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NOEL HEATHER

Enjoying Your Worship Experience: Consumerist Religious Discourse in the Late 1990s

Readers of *Anvil* might be expected to be attentive to the words of Scripture, but how attentive are we to the words that we use around the words of Scripture? E. M. Forster's dictum 'Only connect', if taken too much to heart, may leave the contemporary church heavily indebted to language that expresses values and commitments very much at variance with the faith. We might think, warns Noel Heather, that we left the pick'n mix of postmodernity at the church entrance, but its traces are all too apparent in the culture of contemporary Evangelicalism.

Feeling good down at Safeway's sculptures

Dare I say that I like modern supermarkets, or some of them at least? Not something to admit, perhaps; like confessing you were actually watching television last night. But I find many supermarkets really quite enjoyable aesthetically – almost religiously, though not quite. The sort of feeling you can get from a good cathedral. Perhaps I *should* get out more.

We all know the routine in these places, of course, but they really have got it together in the last few years. The large ones are my favourite. Row after row of high, majestic, pyramidal gondolas: quite a beautiful shape. And 'gondolas'. Where else on a rainy British high street can you find even a mildly exotic word in actual use?

Then there's the strategically-designed check-out. The latest all-in-one check-outs form a fractured triangle sculpture. And they're spaced at a soothingly ample distance from each other, as well as being beautifully low for the convenience of customer and staff.

With the possibility of a hot drink in the coffee shop afterwards, 10.30 on a crowded Saturday morning is almost transformed into happy hour. And then there's the famous trick of piping in the smell of hot bread (the incense of this modern cathedral), and the music too. Ah, well, not everything is perfect then, but obviously I'm still hooked.

Naturally many people's experience of even my favourite supermarket – the one I have in mind here – would be unrecognisable from this description. For the average customer the supermarket visit is of course much more likely to be felt as a succession of uninspiring, mildly stressful choices and transfers up to the final car dump. (Not to mention keeping an eye on the kids.) Both average customer and I are in the same environment but our perceptions are probably vastly different. This is partly because I only go to this supermarket on holiday when visiting relatives far from home and work, and there's rarely any heads-down-to-find-the-horse-radish-soup when on vacation.

Let me stop for a moment. If this was a piece on consumerism and postmodernism without the tonic water I'd probably now launch into something about mall culture. You know the sort of thing, how we're building an ersatz virtual space as a plastic alternative to the conventional lifeworld. Making a perfect copy to be found in every high street. Embracing the everyday. Existential but not angst-ridden.

I'll try to get to some dilute postmodernism in a minute; but what strikes me on holiday is how similar my supermarket experiences are to some of my religious ones. It's not really about how the bread aroma reminds me of incense. Actually I'm not that kind of Christian. I'm thinking more of the church I go to on holiday.

Norwegian wood

The place I attend – a classic mid-stream *now* church – is as carefully planned and as pleasant to visit as the supermarket. From the modern wood to the way they often have women at least giving the notices (it's a conservative area), I like it all. They even sometimes have the elderly out the front. Not to mention the worship songs tactfully laced with the occasional taste of Wesley and even Newton (but then there is the cross-party appeal of *Amazing Grace*).

The multi-purpose building is beautifully modern and used for secular concerts on summer evenings – bridging the gap to the local community. Of course there's the large estate just down the road, but I wouldn't pretend, sniffily, that I have any special answers there. However what intrigued me on my last visit was the recent addition to the church news sheet:

We hope you enjoy your worship experience with us this morning.

I'd better come clean here. Basically I came over a bit atavistic at this – that ancestral stuff. But I'm not harking back to the bread aroma and the incense again. No – the fact is there have been a few sales people in the family, and heeding my genes I instinctively warm to this wishing folk a pleasant worship experience. (And do call again y'all.) I can't help it; though I must say I also feel rather amused at the same time.

I've just enjoyed my supermarket experience the day before. Now, on Sunday morning, I'm feeling what appears, rather incongruously, to be a similar kind of consumerist pleasure. But it's still only 10.25. I lean back into my padded seat and relax gently to the haunting, tripping step of the music group's flute.¹ My mind drifts back to my work and I switch to a more ruminative, reflective mode.

Discourse analysis

I've recently been looking at postmodernist, socially-focused views of discourse (in this sense stretches of text of just about any kind). Because of my background I feel most comfortable with discourse analysis which is textually-oriented: ie mainly concerned with issues such as genre, the coherence of ideas, the cohesion of language and structure, and the implications within and between texts.

When you read up about discourse it's all too easy to slip on the postmodernist headset. You become suspicious (*what does this phrase really say about power relations and implicit oppression?*). You problematize (*does the cyborg discourse suggest a fresh feminist subject position or a reaffirmation of the old* [the title of an essay I've recently marked]?). You relativize of course (famously: *freedom fighter or terrorist?*). Well, this kind of approach can be – and often is – taken far too far, but in moderation it may not always be too bad a thing; some of the tools can be quite helpful even if the worldview is flawed. And it really *is* flawed. You don't *have* to go with the stream past the introductory sections of the *Post-evangelical*.

These days theorists talk quite a lot about language and the commodification of knowledge. We are said to be as much consumers of information as we are now supposed to be customers rather than passengers on trains. Perhaps I should problematize my situation in this padded church chair.

Am I a consumer of a religious commodity as much as a worshipper here on Sunday morning? I must say I was very struck by what an Anglo-Catholic theologian said to me, 'These days the priest might as well bow to the congregation rather than to the altar.'

As I say, some of the contemporary views on how to look at this kind of issue can be useful, as long as one doesn't become tainted by the worldview. The general approach can help to identify deep structure principles of change which seem to be at work.

From 10.30 Divine Service to...

Take what it says further down the news sheet this morning: *10.30 Family Service*. Should I problematize and relativize? Many would take this notice as a routine flagging of the type of clientele expected. Others would see it as an expression of what the local church is. What is clear from my recent research is that, as far as the underlying assumptions are concerned, the mid-to-late 1990s are a watershed time for this kind of labelling. (For example, the advance of the Family Service movement towards the centre of evangelical practice has been particularly noticeable in the last couple of years or so.)

To focus closer on this example, among my collection of intriguing church notices is this not uncommon version of the notice: *10.30 Family Service [Creche Facilities]*. A linguist might see this as a *marked* as opposed to an *unmarked* version

1 Why has every church singing group I've seen during my research included a young woman in a red dress?

of the original. Some people would take the two main elements separately and see the notice as informational and non-problematic. Others, in more suspicious mode, would see the final, qualifying section as subverting (there's that postmodernist language again) a theological concept. From this stance '[Creche Facilities]' overturns the theological notion of *church family* through the strong domestic-self associations. This then reveals the lifeworld 'real' significance of the notice.

Few churches seem to have a *10.30 Singles' Service [Social Facilities]* or an *Elderly Persons' Service [Transport Facilities]*. I suspect it's not just a question of there not being a market for these services. The power and status of those in early mid-life may well also play a determining role. The influence of this section of the worshipping public is often very evident – though in one case I saw recently the opposite appeared to be true in a way which seemed quite significant. Attending a county-wide ecumenical conference, I couldn't help noticing that of the 80-90 delegates sent by their churches, only one was obviously under 40. And he, it transpired, was single. Like the snows of yesteryear, the early middle-lifers (EMLs) seemed to have gone; was their absence partly due to the fact that this ecumenical meeting focused on the community of the church family rather than that of the domestic unit?

Another factor in the foregrounding of the concerns of EMLs reflects the way many churches appear to be still osmotically absorbing post-80s consumerist values. These can encourage EMLs to commodify church matters, paralleling the way marketing culture leads young professionals to commodify the products or services they sell in their working lives – whether in the private or the public sectors these days.² This leaching of consumerese into church-speak seems to be occurring in a number of different ways in the 'worship experience' church cited above (which, as I say, I nonetheless much enjoy visiting). For example, recently the person giving the opening announcements referred not just to the fact that children could leave at half-time for 'a multi-media presentation'; it was described, rather, as 'an *exciting* multi-media presentation.' Of such little touches are we made. Also, members of this fellowship are to be applauded for setting up an excellent church web site on the Internet. However, the announcement of this new venture in the local (secular) paper contained a strong consumerist message. Attached to the names of the four EMLs who set up the site were their secular job titles. All were said to be head of something. To adopt a feature-theory type approach (e.g. a 'girl' is defined as '+ female + young'), the use of 'head' four times in this short article marks – and advertises – the church as being '+ aspirational.' So: Christians aren't losers, and we here are a successful organisation, er, (sic) church; surely people like you would be happy to join us? One wonders how the bruised reeds in the local estate would react to this.

Anyone doubting the power of the mind to pick up and extrapolate from apparently tiny features of language might, for example, try studying a (so-called)

2 Cf mission statements, and the ubiquitous use of 'experience': e.g. currently cycle hire in the New Forest is marketed as offering a 'Cycling Experience'.

exotic language. My Cherokee teacher, an English linguist, commented that it was really quite unbelievable that a Cherokee child learns this language. After ten, humbling weeks of study I could see what he meant. The fact that a child can pick up such a complex language from just listening to other speakers is remarkable, yet of course this happens routinely as with the learning of any native language. Although the language learning powers we enjoy in early life atrophy considerably, we still retain impressive model-constructing abilities which can be influenced by the tiniest of language suggestions. I groaned inwardly in another – quite large – church a few months ago when the normally very aware leader introduced his minister son-in-law by saying that the latter had just been appointed to a ‘large church in XXX City’. Once more the ‘+ aspirational’ cultural DNA has been paraded and affirmed as OK – sadly on this occasion in the hearing of at least 400 pairs of ears.

This suspiciously-minded approach to language analysis may seem a little too grim-faced until you get into the way of it. After all, surely we shouldn't have too many scruples? (Admittedly a good point, as anyone involved in, for example, mission abroad is likely to agree.) Don't we need to get the people into the church – especially the fast-disappearing youth – so what's wrong with a little culturally-relevant consumerese? The thing is, we need to be constantly aware that we all float on a sea of messages by which we are constantly being conditioned, and which are leading us very firmly in certain directions. Church notices can of course be a very powerful medium in this respect, but often people are just too busy to be aware of the constraining forces evoked and perpetuated by the power of words. Strong messages are frequently contained in the deceptively significant codes within alternative notices such as *Everybody Welcome/Everybody Always Welcome/Everybody Very Welcome/Most Warmly Welcomed*. ‘Always’ can be a killer (too vague: we haven't got a grip on this yet); whilst ‘Very/Most’ (we're making an effort) may well indicate the sentiment is genuine.

My favourite notice (linguistically speaking), however, is one I saw outside a seaside church in August:

Sunday 8 pm A Hymn Sing-A-Long.

This contains strong discursual and postmodernist messages. *Genre*: the end-of-the-pier show. *Intertextuality/popular culture*: Max Bygraves (Singalongamax). *Signifiers*: at least semi-detached from their *signifieds* (words more important than their sense/reference). *Experience*: here and now. *Ephemerality*: on.

Returning to the Family Service issue, I have rarely discussed this topic in a meeting containing single Christians without getting a very lively response. They, of course, know all about the supermarket family packs which express how society conveys its image of normality – the same way a Family Service notice does in church.

Cultural viruses and the language-identity loop

Family packs and family services are part of the consumerist discourse of today. Such phrases are information (and cultural) viruses which pass down and maintain what we see society as. Churches are surely primarily places where the individual joins with other believers to worship God. This perspective can be lost if we foreground particular social groupings however fundamental they are – and by 2001 44% of British adults will be single. (The more PC ‘All Age Service’ is clearly at least an improvement.)

What particularly concerns me in the church context is that the Family Service notice says ‘essentially, see each other in social terms’.³ In fact there is a constant language-identity loop: the language chosen both expresses and re-affirms what we are. No wonder single people respond energetically to this issue – they get the fallout.

In the long term this whole socially normalising trend may be seen as de-spiritualising, even infantilising. It’s cute, but too relaxing, I suspect, for the (excuse me) worship environment. We ought to think sometimes at least of Elijah on Mount Carmel.

Infantilising may in fact perhaps be the key concept. Consumerist language is the language of common denominators, and that clustered around the level of the child is about as universal as it gets. And is there something of the *lowest* common denominator in all this – as (sometimes) in the sound-bite sermon?

Commitment discourse

Sunday 6.30pm A Short Act of Worship. There’s another cultural virus from a different church. It’s either a pragmatic marketing device or – in the eyes of prescriptivists – a subtle reflection of the idea that a lower level of commitment is now accepted than in the past. We certainly cannot afford to avoid engaging with real people where they are. Yet I wonder whether a cultural virus such as this may in fact have a profound impact on the church’s ecology. Entering the information chain, in the long run it may well have a transforming effect on mind sets which will significantly affect development and progress.

Back to the future

I often have a strong sense of *déjà vu* when thinking about the way postmodern consumerist viewpoints affect our mental DNA. Allow me to explain. In tandem with my current work in computing and cyberculture I’ve recently finished a study involving a long-term literary interest: Renaissance Christian Neo-platonism and its effects on religious poetry of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries.

3 Peace or no peace, should more churches be encouraging folk to see their pew-neighbour as a spiritual colleague (or, biblically speaking, a fellow soldier) rather than as somebody like them – or not like them – domestically or socially? Ruth Giedhill, the Times religious correspondent, who has

visited hundreds of churches, says that it is only very rarely that her pew-neighbour in a ‘strange church’ says hello. On one occasion when she was greeted in these circumstances she was so surprised she was unable to think of a reply (Times, 26 April, 1997).

Neo-platonism was in some ways the postmodern theory of its day. It certainly helped to weaken the medieval worldview. But its prestige was so great that many Christians went overboard trying to reconcile the new trendy philosophies with their religious beliefs.

I'm especially interested in Du Bartas – perhaps the most popular non-theological writer of the age in Europe (and also the American colonies).⁴ His critique of the old medieval master narratives is in crucial ways devastating – as well as refreshingly humorous. However, despite being a moderate-minded Huguenot and a devout believer, he nevertheless embraced Neo-platonism with energy. And the results at this distance in time seem hardly credible.

For example, encouraged by the platonically-inspired notion of the music of the spheres, Du Bartas went along with current views on not just musical healing, but also musical propitiation. Like many Huguenots he believed that just as David's music calmed Saul, so too hymn singing could have an analogous effect on God. Hymn singing could help quell divine anger in a quasi-physical way. Du Bartas also tried to Christianize astrology: David slaying the Great Bear. Fortunately this didn't catch on or we might be turning to the back of *The Christian* for astrological advice today. Perhaps it's a little more New Age than postmodern *per se*, but the parallel with how we may react to extra-Christian influences in our day is still worth thinking about.

On a basic personal level there's also a worrying corollary to the model-altering effects of taking on board postmodernism: the problem of the impact the latter can have simply on mind storage and focus. The tendency may be for the enveloping connotations of postmodernism, cuckoo-like, insidiously to push out biblical thinking. (In carrying out my current research I can't help but notice how even nodding in the direction of scripture is losing its street credibility in some Christian quarters.)

The public and private mix of consumption

In the language-identity loop, to a considerable extent what we say/read/hear makes us what we are, and vice versa. If we don't refer to/read/hear scripture we become less scripturally-minded. At the same time we risk being transformed by the renewing of our minds in a way which blurs the distinction between supermarket and church. This process is itself in turn connected with a broader trend of blurring between public and private. The picture is a familiar one. The relatives of the dead appear on our screens with their private grief immediately after the tragedy. And newspapers have of course long narrowed the distinction between public and private language – Wotcha/Gotcha/Up Yours Delors.

Instant RAM on our computer screens and immediate sensation on our TVs. One also sees things like worship songs criticised by the conservative-minded in similar terms. I understand why they may use terms such as 'hedonist'. I'm tempted

4 See my forthcoming monograph: *Du Bartas and Milton's 'No Middle Flight': a Study in Humorous Ambivalence*, Edwin Mellen Press.

to go along with this, but I'm not sure I'd go that far yet. Consumerist, perhaps, is a safer word for now. I suspect the jury is still out for the long term effects; we're still in the transitional stages.

In the meantime there's the spectrum of on-line attractions which contribute to the feel-good factor which my culture tells me I have a right to now. Though hopefully not a hedonist I've at least been conditioned to become a consumer who seeks satisfaction. I am appealed to, mentally cosseted, and have my wishes fulfilled. This came home to me the other day in reverse video when I saw one of the most refreshing advertisements I've encountered for a long time.

The ultimate advert

Behind a simple glass screen outside a local sheltered housing project was an A-4 sheet of paper with the legend:

Tuesday 2.30

Dancing to Records

There were no inducements, no pictures, just the information. Though I wouldn't be making the Tuesday date, I wondered how long it was since I'd seen a notice which didn't address me in consumer-speak. This advertisement is a world away from the one recently displayed in the hairdresser's window round the corner (and another favourite for different [linguistic!] reasons):

Genuine and Natural-Looking Nail Extensions Available Here Now.

Conditioned by advertising and packaging, I'm becoming a consumer of worship songs and of M & S cooked chicken. They both give me instant gratification.

Consumer goes home

The church service has started now. Rather like yesterday morning after check-out, at 12 noon I'll have coffee and chat in the new hall and be wished a nice day – or visit – as I leave. At least I don't have the hassle of pushing the trolley back to the car and getting my pound coin back. But I still have an uneasy feeling that there may be something in a theory of mine: that at any time, and often in very subtle ways, one is either being talked further into, or further out of one's religion.⁵

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5 For further reading see: Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Polity Press 1996; Cushla Kapitzke, *Literacy and Religion*, John Benjamins 1995.