophic collapse of the global economy within a couple of generations, not to mention increasingly hostile physical conditions facing us on a daily basis. When we add to this mixture the burgeoning population growth in some parts of the world, then it is no wonder that many people are seeing this as the heralding of global chaos. Contrary to some popular perceptions, it is younger people who find themselves most affected by this. Among people in their twenties today the level of depression is ten times greater than for those born before 1915, even though that generation lived through multiple major traumas. Something like 20% of all teens and twenty-somethings may be suffering from depression, though some researchers put the figure as high as 50%. This apparent rise may be due in part to a higher level of reporting of mental illness, though that is unlikely to explain it all, and in any case the statistics only include depression that is medically diagnosed and treated. Over and above that, many people just feel miserable. Even younger children are affected, with measurable anxiety levels among ‘normal’ schoolchildren

³⁰ For more on this, see *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual?* 90-120.

³¹ Martin Rees, *Our Final Century* (London: Heinemann 2003, 8.

now higher than those found in child psychiatric patients in the 1980s.³² This widespread – and growing – sense of fearfulness is a bigger challenge than many Christians appreciate, not only because it is widely believed that Christianity has played a significant part in stirring up inter-religious strife and promoting environmental carelessness, but also because we seem not to have any meaningful eschatology that can speak into the situation. What Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk say about local churches applies just as much (if not more) on a grander theological scale:

the most important currency a congregation has to spend is hope ... In many congregations the hope account is low and the cupboards of hope are getting bare.³³

The reimagination of a relevant Biblical eschatology should be a top priority for today's Christians. For the whole of human history, the earth itself has been the one thing that could be relied upon to be stable in the midst of changing philosophical and political understandings. Now even that underlying certainty is being challenged, is it any wonder that people are questioning almost everything else?

Historical Perspectives

It is easy enough to identify how people experience the cultural change that is now going on. But is there a bigger picture that might help to put it in context, and identify some of the reasons for our present anxieties? I have already indicated that I think framing this as a modern/post-modern disjunction may not be the most useful way of expressing this, if only because the diversity of terminology within that conversation is now so great that it is not easy to find a way of speaking of it that will command a wide consensus. Yet whatever label we attach to it, no-one will deny that life today is quite different than it was in the past.

In his book *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel H Pink proposes an alternative way of looking at cultural change, which I believe offers some important insights into the challenges now facing the church. In common with other cultural analysts, he identifies three ages through which Western culture has evolved – the agricultural age, the industrial age, and the information age, but then adds a fourth one which he believes we are now entering – the conceptual age. Though his focus is on the culture of the Global North, which he treats in a linear fashion as having moved successively through these various stages, the taxonomy can – with qualifications – be used to illuminate trends in countries throughout the world. In reality, of course, cultural change has never proceeded in a narrowly linear fashion. Moreover, the notion of a single entity that can be labelled 'Western culture' is itself an ambiguous category. Within any given country, there is not one culture, but many, and there may even be different cultures existing side by side in close geographical proximity to one another. Rural Pennsylvania offers a striking example of this, where the Amish and their primitive lifestyle that is devoid of anything that might connect them to the wider world exists side-by-side with all the sophistications of contemporary consumerism. Even beyond such specific cultural enclaves, a country the size of the USA encompasses many

³² For the statistics on all this, see Jean M Twenge, *Generation Me* (New York: Free Press 2006), 105-109.

³³ Alan J Roxburgh & Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2006), 16.

different cultures, and depending on where you look, it can be an agricultural, and industrial, and an information economy all at the same time. The same thing is true in Britain, while parts of the Global South are experiencing in this generation the sort of cultural shifts that took place over centuries in the Global North. With these qualifications, though, Pink's taxonomy still offers a useful reflective tool.

The *Agricultural Age* refers to the sort of rural economy that may ultimately be traced back to our most primitive hunter-gatherer ancestors. It was (and is) a world in which people live in harmony with nature, if only because the cycle of the seasons, and the amount of daylight there may be at given times of the year, determines the pattern of life that is both possible and appropriate. Though there may well be feudal overtones, this way of life (especially in farming as distinct from, say, fishing) has generally been an egalitarian one, if only because the workplace is also usually the home. There is something for everyone to do, and while there may be some social differentiation in terms of who does what, there is a creative and worthwhile role for each member of the family, including children. The idea that certain individuals will 'go to work' to support the others makes no sense here, for each person's skills (whatever they might be) are valued as an important contribution to the economic wellbeing of the family unit. Along with this there has generally been a wider sense of community, as people engaged in the same sort of work lived alongside one another, worked together, and therefore formed natural bonds of friendship. In this sort of cultural context, worship was part of everyday life and reflected an already-existing sense of community. It is still perfectly possible to find places where this is the case, in places as far removed from one another as rural New England and the Highlands of Scotland, and with many points in between. Here, where people live and work alongside each other every day, what happens in church on Sundays serves to bless this shared life, indeed it is in this type of cultural context that what we now recognize as a service of worship had its origins. It works for people who already know one another. They do not need to interact in church, because they spend the rest of the week doing that, and such congregations can be fiercely resistant to practices that urban churches may regard as essential, such as sharing meals in the church, or even having a cup of coffee together after a service. But when churches in a different cultural environment try to operate by replicating these same patterns of worship, they soon find themselves faced with big challenges.

The *Industrial Age*, which in Britain dates back to the early 18th century, saw lifestyles become disconnected from the rhythms of the natural world and reorganized around the working hours dictated by industrialists, a change that was facilitated by one of the early products of the industrial revolution, namely the manufacture of gas from coal and the consequent invention of artificial lighting. But this change was merely cosmetic when compared with the more extensive alterations in human relationships that were brought about by the development of industrial processes. The industrial revolution was driven by coal and iron, which by definition was centred in mines and factories, and which in turn valued physical strength over and above other skills. This inevitably established a priority for male workers, and in the process marginalized the things that women might otherwise have contributed, while the mass produced output of the factories required (and therefore helped to create) a new breed of consumers who would purchase the products. Instead of an economy based on skill (which therefore valued everyone), society moved to an economy based on money (which inevitably prioritized those who were in a position to make it). Out of

this emerged a situation in which it would soon seem normal that men should be workers and producers, and women should be homemakers and consumers. So the industrial nuclear family came to birth, along with more privatized lifestyles as families migrated to urban centres where they knew no-one else and were left to create their own spaces within which the family could survive in a place with no inherited sense of community. This was not the whole picture, of course, for many women (and even children) from impoverished circumstances ended up working in mines and factories. Nor were all industrialists blind to the importance of sustaining community, and some of them built model villages – even entire towns or cities – around their factories. But as a generalization, the industrial age and its associated urbanization led to the demise of more traditional ways of being. Worship in this context often became a political issue, as workers either adopted, or reacted against, the religious preferences of the factory owners. This was the context in which (in Britain at least) the nature of Christian worship began to be redefined in different ways, as new forms of church emerged, represented most notably by Methodists, Congregationalists, and Baptists, but also including other smaller groups, all of them offering a way of being church that met the needs (educational as well as more narrowly religious) of those who might otherwise have been disadvantaged.

The Industrial Age survived in the West for 200 years and more, but by the late 1980s was being displaced by the *Information Age*. The invention of the computer, and then subsequently the evolution of the worldwide web, created a 24/7 workplace that paid no attention to the artificial construct of ‘working hours’, still less to the cycles of nature. In this world, work could be wherever a computer was connected to a phone line. The skills required by heavy industry now looked like something from the age of the dinosaurs, for knowledge and mental agility became the key to the future. Physical mobility suddenly took on a whole new meaning, and the population movements of this period rivalled the move to the cities of the industrial age. By now the traditional family structures were in a state of disintegration, which made mobility a lot easier than before, because moving away from a set of fragmented relationships can generally be regarded as a gain rather than a loss. This was the generation when friends became the new family – and a whole host of TV programmes came to birth around that theme. Within this context, regular involvement in any sort of religious institution was becoming less common, but insofar as worship still featured in people’s lives it became very much a matter of personal preference. This was partly due to the increased mobility of the age, and the explosion of choice that came about once people were prepared to travel some distance to go to church. Obligation was replaced by consumerism, and rules and regulations were pushed aside in favour of a concern for the personal wellbeing of the individual worshipper. This shift can easily be documented by looking at hymns and Christian songs that were written at the time, especially those originating from within an evangelical context, many of which have very little to say about God but a great deal of emphasis on an individual’s quality of life, both interior and exterior. Some churches realized that in a consumer culture, the church is in competition with other things for a share of people’s time, and took steps to market themselves. But most did not, because they assumed that the social conditions of the agricultural or industrial ages still prevailed and people would still exhibit a natural allegiance to the church of their forebears. The shift that took place at this time, from consumption of goods to the consumption of experiences, is one that most churches have still not understood, even though it is at the heart of the apparent popularity of ‘alternative’ spirituality and the corresponding lack of appeal of the

traditional church. Churches have tended to dismiss this by blaming the ideological construct of ‘secularization’, as if that alone can explain why Christians are struggling in the marketplace of spirituality, which ought to be their natural habitat. As a result, not only do Christians often miss the fact that ‘secularization’ is another dubious category that is now being seriously questioned by some of the same social scientists who originally proposed it,³⁴ but they also miss a key question in relation to their own missional prospects in this situation. For there is a considerable body of evidence from many countries suggesting that the reason for non-participation in the life of the church is not intrinsically related to beliefs or religious experience – or secularization – but is rooted in the institutionalized nature of the church, which has become disconnected from the realities of people’s lives to such an extent that the Gospel itself looks like a foreign product, packaged in some alien environment to meet the needs of a society that is quite different from what we know and experience. Australian Robert Gallagher offers wise advice with his admonition that

Too many churches do not include essential cultural concerns in their Christian faith. Church life ... must be grounded in the experiences, attitudes, and reflection of its people if they are going to embrace the church.³⁵

Not only may the polarization implied by language that contrasts the religious and the secular be less than the whole story: it may not be part of the real story at all. I remember at the turn of the millennium reading the book, *The Experience Economy*, by Harvard business professors B Joseph Pine & James H Gilmore, in which they offered would-be entrepreneurs advice as to what sort of business might thrive and make the most money in the 21st century. They suggest that in a consumerist culture, people are looking for

experiences to learn and grow, develop and improve, mend and reform ... [such] transformations turn aspirants into a “new you”, with ...ethical, philosophical, and religious implications ... We see people seeking spiritual growth outside the bounds of their local, traditional place of worship...³⁶

At the time, this struck me as a great description of the business that the church is supposed to be in. Yet at the time very few church leaders could see the possibilities, which no doubt partly explains the frequently-voiced interest among key sections of the non-church community in being ‘spiritual’ but not ‘religious’. It is certainly more than merely ironic that the authors of *The Experience Economy* also directed readers to the model that they felt would best serve the establishment of such enterprises – and found it in the New Testament concept of divine grace as the ultimate transformational tool for people seeking truly life-enhancing experiences!³⁷

By comparison with what the Global North is now experiencing, the lifestyles and challenges of these three cultural paradigms all appear to be deceptively simple and straightforward. Agriculture, of course, still exists, but Britain is no longer able to

³⁴ David Martin, *On Secularization: towards a revised general theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005).

³⁵ Robert L Gallagher, “‘Me and God, we’d be Mates’: toward an Aussie contextualized Gospel”, in *International Bulletin for Missionary Research* 30/3 (2006), 127. Cf also M B ter Borg, ‘Some ideas on wild religion’, in *Implicit Religion* 7 (2004).

³⁶ B Joseph Pine & James H Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School 1999), 163-164, 183.

³⁷ *The Experience Economy*, 206.

produce enough food to feed its population, and even the US imports significant quantities of foodstuffs from other parts of the world. Industrial work still exists in pockets, though the heavy industries such as coal mining and steel making have almost completely disappeared as large-scale operations. The jobs have all gone east, to India, China, and other parts of Asia, and those engineering factories that are left now depend on importing their materials. Moreover – and surprisingly – information technology seems to have peaked, and many jobs in that sector have also been exported, mostly to the same countries as heavy industry. The specific details of how this is happening vary from one country to another, but these trends are widespread in the countries of the Global North. Daniel Pink calls this time the *Conceptual Age*. This reconfiguration of society is painful for many, especially those whose employment disappears. But it also comes at a time when Western people have never been better off than they are now. Being a millionaire has become so common that no-one bothers to count them any more. Even those who are not quite so well off are still much richer than the generations that immediately preceded us. One of the major growth industries of the last ten years has been the building of self-storage facilities, where individuals can rent space to store stuff for which they have no immediate use, but which they do not wish to dispose of. We have so many possessions that the number of rooms in the average house is double what it was in my grandparents' day – and that at a time when more homes than ever are occupied by only one person!

This might all sound like the Promised Land, and to many of the world's people that is just what the Global North is. Why else would so many of them be so desperate to settle in these countries, often risking their all to gain entry by illegal means when their applications for residency are turned down? The underlying cultural reality is quite different. Far from being paradise, many people find themselves economically well off, but trapped in a living hell of personal insecurity. Nor is this just an individual matter: the entire culture is increasingly unsure of itself and no longer knows whether to believe in its own rhetoric, or indeed whether there is any such thing as belief. A hundred years ago, our forebears were brimming with confidence about their own potential. The world quite literally was at their feet, and it seemed as if nothing would stop the expansion of the Western world and its power base. Though the days of empire and colonialism are now but a distant memory, economic expansion has continued through the exploitation of global marketplaces and the export of consumerism. But whereas in the past, Western people truly believed in the superiority of their own insights (which explains the evangelizing zeal with which they were promulgated), our culture has undergone a significant loss of confidence in itself – not least because the promise of world peace held out at the beginning of the 20th century turned out to be hollow, and as time passed every horror surpassed the previous ones for brutality and inhumanity. By the 1960s, the self-confident worldview that had driven the Western mind for a thousand years or more looked decidedly jaded, if not altogether discredited. Today, it feels more and more like a favourite sweater that is unravelling, but which we find difficult to part with. We know that in its present form it is unserviceable, yet we are conscious of the fact that there is a lot of good material in the frayed strands, and not everything about the Enlightenment was bad. Where, after all, would we be without modern medicine and its antibiotics and anaesthetics, or the literacy and educational opportunities that continue to transform the lives of those who would otherwise never achieve their full potential? Or, for that matter, the worldwide web, which is as thoroughly Western a technological invention as anyone could imagine?

The religious side of this historic expansionism was, of course Christendom – indeed, Christendom was the original form of Western imperialism. Among church people the question of Christendom has dominated much recent writing – what it was, or might still be, and whether it was a good thing or a bad thing. Opinions vary, with some writers engaging in deep self-examination and regret for what can be seen as the extravagances of the past, while others (from different ecclesial traditions) parade themselves as being largely immune from criticism and therefore potential saviours for a post-Christendom generation. The reality is rarely so simple, of course, and it seems to me that we all struggle to one degree or another with the realities of our history. Some of our struggles are hardly justified, and in particular I find myself with an ambivalent attitude toward the high level of criticism that is now being aimed at our forebears in faith. It is a matter of incontrovertible fact that those who presided over the church during the period of its cultural dominance engaged in or condoned some activities that were less than a faithful reflection of the Gospel. We might think of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the slave trade and, depending on whose analysis is followed, the missionary movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But to highlight such failures is merely to observe that the fate of the church has always been in the hands of ordinary mortals who are liable to make errors of judgment, even on occasion to be self-serving and arrogant. Moreover, many of those events were happening anyway, for economic and political reasons that were nothing to do with religion. No doubt it would have been better if the church had been less compliant, but that is human nature. I can only speak for myself, but I have a strong feeling that if I had been there in the same historical circumstances, it is highly likely that one way or another I would have been complicit in the same sort of behaviour.

Back in the 1990s, I worked on several occasions with renowned Chinese missiologist Raymond Fung. During the period when he was Evangelism Secretary for the World Council of Churches we collaborated on several ecumenical Schools of Evangelism that brought together church leaders from around the world, with the intention that they might learn from each other as well as being stimulated by input from the two of us.³⁸ On each occasion some 30-40 people gathered for an extended period which in one case was as long as three weeks. Even before we had met any of the participants, it was taken for granted that many, if not all, of the leaders from Global North churches would bring a huge burden of guilt and remorse for the ways in which they believed their forebears had exploited and generally oppressed the participants from other nations. Sometimes this was well deserved. One of the most memorable moments from that series of events happened place in Scotland on June 17, 1991. That was the date when the white South African government under F W De Klerk took the momentous decision finally to repeal its hated apartheid laws. Among the participants at the WCC event was a white bishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa, along with several black church leaders from that and neighbouring African countries. It was coincidental – though fortuitous – that our worship on that night was focused on the sort of prayer that consists of ‘sighs too deep for words’ (Romans 8:26), in the course of which we all knelt around a tree branch and hammered nails in not-so-silent worship. There were many tears – of sadness for the atrocities of the past that had been committed in the name of Christ, but also of forgiveness and joy as

³⁸ Raymond’s themes at those events appeared in his *Isaiah Vision* (Geneva: WCC 1992) and the monthly letters on evangelism he issued from his desk in Geneva, some of which were published as *Evangelistically Yours* (Geneva: WCC 1992). My own lectures at these events formed the substance of *Faith in a Changing Culture* (London: HarperCollins 1997).

a white man was embraced by black Africans who had suffered so much. Not surprisingly, those of us who were white felt blameworthy in some way, even if we had never been to South Africa or shared the theological or political opinions of its government. I remember Raymond subsequently reminding us that, notwithstanding our justifiable sorrow, the relationship between Christendom and the rest of the world had not all been negative, and we should grow up and stop beating ourselves up all the time. He pointed to the many positive things that Western adventurers had done to improve the life of others through selfless service, and highlighted the fact that he himself owed a great deal to Christians from the Global North who had facilitated his education and provided him with opportunities that a Chinese person of his generation might never otherwise have had. Other, more cynical commentators have noted that Western people are questioning the accomplishments of science and technology (and, in the name of environmental protection, trying to scale them back) at the very point when other nations are in a position to take advantage of them, and wondering if this is not motivated by the same sort of selfishness that we now complain about in the colonial era. No wonder our entire culture is suffering from a corporate lack of confidence in its own heritage. It is not my purpose here to whitewash Christendom, but to point out that – like most things in life – it has been a mixed blessing rather than an unmitigated disaster in all respects. But neither should we suppose that the anxiety now experienced throughout the culture is entirely disconnected from the attitudes of those who have gone before us. In the obituaries section of the final issue of *The Economist* for the 20th century, there was just one entry: God! Belief in God, it suggested, had died because people ‘nationalised God’, ‘reformers privatised him’, and ‘Christians turned not cheeks but swords against Muslims’, and the result was ‘the cynical, questioning, anti-authoritarian West’.³⁹ This striking claim highlighted something that seems to me to be of particular importance in relation to a Christian apologetic, namely that the present loss of confidence (at least as perceived by ordinary people in the street) is based more on practical concerns than on any great crisis of philosophical understanding. Theologian Thomas Oden put his finger on something important when he wrote that

Not some theory but actual modern *history* is what is killing the ideology of modernity ... While modernity continues blandly to teach us that we are moving ever upward and onward, the actual history of late modernity is increasingly brutal, barbarian, and malignant.⁴⁰

All things are interconnected, of course, and it is because the worldview that failed to deliver a better experience for the world’s people was ultimately based on a rational understanding of the universe that rationality itself has come to be questioned as a reliable basis for making informed choices about human flourishing – including spirituality. This realization has played a big part in creating an environment in which it seems reasonable to take seriously ideas that in a previous age would have been dismissed as primitive and nonsensical. When you add to this our increased awareness of cultures other than our own, brought about by the expansion of the mass media and the growth of cheap travel, and then throw in a dash of natural human curiosity, you have the soil in which new forms of globalized spirituality can take root and grow.

³⁹ *Economist* vol 353, no. 8151 (Dec 31 1999), 135.

⁴⁰ Thomas C Oden, *After Modernity – What?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990), 51.

For every one who is self-consciously looking for spiritual solutions, though, many more are just paralysed by fear. The challenges facing young people especially have been mentioned earlier. Church analysts have adopted more enthusiastically than other social commentators the language that would identify individuals by reference to their date of birth. The terminology of Generation X, Y, Millennials, and other slick labels, would be familiar to most church youth workers today. But the reality in the lives of young people is more complex than that – not to mention the fact that some researchers regard these categories as not being age-related at all, but as representative of a particular way of seeing things and of processing information. While I was writing this book, I was in a meeting with colleagues at Fuller Seminary where there was some discussion about the nature of theological education in the 21st century, and particularly whether the major responsibility for effective learning should rest with the students or the professors. One faculty member who is in his forties commented that the educational scene had changed even in the time that had elapsed since he completed his own graduate education some ten years previously. He observed that whereas in the past, a graduate school (as distinct from an undergraduate college) could have expected to enrol only mature adults, his own experience today was suggesting that maturity is no longer age related, and for many people adolescence now seems to extend into their thirties.

Others have wondered if, just as the 20th century identified adolescence and teenage as key stages of life, maybe in the 21st century we will come to regard young adulthood as a separate stage, with its own challenges and opportunities. Whatever label we might care to use, it is certainly the case that the anxieties and fears, and the uncertainties about identity and relationships that the textbooks on developmental psychology would traditionally have placed in the teenage years, are not hard to find in people who are significantly older than that. In particular, such young people do not find it easy to connect either with church or with those forms of ‘alternative’ spirituality that their parents’ generation seems to find so appealing. Their ways of dealing with the discontinuities of life are more basic, even elemental. In her study of the lives of young adults, psychologist Jean M Twenge reminds readers that

Being young has not always carried such a high risk of being anxious, depressed, suicidal, or medicated.⁴¹

Older people, and civic authorities, regularly complain about what they regard as the anti-social behaviour of the young, especially when it manifests itself on the streets after long nights out in bars and clubs. But we need to ask why so many people regularly go out at weekends with the specific intention of getting drunk with alcohol or stoned through drugs. Hedonistic behaviour is not always happy behaviour, but often masks a deep uncertainty about fundamental questions of human existence. In lives filled with so much pain, drink or drugs at least offer the prospect of some relief from the harsh realities of life, even if it is only for a short period. In his book *Penguins, Pain and the Whole Shebang*, John Shore recounts his own remarkable experience of becoming a Christian without any connection with or intervention by the church. He also offers the perspective of a recent convert on how he imagines God might see things (the tongue-in-cheek sub-title of the book is *Why I do the things I do, by God*). In the course of these musings, he puts his finger on a profound reality when he comments that ‘... a person without hope is, or always becomes, more

⁴¹ Jean M Twenge, *Generation Me* (New York: Free Press 2006), 105.

animal than human'.⁴² When people in the street (or politicians) behave in what seem like sub-human ways, it says something significant about our culture, afflicted as it is by a profound sense of futurelessness, and therefore hopelessness.

Two challenges for Christians stand out in particular. There is a theological question. Hope is at the heart of the Gospel, and yet no Christian tradition seems to have any sort of serviceable eschatology for the 21st century world in which we live. Though they can still find resonances among some Christians, the opinions on this subject that originated in the millenarian speculations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are completely irrelevant to the concerns of the wider population. Yet most of us seem embarrassed to acknowledge any sort of eschatological dimension of faith, probably because we really have no idea what to think about it. This is something we need to work on: what would a meaningful 21st century eschatology consist of? Besides that, however, there is also a missional question raised here. For if hedonism, with its accompanying and sometimes destructive indulgences, is the way in which many people confront and deal with life today, then in one sense that set of behaviours and rituals actually is their spirituality. What would it mean for that to be transformed and redeemed? This is not a silly question. As a matter of fact, I made a start on addressing it in a paper delivered to a conference in Windsor several years ago, and I have continued to reflect on it ever since.⁴³ It will surface again later in this book, as it is a key missional question that I believe we need to address in respect of many different aspects of contemporary culture. If we believe that this is God's world, and God is at work in it (the *missio Dei*), and if we further accept the most obvious consequence of this belief – that there can be no cultural no-go areas for God – then that must mean God can be found even, maybe especially, in the midst of all our struggles to be fully human. At heart, that is a question about relationships – with God, with the cosmos, with society, and with ourselves. These themes will surface repeatedly in the chapters that follow.

⁴² John Shore, *Penguins, Pain and the whole Shebang* (New York: Seabury Books 2005), 46.

⁴³ John Drane, 'Contemporary culture and the reinvention of sacramental spirituality', in Geoffrey Rowell & Christine Hall (eds), *The Gestures of God: explorations in sacramentality* (London: Continuum 2004), 37-55.