Living into Tomorrow's Country: Post-modernism and Christian Education

Feature

by
Brian Russell

Remembering... society in Britain as a single, secure whole

Many in Britain today speak warmly of the society they used to know as a single, secure whole. The picture of one unit is not necessarily romantic; speakers acknowledge that post-1950 Britain was structured, classified, a rather rigid return to pre-1939 patterns, rather than a dramatic and sustained step forward. But the familiar arrangements of well-established expectations seem to represent a certain safety. I'm not at all sure that it was really like this, but many of the older generations act now out of that assumed 'memory' as an operating norm by which to measure current trends and patterns.

'Remembered British society' might be pictured like a single apple with a central core, or like a single magnet that draws all things into itself:

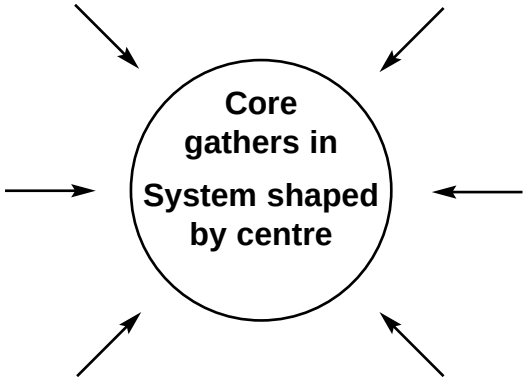

Diagram 1

Yesterday's society would, then, be characterized by:

- an agreed basis for objective judgements based on common criteria and generally accepted values. This would provide some basis for a society to arrive at deciding what constituted valid views and actions. Not everyone might believe or do what was valid, but they would agree that, in principle, there were beliefs and actions that belonged properly to the common life of society.

- trust placed in experts who were viewed as skilled professionals capable of making impartial decisions. Experts could guide and sustain this single unitary system, and were the agents by which the shaping was achieved. For example, civil servants would be trusted to rise above vested interests, including their own personal views, to advise courses of action that were in the common interests of the nation. Indeed, Church leaders could be looked to to speak for the common good, even when this ran against the particular needs of the Church. Locally, church leaders might be seen as people who could help to bring about reconciliation amongst those who differed or disagreed, and so they could be part of how the local community was held together.

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- a strong wish or need to find one's place as someone who belonged to this single society, in whatever stratum was possible. For example, long-standing British Christians, whose ethnic origins were as people born in the Caribbean or Asia, speak of the Commonwealth and of Britain as if it was the circle in diagram 1. They were to be drawn to Britain as the core or centre that had helped shape the culture of the Empire and Commonwealth. Their hope was that they might conform and so belong. This has given rise to the tension between, on the one hand, a wish to be unobtrusive, as people who hide their differences so that they can belong, and, on the other hand, the awareness that this is assimilation rather than a true valuing of their uniqueness.

This circle might also be a model for how institutions in society were viewed. For example, the Church would be a strong, well-defined institution, with a central set of norms, that sought to draw into itself the life of individual Christians and individual

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worshipping communities. There would be quite a strong sense of duty and obligation to attend, even when particular services of worship or social events were not to the particular liking of an individual. There would be a strong feeling that 'we must support the institution' and 'we must show we are part of the whole'. In a very specific way, someone might speak against an event taking place as a member of a church committee, but still come to it when, against their opinion, it was decided that the event should go ahead.

This model might also be seen as a picture of right Christian believing. There would be a strong central core of corporately agreed and authoritatively held Christian belief. This is the substance that should be conveyed in church-based education for children and young people.

Of course, much fragmentation was already taking place in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For some, the model was crumbling at the edges. For others, the erosion was more far-reaching.

What has changed: a range of slightly connected trends, not new culture

The changes taking place, which can be gathered together under the title of post-modernism, are difficult to define and talk about precisely because they seem to dissolve when we train in hard upon them.

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Many of the features have been building up momentum for some years. Perhaps what is new in the present is the force and combination of the features and trends. The word post-modern suggests that something radically new is taking place, for which we have only very limited help from past landmarks and past ways of handling decisions in society. The post-modern culture of today might be pictured rather like the core of a nuclear source of energy that begins to melt down.

We now have a picture which is moving outwards increasingly from the old centre and dispersing into fragments.

In comparison with the first diagram, some fundamental shifts emerge:

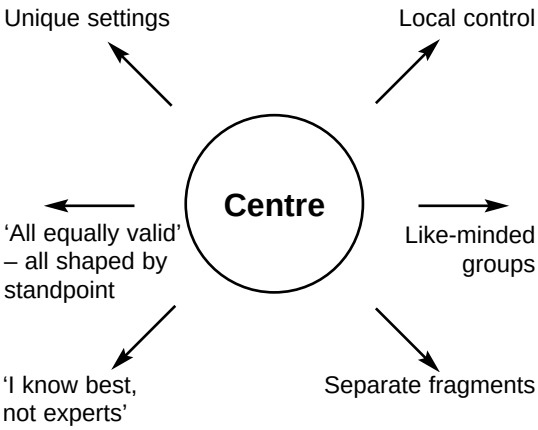

Diagram 2

- This map acknowledges different values, a range of viewpoints and a variety of starting-points. In this model the individual is primary, and one has scope to determine one's own beliefs, values, style of life and frame of reference. This has an element of liberation: freedom to explore, to discover and to arrive at a personal certainty. Truth proved on your own pulses can shape your life. But another reading of this map could be that the separate outer points, increasingly expanding outwards, are more like satellites that have been put up into space but which have then developed their own life and momentum, and broken free of any system.

- There is a limited basis for agreement on decisions. There is much less possibility for consensus because there is less agreement about the criteria for deciding problems and about the values that should be given weight in any decision-making. It is like a sporting game based on competition, where no-one is clear any longer about how to referee, because to referee requires some agreed norms, rules and customs. This map places great onus on the capacity to communicate and debate across the range of differences, but it is precisely this capacity that has become problematic.

- In this map, there is very little structure to be found 'in the middle' between the outer or local points and the centre. We can see benefits: the local is in a better position to take decisions, to appraise the needs that are to be met, and to set particular targets. But there is also a cost. The relative lack of middle levels makes it difficult to mediate, to reconcile, to balance and collaborate between the centre and the local and between local centres of decision.

- This all amounts to a loss of overall coherence, a felt loss of the sense of overall belonging, both in society and in the Church. Society and Church seem to exist for the individual to harness and adapt to their own purposes.

All the different factors listed in the diagram are interrelated, and the map can be entered at any point and any path followed to connect the different factors together.

Separate fragments

On the positive side, this can involve a release of energy, scope, movement and personal choice. The individual need not feel bound to accept a whole value or belief system as given. Each can work out what has meaning for them, taking and adapting elements that chime in with their personal experience and spiritual journey. For example, there is less concern to look for the authority of an expert in Bible study. There is much less interest in what a text was intended to mean, and the interest and energy arise when the text is seen to illuminate or provide clues and pointers for the interpretation of my own experience. The meaning for the text begins to become the meaning it holds for me.

Grace Davie indicates that believing does not necessarily lead to a sense of attachment or belonging to an institution. Individuals live in their own fragments. Alongside those who choose to belong to the institutional church, there are large numbers of people who can be described as spiritually alive and searching but who choose to remain on the margins of religious bodies and organizations. Part of mission is to see how to contact, feed and nurture faith in these fragments, without necessarily envisaging a return to institutional belonging as characteristic of British religion.

'I know best, not experts'

The individual is recovering personal authority. There is a distrust in the traditional expert and an unwillingness to allow knowledge to be concentrated in the hands of a few. If knowledge is power, there is now a democratic concern to disperse knowledge so that there can be more participation in power. In church terms, we increasingly see laity seeking and even demanding opportunities to learn and to know about the Christian faith. With this goes a certain loss of status and authoritativeness for church leaders. There is a shift in the role of church leaders more towards roles of nurturing the faith of others by providing opportunities to grow and to take responsibility. It is also more difficult for church leaders to speak on behalf of others. There is a natural tendency for the individual to say that one speaks for oneself. This makes any kind of community role or representative ministry much harder to offer at a time when, in view of the whole map, there is a high premium on the role of good communicators who can hold together diversity in a community or gathering of people.

'All views are equally valid', as all are shaped by a standpoint

This factor helps to explain the loss of confidence in the expert; the expert is now seen to be speaking from the point of view of his or her own vested interests. There is now much less confidence in the possibility of rising above vested interests and prejudice. The danger in society is that there is competition between different vested interests with little scope for mediation and for arriving at joint decisions.

There is a positive side for church education. Individual Christians, especially newer churchgoers, are increasingly asking to learn about their faith so as to arrive at an understanding of their standpoint. This means that, whatever content from the Christian tradition needs to be handed on, at the very least it needs to be handled through a sensitive educational process that begins with the starting-point of the learner. It also means that learning has to be made attractive. Current culture places a premium on imaginative forms of communication that help ideas and texts to come alive for the experience of the learner.

This factor also explains some of the difficulties the Church has in ministering to society. It is much harder for the Church to adopt a challenging or prophetic role. The tendency is to greet such proclamations with the response, 'You would say that, wouldn't you?', meaning that the Church is seen to have its own vested interests. So, if the Church speaks out on affordable housing, the Church is then asked how it is putting its own resources of money and land into creating affordable housing. The Church must be a good illustration of what it teaches, a working example of the truth to which it points.

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Unique settings

Along with the sense that each person's own experience is particular and unique goes the outlook that each local setting has a unique history, a particular story, and therefore must arrive at its own solutions and strategies. This has increasing force when those who live in a particular setting have less experience of alternative settings. The strength is that decisions are owned due to participation and therefore worked for locally. The danger is that it is hard to arrive at any kind of shared approaches, strategies or policies. There is a great need to see how what works well in one setting might be adapted for another setting. This challenges how a ministry of oversight and overall cohesion in a church, as a linking together of local unique churches, can be attempted.

The positive impact of this factor can be seen in attempts to create a 'local theology'

Local control

This runs closely with the previous factor: 'We have local control in this unique setting, and we can assure you that your plan won't work here!' There is also a fit with individualism, because a collection of individuals can believe that they are acting corporately when they are in fact espousing a kind of collective individualism.

Worship and social life become distinct and different gatherings to serve the needs of those particular sub-groups

For example, central government determines the basic pattern of curriculum and funding; the autonomous local school must shape its life within this; and there is increasingly less of a role for any intermediary levels of influence or decision. The danger is that the school becomes a value system designed by its governors and parents, meeting a set of particular needs, rather than addressing a range of local educational needs. Again, initiatives for community and urban regeneration are often seen to be directed from the centre to the very local.

One of the overall issues which emerge for Christian education is – Who is this learning for?

The positive impact of this factor can be seen in attempts to create a 'local theology', that is an account of the Christian faith that carries weight and carries forward Christian life in a particular place. The questions are around how this local theology can be fed and tested against wider understandings. It needs to be more than a theological voicing of shared vested interests. This is where traditional language about the Catholic nature of the Church is important, because this provides some framework for critical thinking and challenge.

Like-minded groups

The individual feels most comfortable with those who share a similar set of experiences, style of life and values. This can mean that individuals have less contact with those who hold different views. The strength of identity that arises from a sharing of values and experiences can be weakened because there is less scope for discussion and awareness of different approaches.

The local church may become a loose collection of different like-minded groups. There may be less of a sense of obligation and loyalty to attend all events. The church might be seen to be offering a menu of varied items which the church committees will agree to because each is important to one sub-group or another. Those who agree to an event, but do not see it as significant for them personally, will not feel a sense of obligation to attend: 'It should happen, but don't expect me to come.' So worship and social life become distinct and different gatherings to serve the needs of those particular sub-groups. For example, worship can become different occasions suited to different groups, rather than a range of experiences within one service of worship that feeds across the whole range of worshippers so that each gains from different aspects of the worship at different levels.

Implications for Christian education

One of the overall issues which emerge for Christian education is – Who is this learning for? Individuals who want to learn about their faith will ask for opportunities to be created for this to happen. Is the learning for them? Out of this learning and development, individuals may begin to offer their gifts in the local church. Is this learning to benefit the local church? Out of this growth may come individuals who can contribute more widely to the life of the church. Is this education for the sake of the whole church? Dealing with the whole range of these questions helps to decide what should be the content and method of the learning and who should pay for it.

Ready for Tomorrow: prospects for living in a post-modern culture

We can be encouraged to look for alternatives, using what is helpful, in current trends. I offer one suggested model – the 'planetary system'.