

The Alpha course and Evangelism in Modern and Post-Modern Settings*

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Introduction

In the theological colleges of the future, I can imagine someone setting an essay question with a title like, ‘Compare and contrast the approaches to evangelism found in the Alpha course and the emerging church’. That is always supposing that there are theological colleges in the future, or indeed that there is anything left of what we now recognize as church. And, for those who are wondering what sort of answer will command a high grade, it is probably that Alpha is a manifestation of a modernist approach to mission, whereas the reality we know as ‘emerging church’ is – for all its diversity – rooted in a conviction that, to be intelligible (let alone accepted) the Gospel needs to be contextualized in a very different culture, namely that of post-modernity.

The precise distinction between these different ways of being has been discussed endlessly (and often pointlessly) in recent years. In some church circles, it seems that they talk about nothing else. The ways of describing today’s culture are seemingly endless: 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 knowing what they mean. In fact, that may be the safest way in which to regard these terms: to admit that in the final analysis we do not know what is going on in the culture, and that any term we apply to try and articulate our understanding is likely to be provisional, even inaccurate. Out of the plethora of terms in current use, I tend to adopt post-modernity (with a hyphen), not so much as a precise definition but rather as a shorthand way of referring to the chaos into which things have descended once the previous worldview (‘modernity’) began to be questioned and rejected. It will fall to future generations to decide 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. Arguing about words gives the appearance of rationality to discussions about contemporary culture, which no doubt explains why it has become so popular. But to paraphrase Marx’s famous dictum, ‘post-modernity’ has become the opiate of the intelligentsia, a make-believe expression that encourages academics and others to think they understand what is going on in the world - and behind that is the thought that if we are able to name it correctly, we will also be able to control it. This is just wishful thinking: Western civilization is in a bigger mess than most of us care to admit. It may be in a phase of final meltdown.

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Practical post-modernity

I will continue to use the term post-modernity as a convenient way of referring to whatever it is that is going on in Western society right now, but without any necessary inference with regard to what this means people may or may not believe in a theoretical sort of way. In terms of effective mission, the reality with which we need to deal has less to do with philosophical discourse, and is more about lifestyles and personal perspectives. The practical impact of post-modernity manifests itself in three ways that are relevant to this discussion. In everyday life, we are conscious of the fact that *nothing seems to work the way it once did*. This includes transient operations such as cooking, cleaning, or washing, as well as more profound matters like exploring the meaning of life. In his novel *Microserfs*, Douglas Coupland spells out how this sense of disconnectedness from the past affects our search for personal identity:

people without lives like to hang out with other people who don't have lives. Thus they form lives.¹

They tend not to hang out in churches, though, because 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. 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.²

The spiritual reality of that in terms of mission was eloquently articulated by a 20-year-old woman in a study carried out by George Barna in the USA (where, remember, church is still more highly valued than in the UK):

I honestly tried the churches, but they just couldn't speak to me ... All I want is reality. Show me God. Help me to understand why life is the way it is, and how I can experience it more fully and with greater joy.³

A second mark of everyday post-modernity is the realization that *the way Western people have lived is not the only possible way to be*, nor is it the only one that can lead to a fulfilled and meaningful life. A couple of generations ago, other world faiths were beyond the experience of most people, whereas today they are on our doorstep. But this is only one aspect of the diversity that we now experience. Within the Christian church, there is an awareness that there are many different ways of worshipping, and of doing theology. The rise of Pentecostalism from nothing at the beginning of the 20th century to being one of the major strands of the world church today is just one aspect of that. 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. Along with that is a change in the ways in which we both exercise and acknowledge authority. Though political and industrial leaders struggle with this as much as the church does, there is a widespread feeling in the culture that power should no longer be something to be exercised 'over' people, but is something to be shared. There is enough power to go round without it all needing to be in the hands of just a few individuals! This is one important

¹ Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (London: Flamingo 1995), 313.

² George Lings, *Living Proof - a new way of being church?* (Sheffield: Church Army 1999), 13.

³ George Barna, *Baby Busters* (Chicago: Northfield 1994), 93

distinguishing factor in the rise of New Spirituality, for whereas traditional religions tend to be led by recognized authorities who exercise control over the beliefs and behaviour of their followers, 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,⁴ but the phenomenon cannot be ignored in relation to the mission of the church. An ethnographic study over a two year 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’ had largely occurred at the expense of the local churches.⁵ Twenty years ago, Shirley Maclaine intuited the same conclusion, when she claimed that ‘Your religions teach religion – not spirituality’.⁶ 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 corresponding growth in the popularity of new forms of experiential spirituality, whether that be through the study of arcane texts, involvement in techniques to enhance spiritual awareness, or experimentation with so-called ‘complementary’ healing therapies and so on. Moreover, a much publicized research project carried out by David Hay 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 the ‘secular’ population.⁷ George Ritzer succinctly expressed one of the reasons why we are increasingly conscious of the need to find that special experience that 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.⁸

When I first came across that statement, I realized that it could just as easily be applied to church life as to any one of the other rationalized systems with which we increasingly struggle in everyday life, which is why I then wrote a book about it – a book which immediately struck a chord with large numbers of other people.⁹ It is debatable whether the church really is as ‘unspiritual’ as some people claim, but whether we like it or not that is a widely held perception among those people who ponder such things. It makes sense to think that individuals who already believe that something spiritual is important for a wholesome life are more likely to be interested

⁴ 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.

⁵ Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005).

⁶ Shirley Maclaine, *Out on a Limb* (London: Bantam 1986), 198

⁷ 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).

⁸ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks CA: Pine Forge Press 1993), 26

⁹ *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2000); and in George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: the Reader* (Thousand Oaks: Sage 2002), 71, 151-161.

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 creating the church of the future.¹⁰

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 Astronomer Royal, and a Cambridge professor), 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.¹¹

His book makes depressing reading, as he lists all the possible ways in which the ultimate doomsday scenario might be played out, most of which involve human error rather than deliberate terrorist actions. But the presence of indiscriminate killers on the streets of cities around the world is reminding us of just how fragile human existence is.

To be effective, any evangelistic strategy will need to connect with these concerns, and the church will not be part of the UK future unless we are able to contextualize the Gospel within this frame of reference. If that sounds unduly pessimistic, we need to remember that all the facts known to us point in that direction. Even Peter Brierley, a Christian researcher who wants the church to survive and thrive, has concluded that by 2040 there will – on present trends – be little distinctive Christian witness left in Britain, and that the denominational structures with which we are now familiar will have imploded and disappeared long before then.¹² He is not alone. American researcher George Barna reaches a similar conclusion with regard to the future of mainline denominations in the USA, and documents the rise of new expressions of Christian faith, such as home churches, marketplace ministries, and cyberchurch – all of which he projects will have overtaken regular participation in congregational activity within a very short time, so that even those who consciously model their lives on the Gospel (and also engage in a committed way in activities such as prayer, Bible, and spiritual direction) will be doing this without any formal connection with a local church.¹³

As a Christian believer and a theologian, I have no doubt that the church has a future: my belief in God (as well as my naturally optimistic personality type) allows me to see a future in which the Gospel is still a transformational spiritual force. But my analysis of the cultural trends in Britain also requires me to qualify that by saying that the church of the future may not be in these islands (or indeed in the West more generally), unless we address these serious missional challenges in more creative ways than we have so far been able to do. There are, of course, many signs of hope – not least the out-of-the-box thinking represented by the emerging church, with which this chapter started. The Church of England in particular has made a good start by embracing the insights offered in its *Mission-Shaped Church* report, followed so

¹⁰ For more on this, see *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual?*, 90-120.

¹¹ Martin Rees, *Our Final Century* (London: Heinemann 2003), 8.

¹² Peter Brierley (ed), *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 5: The Future of the Church* (London: Christian Research 2005), 12.1-14.

¹³ George Barna, *Revolution* (Ventura CA: Barna Research 2005).

speedily by the establishment of 'Fresh Expressions' as a vehicle through which some genuinely missional creativity can be exercised.¹⁴ But the real test will come in the next five to ten years, as the system faces radical questions about the continuity of new and old ways of being church. There will be no single answer to that question, but the one thing that is now indisputable is that the inherited patterns of church life no longer have meaning for the majority of Western people. Debates about the legitimacy of change are increasingly irrelevant, because the church has already changed beyond recognition. In my lifetime, it has gone from being a vibrant spiritual community at the centre of civic life to being on the margins, from being an all-age community to being largely the preserve of old people, and from being a place of nurture and spiritual growth for children to being a prison from which they escape as soon as they are old enough to make their own choices. There are of course numerous local exceptions, but the future of the institution as a whole is clearly in jeopardy. The days when the church was the single most dominant force in Western society have long gone. Indeed, the pendulum may even have swung to the opposite end of the scale, with large numbers of people taking it for granted that the church has nothing at all to contribute to today's search for ontological meaning, and significant numbers expressing resentment whenever Christians do venture to voice an opinion on the things that matter.

Alpha and post-modernity

In placing the Alpha course alongside these four marks of practical post-modernity, it might look as if Alpha works quite well in spite of being avowedly not post-modern. Its foundationalist approach to Christian faith is certainly quite different from the more relational and experimental attitudes that I have identified as being central to the ways in which people do things today. In terms of the first mark, Alpha strives hard to avoid being categorized as a hangover from the past that no longer works in today's circumstance. All its advertising is designed to convince the public that not only does it work, but it represents something trendy. It is cool, or hip, to take the Alpha course – an image that is reinforced by the fact that a few celebrities have done so. The marketing suggests that, far from being attached to something outmoded and irrelevant (like the church), Alpha is at the cutting-edge of contemporary reflection on the meaning of life. The only connection with an institution is portrayed as more or less coincidental: the course may be 'coming to a church near you', but in reality it is more likely to be in a home or restaurant than in a place which looks like 'church'. If Alpha is church, it is certainly not church as our grandparents knew it. This image, however, is more than just marketing hype. For the course itself avoids having to address the question of the church's irrelevance by scarcely mentioning the church at all! Christian discipleship is portrayed as a solitary affair between an individual and God, and insofar as it might become communal it is the sort of community created on an *ad hoc* basis by those who happen to be a part of the course. The Alpha approach to all this could be defended (I can think of several arguments myself that might be advanced in its favour), but its consequences require further reflection both theologically and culturally. Theologically, in relation to whether one can be a Christian without being a part of a church: this is a big question not only in the UK, but worldwide, with the emergence of indigenous churches in 'the next christendom'

¹⁴ Church of England General Synod, *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing 2004). See <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk> (*Mission-Shaped Church* can also be downloaded from this site).

which either see no reason to have a connection with historic Christianity, or even reject the notion of ‘church’ altogether as being an imperialistic Western construct.¹⁵ And culturally, I wonder if it is really possible to engage in effective mission today without acknowledging some sense of accountability for all the past baggage of Christendom (not all of which was negative). Moreover, in relation to a theology of culture, I am not sure that ‘relevance’ is an appropriate category. Truly effective contextualization will not be about making the Gospel ‘relevant’, but about being incarnational within the culture.

When we consider the matter of different ways of doing things, I will single out just one issue: leadership. Alpha is highly rationalized, and though to some people the label of ‘McDonaldization’ is a bad thing, a by-word for oppressive structures, narrow-mindedness, and personal exploitation, Nicky Gumbel repeatedly cites the business model associated with this label as a way of justifying the imposition of a rigid form of control that insists that Alpha must conform to a particular scheme wherever it is delivered, regardless of the local cultural context.¹⁶ Leadership is very tightly controlled: interested non-Christians can only join as helpers, not as leaders. In spite of the fact that discussion and questioning appears to be encouraged, the reality is that Nicky Gumbel always has the right answer. Alpha tries to address this sort of criticism through its informal style, the emphasis on meals, time spent in groups, and going away for weekends. But even though everybody knows how to eat, and how to entertain their friends, local groups are given instructions about how to organize meals, not only in relation to ambience and the use of videos and talks, but also on the sort of food to serve and how to have ‘non-religious’ conversations! This can all become very manipulative, especially when it takes place in someone’s home, because guests are unlikely to offend their hosts by asking awkward questions. To use a communal model effectively, we need to trust the process, and Alpha (at least in its official formulations) fails to do this because all the outcomes need to be tidy. For many of today’s spiritual searchers,¹⁷ the way in which Alpha seeks to protect its product by insisting on rigorously regulated ways of doing things is likely to be regarded with some suspicion, and might well be interpreted as a lack of confidence in the power of the Gospel to look after itself.

A similar comment could be made with regard to the third strand in my presentation of popular post-modernity, that is the desire of people to be ‘spiritual’. In *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual?* I identified three major aspects to the way in which this term is commonly used today: lifestyle, discipline, and enthusiasm.¹⁸ If I am correct in this analysis, there are many aspects of the Alpha course that different individuals might regard as being, for them, a spiritual experience. For some, the meal itself might be a spiritual experience, while the discipline of Bible reading and study would be for others. But Alpha locates spirituality only at the ‘enthusiasm’ end of the spectrum, with its emphasis on a charismatic understanding of spiritual gifts.

¹⁵ See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the coming of global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002); Timothy C Tennent, ‘The Challenge of Churchless Christianity: an evangelical assessment’, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29/4 (2005), 171-177.

¹⁶ Though there is a nod in the direction of local adaptation, the Alpha copyright is as strident a statement as one could imagine, with its insistence that ‘This teaching should neither be departed from nor qualitatively altered ... [so as to avoid] ... causing confusion and uncertainty as to what the Alpha course really is.’ (original italics and emphasis).

¹⁷ Cf my *McDonaldization of the Church*, 69-73 for a definition of ‘spiritual searchers’.

¹⁸ *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual?*, 41-89.

Here again, in a post-modern context, this is an unhelpful restriction of the spiritual possibilities. Moreover, the way this is introduced is once again open to the claim of over-rationalization and unnecessary control, for it is expected to take place in the context of a 'Holy Spirit weekend', which comes somewhere between one third and halfway through the course, and is always after the talk on prayer and before the one on healing.¹⁹ This is a time at which leaders expect to get a sense of who will be 'in' and who will be 'out', depending on what happens in the 'ministry time' when people respond to the promptings of the Spirit through manifestations such as speaking in tongues or being 'slain in the spirit'. The idea that such experiences are the only way in which one can encounter the mystical is of course taken for granted in charismatic circles, which is itself odd for any group claiming to take Scripture seriously, where the emphasis is on the unpredictability of spiritual experience, and where the work of the Holy Spirit is at times bordering on the anarchic (e.g. John3:8). Alpha's understanding of spiritual experience strikes me as being at best limited, in cultural as well as in Biblical terms, which also means it will be limited in missional terms, because it will by definition be unable to recognize as genuinely spiritual encounters many of the things which today's spiritual searchers would value.

Finally, when we come to the culture of fearfulness which is one of the emerging traits of post-modern living, Alpha has very little to say. In this, however, it is neither better nor worse than the rest of the church. One of the most pressing needs of our day is for the articulation of a meaningful Christian eschatology that will connect with the situations we now face, global warming and environmental destruction as well as terrorism and all the other things that frighten us. Most of us (and I include myself in this) either have no significant eschatology at all, or else have taken over uncritically a half-baked collection of vague ideas from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Alpha is no exception.

Finally, in this section: does all this mean that Alpha is a good thing, or a bad thing? The way in which Alpha presents Christian faith undoubtedly deserves some critical theological scrutiny, and I will say more about that below. But in narrow missional terms, this discussion brings both good news and bad news. In *The McDonaldization of the Church*, I identified seven people groups that I believe the church needs to connect with in order to address the challenges we now face. This list has been widely acclaimed and adopted by others, and comprises the desperate poor, hedonists, traditionalists, spiritual searchers, corporate achievers, secularists, and the apathetic. Of these people groups, the ones who seem most consistently to be attracted to Alpha courses are the traditionalists and the corporate achievers, though I am sure that somebody somewhere is bound to have run an Alpha course for the desperate poor, and there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that in certain contexts (not least Holy Trinity Brompton itself) hedonists – particularly of the upper- or middle-class variety – can also find it attractive. Of course, not everyone within these groups has been to an Alpha course, and even the figures claimed by Alpha are but a drop in the ocean when compared with the population as a whole. But the one thing that unites these particular groups is that they tend to be cognitive, rational people who take in information through reading, discussion, and regimented thinking processes. That is certainly true of the traditionalists and the corporate achievers, and whilst that may

¹⁹ For a description and analysis of this weekend experience, see Stephen Hunt, *The Alpha Enterprise* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2004), 233-247.

not universally be true of working-class hedonists, it tends to be the case with their middle-class counterparts (who when they are not going to parties might well be corporate achievers). The point I am making is that Alpha, like many other things in church life, does not connect equally with all sections of society, and in particular has less appeal to spiritual searchers than it does for other groups. It may be objected that the relative success of Alpha in prisons challenges that, inasmuch as the prison population represents a microcosm of the whole of society. But I would argue that prison is a special case and that part of the reason for Alpha's success there is to be found in the fact that it fits rather neatly into the norm of what the authorities regard as an appropriate educational experience in that context. In any event, there is a significant number of people to whom Alpha does not appeal, and in view of the cultural trends identified here there is a strong case for suggesting that a presentation of the Gospel that was less prescriptive would stand a better chance of connecting with these other sections of the community.

Contextualization and Culture

Underlying all this is a key theological question regarding the way in which Gospel and culture relate to one another. Richard Niebuhr's classic work on this subject was published in the middle of the 20th century, and still has value as a way of introducing the discussion and identifying possible trends and tendencies.²⁰ But the intervening half century has seen developments in both practical theology and missiology which now require us to pose the question in a slightly different way. Gordon Lynch offers four ways in which the interaction of Gospel and culture can be understood:²¹

- The 'applicationist' approach, which begins by identifying core values from the Christian tradition (the Bible and so on) and then applying these as a way of critiquing the culture. This was in essence Niebuhr's own approach.
- The 'correlational' approach, exemplified by the work of a scholar like Paul Tillich,²² in which the concerns of contemporary culture may be used as a source of new questions to be addressed to the tradition, with the expectation that new answers might then be forthcoming.
- The 'revised correlational' approach, promoted by scholars such as Don Browning.²³ Like Tillich's approach, this one listens to the culture's questions, but goes much further, and whereas Tillich tended to assume that the tradition would always have the 'right' answers, Browning engages in a more open-ended dialogue in which Christians themselves might need to rethink their understandings.
- 'a *praxis* model of conversation' which Lynch finds in liberation theology, where faith and culture are both evaluated on the basis of their ability to promote right action.

The Alpha course clearly operates within the first of these categories, and everywhere assumes that straightforward answers to the culture's questions are to be found in the Bible, particularly on matters of personal morality, and especially sexual behaviour. There is nothing distinctive about that, as the same approach characterized Western educational systems for centuries: that the teacher (or some other authority) knew

²⁰ Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 50th anniversary edition (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2001), originally 1951.

²¹ Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005), 101-107.

²² Cf Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press 1959).

²³ Cf Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991).

best, and learning was merely a matter of transferring knowledge from teacher to students. With greater understanding of the human personality, as well as new insights into how we receive and process information, that sort of approach has been abandoned in most educational contexts, and personal experience and exploration are now central in subject areas as diverse as medicine, social science, languages, and the study of literature.²⁴ This shift from what we might call a creedal to a communal approach not only matches the preferences of today's spiritual searchers, but also has significant connections with the ways in which Jesus invited people to follow in faithful discipleship.

Spiritual searchers are individuals who are knowingly engaged in an intentional search for spiritual meaning and purpose in life. They embrace every demographic and socio-economic group, are as likely to be in their seventies or eighties as in their twenties and thirties, and can be found on council housing estates as well as among the British aristocracy. They are likely to be attracted to a highly diverse, if not eclectic, collection of spiritual activities that might include courses in self-improvement or a search for healing along with more obviously 'spiritual' pursuits such as contacting angels or reading tarot cards. The one thing they all have in common, though, is that their spiritual explorations are likely to begin with experience – their own and that of other people. At the same time, these people are not characterized by intellectual laziness, and often become serious students of the most arcane subjects when they seem to offer some potential for feeding their spiritual appetite. Not long after I had completed a PhD on Gnosticism, I was invited to a seminar by people like this, to tell them what I knew about Gnostic gospels. Some thirty or forty people turned up, and every one of them had learned enough Coptic to be able to make sense of the textual complexities of these documents. But they had not done that simply for the intellectual stimulus: they learned the language because they believed it would enhance their experience of using these texts for their own personal development. We are witnessing a similar phenomenon today with the extraordinary success of Dan Brown's novel, *The DaVinci Code*, and the interest in some obscure historical periods that it has sparked.

If we move from post-modern educationalists and today's spiritual searchers and go back to Jesus, we find some interesting parallels between his practice and what has just been described. For the shift from the creedal to the relational could also be characterized as a move back to Jesus, whose teaching style was likewise based on persons, not texts, and communicated through stories and shared experience rather than abstract philosophical propositions. I have often heard it said that the interactive communal aspects of Alpha are really good, but the packaging of dogma is more problematic. Alpha prides itself on getting 'back to basics', but it is arguably not basic enough. For what has really happened is the sacralizing of a particular cultural form of Christian belief that is firmly contextualized in the world of modernity, and ultimately is the Gospel as seen through the eyes of Christendom, which in turn owed much of its rationale to ancient Greek thinking and Roman organization.²⁵ Alpha is

²⁴ In light of my argument here, perhaps it is not too surprising that the teaching of theology remains largely resistant to experiential interactive learning and teaching.

²⁵ Cf Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster 2004); and for some contemporary theological/cultural implications, my article 'From Creeds to Burgers: religious control, spiritual search, and the future of the world', in James R Beckford & John Walliss, *Religion and Social Theory*

indeed a traditional message contained in trendy packaging, but the tradition that it perpetuates is not radical enough, in the true sense of that word, because it does not go back to the root of the tradition in Jesus. It does not require specialized knowledge of the gospels to see that Jesus' attitude to leadership, for example, was quite different from Alpha. Rather than filtering people out of leadership positions, he welcomed them in, and his open inclusiveness even in choosing his closest disciples was one of the secrets of his success as an evangelist. At the same time, and precisely because of this way of operation, he was able to challenge all those whom he met – whether they were religious types (who wanted their belief systems cut-and-dried in Alpha style), or others who were searching for meaning and healing in the midst of their own fractured and fragmented world.²⁶ Since Jesus still enjoys 'a good reputation' even among non-Christians,²⁷ his method of making disciples might just have something we could learn from. Jesus does feature in Alpha, of course, but largely as an object of belief. Arguably there is too much emphasis on doctrinal formulations, and too little on the model offered by the person of Jesus as depicted in the New Testament. Jesus' typical *modus operandi* was not to tell people 'how it is' (unless they specifically asked), but rather to ask questions and tell stories. Telling stories opens up spaces for reflection that not only inform and inspire, but also encourage other people to share their own stories. Storytelling with spiritual intentionality is a poetic, if not mystical, device, especially in the way Jesus used it. His stories communicated so well (and still do) because they point hearers to the truth that lies beyond the words, rather than suggesting that the truth can itself be encapsulated in words. In a world of so many competing ideas, the open-endedness of story theology has a significant advantage over highly structured and carefully defined propositional analysis. Not only is it intrinsically faithful to Jesus, but it also creates spaces for discussion that are safe as well as uniquely challenging. If I invite someone to believe in a set of abstract propositions, there is always going to be room for disagreement as to the precise nature of those propositions, their implications and ultimate meanings. If I invite another person to share my story, he or she might find it entirely alien to their own experience, but the one thing they cannot do is argue about its veracity, because it is my story and its authenticity derives not from its content but from who I am judged to be.²⁸ In practice, the delivery of most Alpha courses at local level tends to take account of that, and there is generally more sharing of personal stories than can seem to be the case when only the videos and books are reviewed. Few local leaders have the verbal skills of Nicky Gumbel, nor do they always know all the 'right' answers to the questions that may be asked. Most ordinary Christians have their own questions, and are nothing like as certain about it all as Alpha would like them to be. Indeed, some would say that, to be real at all, faith must always be the other side of the coin of doubt, and the true source of Alpha's apparent success may well be found more in the honest vulnerability of such people than in all the glossy marketing and presentation.

There is one further question regarding Gospel and culture that takes us back to our starting point in comparing Alpha with the emerging church. As was noted above,

(Aldershot: Ashgate 2006), also in George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: the Reader* 2nd ed (Thousand Oaks: Sage 2006).

²⁶ Cf Richard V Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999).

²⁷ Nick Spencer, *Beyond the Fringe: Researching a Spiritual Age* (Calver: Cliff College Publishing 2005), 142.

²⁸ For more on this, see *McDonaldization of the Church*, 133-154.

Alpha has very little to say about the church, yet there is an underlying assumption that the church (through its use of the Bible) is actually the sole repository of the divine. No doubt some Alpha devotees would wish to qualify that, but however Alpha's understanding of the relationship between Gospel and culture be defined, it clearly stands in a very different place from this statement made by one of Britain's most successful emerging churches:

We believe that God is already in the world and working in the world. We recognise God's indefinable presence in music, film, arts and other key areas of contemporary culture. We wish to affirm and enjoy the parts of our culture that give a voice to one of the many voices of God and challenge any areas that deafen the call of God and hence constrain human freedom. Experience is vital and experience defines us. We aim to provide an environment in which people can experience 'the other'. In which the vastness of God can be wondered at whilst reflecting on the paradox of the human who was God, Jesus.²⁹

One of the most significant missiological insights of the 20th century was the articulation of the concept of the *missio Dei*, the realization that mission is the work of God and not of the church or of individual believers. It follows from this that God must already – and continuously – be at work in the world, and therefore we can expect to meet God in the context of everyday life. The question here is about Biblical faithfulness as well as cultural relevance. For this sort of expression of the relationship between Gospel and culture is based not on wishful thinking, but on a serious exegesis of Genesis 1:26-27, where people – by virtue of being in existence, as humans – are described as made 'in the image of God'. Taking that seriously, and combining it with missiological reflection on the *missio Dei*, leads to a view of culture and of human nature that challenges much that is taken for granted in the Alpha course, not least its dualistic insistence on some absolute disconnection between human nature and divinity, and between the Gospel and the culture. It may be that this dualistic worldview is so deeply embedded within the charismatic mindset that has given birth to Alpha that it would not be possible to address this without radically changing the shape of the entire enterprise. But if the Gospel cannot be authentically contextualized within the culture of post-modernity (however we define or understand it), then the future of Christianity in the West looks even more bleak than we think. And the essay question with which we started this? Answers on a postcard please ... time allowed, ten years.

²⁹ <http://www.sanctus1.co.uk/howeare.php>