

THE EMERGENCE OF INSIDER MOVEMENTS

By Bill Nikides¹

1 Identifying the elephant

Getting underneath the skin of insider movements, moving beyond the anecdotes, aphorisms and hype is no easy task. Shrouded in mystery, accompanied by hushed tones, as if the very telling of its stories places real people in danger, trying to get to its roots is a bit like Rudyard Kipling's blind men trying to describe what is in fact an elephant. It seems too big, and is too diverse for anyone to gain a coherent picture. In part, I think this confusion is deliberate on the part of its formularies and missionary practitioners. Insider movements grew in the dark. Most of us in the West never even knew they existed for decades. Then, when we, the various parts of the Christian church began to enquire, we were met with missionary success stories taking place in unknown locations as recounted by people with pseudonyms. More fundamentally, questions of origin or concerns regarding doctrine are generally met with assurances that there are no real explanations worth repeating since the movement is one of the Holy Spirit, having nothing to do with Westerners exporting ideologies and methodologies East and South. Rather, Western missionaries were simply witnesses to what God had already spontaneously generated in Muslim cultures.

I disagree with these characterisations. I believe that insider movements are, despite the barriers and more than a little obfuscation, understandable. Just as architects of IM such as Charles Kraft have exhorted us to self-examination, wisely pointing out that we are just as prone to religious syncretism as anyone else, I would like to take him up on his suggestion and examine what I believe is fundamentally a Western invention. I only say "largely" rather than "entirely" because in its application, insider methodology can, in

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fact, merge with indigenous syncretism. South and East Asia; North and Sub-Saharan African Islam all contribute these. Nevertheless, I think looking at insider movements as extensions of Western, and in particular American evangelical expressions can help us understand insider movements. One recent strand of contemporary evangelicalism, the emergent church movement stands out. I believe that a good look at the emergent church will help us also understand what insider movements are about.

They say that if you wish to eat an elephant, you have to do two things. First, you have to recognise that such an enormous meal can only be consumed one bite at a time. The second thing to remember is that you need a plan. A bit of elephant anatomy helps. So it is with insider movements. Many people and many ideas shaped its thinking. More importantly, many people and many ideas shaped its thinkers. One such idea is the emergent church. Before we can talk about the connections between these two phenomena, however, we need to look at a few things that helped create both. Then we can get our arms around the emergent church before relating it to insider movements.

2 Eating the elephant

A good place to start is with a bit of prehistory. This is, to be sure, a book about missions, but we often make big mistakes in not looking outside the box of missions to understand what we have in the box. For example, Erich Kahler, a literary critic and scholar noted changes in American and European worldviews after the Second World War. His observations are worth quoting at length.

We live in an era of transition, on which age-old modes of existence, and with them old concepts and structures, are breaking up, while new ones are not as yet clearly recognisable. In such a state of flux -more rapidly moving than ever- in the incessant turmoil of novelty, of discoveries, inventions and experiments, in such a state, concepts like wholeness, like coherence, like history are widely discredited and looked upon with distrust and dislike. Not only are they felt to be encumbering the freedom of new ventures, they are considered obsolete and invalid. The repudiation of all these concepts implies a discarding of form, for they all-wholeness, coherence, history-are inherent in the

concept of form. They all mean and constitute identity. Indeed, form may be plainly understood as identity. As Richard Blackmur strikingly put it: "Form is the limiting principle by which a thing is itself." Accordingly, losing form is equivalent to losing identity.²

He is saying that back in 1968, he noticed a growing trend among the thinkers and shapers to discard traditions, structures, and conventions for the sake of "new ventures" designed to avoid obsolescence and maximise freedom. People wanted to be free of constraint and even at the risk of losing coherence, the old ways were distrusted and then discarded. Forms were considered either unimportant or likened to prisons, dooming people to lives of meaningless repetition.

That was then and this is now. This sort of radical mistrust of history, tradition, structure, standards and constraint we now identify as postmodernism. To be postmodern is to be "post" everything that what we think modernism stands for. Interestingly enough, the list looks much the same as it did in 1968. The only thing that may have developed is the level of mistrust. Zygmunt Bauman, a highly influential sociologist has made a career of understanding postmodernism in the West and concluded that it was very much not "post" anything. Postmodernism according to Bauman is just an accelerated version of everything that was taking place within modernism, the world of the industrial West. He coined a term that he believes better explains what we are all experiencing is. He calls it "liquid modernism". In describing the increasingly rapid rate of change, as we discard old forms for new ones, he likens the phenomenon to the difference between solids and liquids. In a liquid state, social forms and institutions cannot keep their shape for long.³ Structures and organisations become networks for example. In order to facilitate making what are believed to be necessary changes in liquid modernity,

² Erich Kahler, *The Disintegration of Form in the Arts* (New York: George Braziller, 1968) 21.

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in An Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) 1ff.

A swift and thorough forgetting of outdated information and fast ageing habits can be more important for the next success than the memorisation of past moves and the building of strategies on a foundation laid by previous learning

In that brave new world of rapid change, the first “sacreds to be profaned” were traditional loyalties, custom and obligations. Bauman noted that the power to create had to be free of fences and barriers. Dense and intense social bonds had to be cleared away.⁴ This translated into any number of different directions. The sexual revolution, gender equality, marriage, segregation all came under the gun. So did institutional religion. Mainline churches were in massive decline throughout most of the Twentieth century. What filled the void was a neo-evangelicalism that both repudiated the insularity and perceived backwardness of fundamentalism; and looked forward to a happy engagement with the modern world. The seekers after truth among the new evangelical tribe rebuilt the face of Christianity in the West. Impatient with the stifling and reactionary thinking they found in denominational Christianity, movers and shakers started and colonised new parachurch organisations, capable of mobilising people and initiating mission faster than they could in any other venue.

In the early days of the nascent evangelicalism, the vast majority of evangelical leadership, the trendsetters, maintained a close watch on core doctrinal commitments. But, the engagement with the wide world outside the church doors cut both ways. It allowed believers to really engage the world on its terms.

On the other hand, it also created a bridge to thinking in the outside world that would threaten its original core commitments. He who builds a bridge cannot always determine the direction of the traffic; nor the selection of the drivers. An ever-increasing gap began to grow between different wings within evangelicalism. You could see it coming in the late 60s and 70s with movements such as the Jesus People; Christians fiercely mono-generational, experiential

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000) 3-14.

and anti-historical.⁵ Gerald McDermott, in a recent article described the two main wings as the Meliorists and the Traditionalists.⁶

Reformational and “conservative” Christians align with McDermott’s traditionalists. Traditionalists are framed by their identity with “The Great Tradition”, the mainstream expression of Christianity that sees itself in continuity with the early church, its attitude toward scripture and its concern for maintaining biblical doctrine. “Forms” such as church and office are not considered culturally conditioned options, but necessary extensions of the whole history of God’s people. On the other hand, many within the emergent church and insider movement identify with his Meliorists.

Meliorists, according to McDermott, think that conservatives pay too much attention to tradition. They do so for two reasons. Either they (the conservatives) are simple-minded (Biblicists) or they are Paleo-orthodox (they cannot face the modern world). Creeds and confessions are simply culturally landlocked, man-made statements that may need a doctrinal makeover. This combines with the fact that for many, biblical inspiration means that the authors are inspired, not necessarily the words. McDermott concludes that the logic of the Meliorists leads them to proclaim Scripture’s authority while rejecting the church’s historical understanding of it, making a theologian “just another culture-bound interpreter of spiritual experience.” Out go the theologians-in come the anthropologists. He also issues one final caution. The creeds and doctrines of the past served as something other than a straight-jacket. They were the ordinary Christian’s only protection against “the ingenuity of the wise and intellectual superior”. In other words, Meliorists have created a gnostic evangelicalism, dominated not by history, tradition, or the Bible, but by cultural or methodological experts. I believe that, if the categories of Meliorism and Traditionalism are valid ways to describe the divide among evangelicals, then the emergent church represents a kind of Meliorism

⁵ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organised Religion* (Chicago: Moody, 2009) 92.

⁶ Gerald McDermott, “Evangelicals Divided” *First Things* 21.2 (April 2011) 45-50.

But how do we describe it? What are the emergent church's characteristics? Several things come to mind. John Drane has a helpful summary. The emerging church is one of two expressions:

A shorthand way of describing a genuine concern among leaders of traditional denominations to engage in a meaningful missional way with the changing culture, and as part of that engagement to ask fundamental questions about the nature of the church. Or...Christians who have become angry and disillusioned with their previous experience of church and who have established their own faith communities that-far from being accountable to any larger tradition-are fiercely independent and often highly critical of those who remain within what they regard as the spiritually bankrupt Establishment.⁷

Sam Storms has a list of emergent distinctives. These include:

1. Journey vs. Destination
2. Belonging then believing vs. believing then belonging
3. Inclusion vs. exclusion
4. Corporate vs. individual
5. Incarnational vs. attractional
6. Fluid ecclesiology vs. fixed ecclesiology⁸

The list is helpful in seeing the conceptual overlaps between emergents and insiders. Take the first distinctive. Is it not analogous to the definition of insider movements as “movements to Christ” rather than as movements in Christ? This allows for the rest of the distinctives to take place. Someone can, in the insider milieu, remain a Muslim member of the mosque because he or she is on the way to Jesus, not the church. This person is being included in the insider Muslim movement that encourages its followers to remain within their original faith systems, thereby incarnating Christ, rather than being extracted into the Church. It allows people to bypass doctrinal standards, membership accountability, and

⁷ John Drane, “What is the Emerging Church? Editorial *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6.1 (2006).

⁸ Sam Storms, “The Emerging/Emergent Church: Observations and Analysis” www.samstorms.com.

perceived institutional barriers. So it is with insiders.⁹ So it is with emergents. Emergents and insiders alike view cultures as essentially insurmountable barriers, regardless of what people like David Bosch said. He and others warn of syncretism, but both insiders and emergents seem to pay little attention. It is as though the culture is the ultimate, irreducible reality.

It is vital that these multiform people and subcultures encounter Jesus from within their own cultures and from within their own communities, for only there can they truly comprehend him. It is now critical for the sake of the gospel itself that these people experience salvation in a way that does not dislocate them from their organic groups but rather allows them to encounter Jesus in a way that is seamlessly connected with life as they have come to understand it through their own histories and experiences.¹⁰

Leonard Sweet, an emergent guru, talks about doing church in a way that is biblically absolute but culturally relative. He employs what he calls an EPIC model to describe emergent priorities. EPIC stands for Experiential, Participatory, Image-Driven (as opposed to orally driven), and Connected. In his mind, when you put all of that together, you do not have religion. Speaking for postmodern believers, he states that “Postmoderns have had it with religion. They want no part of obedience to sets of propositions and rules required by some ‘officialdom’ somewhere.”¹¹ David Wells calls this the “disappearing trick” of postmodern Christians, the process of considering faith in Jesus as outside the historical church.¹²

Like the liquid modernity Bauman describes, emergents describe institutions such as the traditional church. They also focus almost exclusively on an understanding of incarnational theology as contextualisation. This engenders moving within the social fabric of

⁹ Rebecca Lewis, “Promoting Movements to Christ Within Natural Communities” *IJFM* 24.2 (Summer 2007).

¹⁰ Chad Richard Bresson, “The Emerging Church: What They Are Saying” II. www.clearcreekchapel.org.

¹¹ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims* (Nashville: B&H, 2000) 112.

¹² David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 10f.

culture, so as to incarnate Christ within it. Rob Bell, an emergent rock star, explains:

Jesus is supracultural. He is present within all cultures, and yet outside of all cultures. He is for all people, and yet he refuses to be co-opted or owned by any one culture.¹³ That includes the Christian culture. Any denomination. Any church. Any theological system.

The point that Bell, Brian McLaren and insiders make is that Christ is not the exclusive property of the church, so it is completely appropriate to find him embraced by Muslims, Hindus etc. Emergents tend to see the organised church as hopelessly corrupt; far better to focus the believers' energy on building the kingdom and bypassing the institutions.¹⁴ The emergent leader, Erwin McManus, in fact, stated that his goal is to "destroy Christianity as a world religion and be a recatalyst for the movement of Jesus Christ".¹⁵ That goes a long way to explaining why, if George Barna's 2006 statistics are to be believed, that while 45% of the Americans he surveyed claimed to be born again, 21% of these were unchurched.¹⁶ This must, however, go hand in hand with a minimalist view of doctrine and theology.¹⁷ Spending time scrubbing theology is considered a waste of time and wrong-headed since doctrine is really only cultural Christianity attempting to force its view on others.¹⁸

¹³ The prevailing way of understanding religion for Emergents and the insider movement is as an expression of culture.

¹⁴ DeYoung and Kluck 17. See Jonathan Bonk, "Salvation, Other Religions, and Asian Mission" *Asian Missiology* 2.1 (2008) 112. Bonk seems to believe that insider movements are the best way to preserve biblical faith, as opposed to visible churches. See Stuart Caldwell, "Jesus in Samaria: A Paradigm for Church Planting Among Muslims" *IJFM* 17.1 (Spring 2000) 29f for his promotion of kingdom over institutional church.

¹⁵ Quoted in Richard Bennett, "Hazards Unfolded By Emerging Church Leaders" www.bereanbeacon.org.

¹⁶ Wells 42f.

¹⁷ Wells 17.

¹⁸ David Greenlee, "New Faith, Renewed Identity: How Some Muslims are Becoming Followers of Jesus" www.edinburgh2010.org. The author examines the validity of insider "conversions" by examining the phenomena through seven different lenses (psychological, behavioural etc), none of which include a theological or doctrinal lens.

Both movements are broadly open to other religions.¹⁹ Few are exclusivists that think that Jesus must be proclaimed Lord personally and within the context of the historic church. Semir Selmanovic, pastor of Church of the Advent Hope in Manhattan, and member of the Emergent Village, notes approvingly that many emergents have eschewed the Christian identity, moving beyond it in order to live a “Christ-like life” as Hindus and Native Americans.²⁰ The irony in this is that two things are considered worthy of perpetuation and one is not. Both insiders and emergents think that Jesus is here to stay and so are the religions of the world. The only one that has to go is world Christianity. Lloyd Chia recounts a night out together, as he was doing his doctoral research on the emergent church, with four people: Eliacin, Raul, Felipe, and Brian McLaren.²¹ McLaren had been at a conference where he advocated dual-identity in religion. Felipe was perplexed. “How can I be a Christian if I can’t draw a clear line between myself and a non-Christian?” He also found it difficult to believe that he could learn anything profitable from other religions. McLaren explained that there were two typical choices. One could either set up absolute boundaries, maintaining a strong Christian identity or have no boundaries and a weak identity. McLaren then knocked over both straw men. He offered a third alternative. Felipe could maintain a deep commitment to his faith without having any insider/outsider boundaries. He then told stories of people that had come through other religions to Jesus. Eliacin recounted that he had listened to a

¹⁹ See Abdul Asad, “Rethinking the Insider movement Debate: Global Historical Insights Toward an Appropriate Transitional Model of C5” *St Francis Magazine* 5.4 (August 2009) 151. Asad, a pen name for an American missionary, proposes turning insider movements into a sect of Sufi Islam. Kevin Higgins, “Muhammad, Islam, and the Qur’an” (October 2007).

²⁰ Tyson Dauer and Cecilia Pick, “Re-Emerging Pietism: The Emerging Church as Postmodern Pietism” *Journal of Undergraduate Research* 8 (1 September 2008) 32. Compare Kevin Higgins, “Beyond Christianity: Insider Movements and the Place of the Bible and the Body of Christ in New Movements to Jesus” *Mission Frontiers* (July-August 2010).

²¹ Lloyd Chia, “Emerging Faith Boundaries: Bridge-building, Inclusion, and the Emerging Church Movement in America” Ph.D. Dissertation (December 2010) 263ff.

minister tell him recently that the minister had been studying the Qur'an, concluding that "I think Islam is making me a better Christian." In terms of a theology of religions, one can clearly see the overlapping perspectives of insiders and Emergents.²²

Another feature of emergents relates to how they interact with other people and ideas. According to Scott Clark, both liquid modernity and the emergent Church find critique fairly unwelcome. Arguing over truth claims is considered an especially unwelcome intrusion. It is old-speak after all.²³ Lloyd Chia made a careful study of how emergents interact with ideas, both theirs and others'.²⁴ He observed how the Emergent Village blog moderator policed his site. The moderator distinguished between those interested in genuine dialogue and "trolls" who excluded themselves by being antagonistic. Rules were established that governed who was admitted to and who was excluded from conversations. Name-calling ("you are a heretic") and condemnation ("believe that and you are going to hell") got you excluded. Mutual openness got you included. Chia made an interesting observation. "Instead of an exclusion defined by identity (who you are), or positionality (what you believe), exclusion I defined by how one chooses to interact."²⁵ An emergent response to D.A. Carson's *Reclaiming the Centre* proposed establishing rules of engagement. Some of these "rules" included:

²² See Bernard Dutch, "Should Muslims Become 'Christians?'" *IJFM* 17.1 (Spring 2000), Joseph Cumming, "Muslim Followers of Jesus?" www.christianitytoday.com. Rebecca Lewis, "The Integrity of the Gospel and Insider Movements" *IJFM* 27.1 (Spring 2010). Rebecca Lewis, "Insider Movements: Honouring God-Given Identity and Community" *IJFM* 26.1 (Spring 2009). Kevin Higgins, "Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements" *IJFM* 23.3 (Fall 2006). John J. Travis and J. Dudley Woodberry, "When God's Kingdom Grows Like Yeast: Frequently-Asked Questions About Jesus Movements Within Muslim Communities" *Mission Frontiers* (July-August 2010) 27.

²³ R.Scott Clark, "Whosoever Will Be Saved: Emerging Church, Meet Christian Dogma" *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) 115.

²⁴ Lloyd Chia, 200f.

²⁵ Chia 201.

1. Respect for boundaries and difference: “You do it one way, we do it another.”
2. A commitment to dialogic engagement instead of “one-way” criticism.
3. Responsible critique that includes not perpetuating second-hand critique.
4. The necessity of personal encounters, or “get to know us.”
5. Establishing a realistic sense of “scope”: “We ask our critics to remember that we cannot be held responsible for everything said and done by people using the terms ‘emergent’ or emerging church,’ anymore than our critics would like to be held responsible for everything said or done by those claiming to be ‘evangelical’ or ‘born-again’.”²⁶

We see the same pattern of inclusion and exclusion occurring today with regard to conversations about insider movements. If you are going to interact, you will have to play by their rules. Anything else will be deemed an occasion for conflict resolution.

For emergents, as for insiders, diversity is prized far more than is unity or conformity. This may, in fact, be linked to their need to defend their own turf. Individuals within the camp can say virtually anything, hold to any idea or practice, while the movement as a whole denies that any particular point applies to them as a whole. The “all-purpose” reply to critics by emergents, is “not everyone in the movement believes like that.” Many insiders could mirror these words perfectly. The consequences are significant. Phil Johnson, for example, notes that emergents “percolate” all sorts of heresies and false doctrines, but this defence mechanism of broad diversity and plausible deniability shields them from confrontation.²⁷ It is a rope-a-dope approach that renders emergents and insiders virtually

²⁶ Chia 290ff. Joshua Massey, “God’s Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ” *IJFM* 17.1 (Spring 2000) 11, exhorts both proponents and critics of insider movements to “accept God’s diversity in drawing Muslims to Christ.” See also Kevin Higgins, “Speaking the Truth about Insider Movements” *St. Francis Magazine* 5.6 (December 2009) for an insider parallel.

²⁷ Phil Johnson, “Joyriding on the Downgrade at Breakneck Speed: The Dark Side of Diversity” *Reforming or Conforming* 213f.

immune from serious and consequential critique. Every criticism is disqualified as painted with too broad a brush.²⁸

Both emergents and insiders share intellectuals and some celebrities. On the popular side, Brian McLaren is quoted and feted by both movements. More seriously, both share some of the same influential thinkers, who, while not either insiders or emergents, shape the thinking of both. Principle among these are the missiologist David Bosch, a champion of incarnational contextualisation and the missionary historian Andrew Walls, an important architect for encouraging the development of local theology in the place of historic creeds and confessions.²⁹ Miroslav Volf, the Yale Scholar, author of *Allah: A Christian Response*, editor of *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbour*, and co-sponsor of the Yale Response to *A Common Word Between Us and You, Loving God and Neighbour Together*, along with another insider advocate, Joseph Cumming, also serve as influential shapers of both communities.

How do the emergent church and insider movements relate or overlap? There are different ways to look at it. There is the direct method. Do the two communities quote one another or hang out for example? They do on occasion. Indirectly, do they share similar ideas or philosophies? How do they reflect liquid modernity? What are their reactions to institutional Christianity as a form? If doctrines generate rules for living, how do they each react to doctrine? I believe that a careful examination of the two leaves little room for doubt. Both emergents and insider proponents have been nourished from the same spring. I just wish it had not been contaminated.

²⁸ Johnson 223.

²⁹ Kevin Ward, "It Might Be Emerging. But is it Church?" *Stimulus* 17.4 www.stimulus.org.nz (November 2009).