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# House-hunting and Home-coming: Discovering 'Consecrated Cathedral Space'

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What does it mean to consecrate a building? In simple terms, the word 'consecrate' means to "make holy together" – a public act that is an external validation of a deep and profound inner spiritual meaning. The outside, if you like, recognising the inside, and what is spiritual and holy about that specific interior space. The cross on the outside of this cathedral, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, therefore, could hardly be more apposite. This is the cross for the world; and consecration is the public act of recognising that the outward sign of salvation is held within these fine walls and exquisite glass.

We do well to remember that the ministry of Jesus was very much about outsiders and insiders. Jesus befriended the outsiders. The insiders, he turned to the outward. Jesus rarely ministered or healed in religious buildings. He was not a synagogue planter or grower of churches. What Jesus did with space was to abide in it; make his home and occupation amongst us, so that we might make our home and dwell with him for eternity. Jesus, the gospel of John tells us, abided with us, so we might abide with him for eternity. So our faith homes are 'abodes'; places where we meet God, and where those places speak of God's eternal welcome to humanity.

In this pilgrimage, we are all strangers. As indeed Jesus was to many of those who met him. Think of the Road to Emmaus story in Luke's gospel. It ends in a home, but it pivots on 'strangers'. "Are you the only 'parishioner' (or stranger) that does not know what has happened to Jesus of Nazareth?" ask the dumfounded disciples, addressing their question to the mysterious stranger that walks with them. But the stranger responds, and explains what the gospel is. Before, of course, coming home for a meal with them. It is here, in faith-home, that Jesus is revealed. And it is a faith-home that we look forward to consecrating later this year. Thanks be to God.

So here we are in this remarkable Cathedral, dedicated to the Holy Trinity. It is a medley of styles; an alloy of structure; a diversity of spaces. The building is a testimony to the many hands that make history, and build to the present – and yet point to the future. The beautiful glass; the authenticity of the stone and the timber, and the styling of the chapels, altars and different spaces send powerful and profound messages about diversity and unity, plurality and simplicity. So let me offer a telling analogy from a theologian that might help us understand what this Cathedral is doing. The analogy is though, a good 'fit' for the spirituality that I often articulate for Anglicanism and the shaping of public life: complex, contrary, encompassing – yet incomplete, and always pointing beyond itself to something other and higher. The analogy likens our faith to a very familiar 'complex space' – such as a great Cathedral:

> 'One walks through such a building conscious of continually unfolding vistas. It is a whole, yet it cannot be seen as a whole. Nor, though it is handed down to us by the past, is it every completely finished. New spaces expressing new needs, new altars representing a multiplicity of concerns and commitments, new decorative details celebrating new ideas and discoveries, can go on being added. It is also constantly decaying and constantly being rebuilt. It can represent both diversity, and the imperfection of incompleteness, without compromising its unity or confusing its purpose. A cathedral points beyond itself. It is not definable like a city, but open to all. Its verticality is a reminder that it is not just about human beings and human relationships. It provides a complex space which can bring home to us where, as transitory, contradictory, sinful and yet ultimately hopeful and receptive human beings, we really stand before God'[1]

Here, I make some opening observations. This Cathedral is something to this city. It is a Big Tent; God's Marquee. It is a larger space for giving permission for encounters between strangers and neighbours, friends and foreigners, God, humanity and creation. Cathedrals create the possibility of a place where there can be poetry and silence; lament and hope; blessing and condemnation; trespassing and convening. These spaces, in other words, make allowances for the Kingdom of God to become a reality in the midst of the everyday. Cathedrals, as 'archetypal' churches, are meant to be households of faith, providing shelter and inclusion for all. And deep within the 'DNA' of Anglican polity and identity, wherever it is encountered in the world, there is a disposition towards comprehensiveness, breadth and inclusion. The Anglican vision of the church is first and foremost, a blueprint for the ordering of society. Anglican polity is, first and foremost, a social vision that has ecclesial consequences. It is not (merely) an ecclesiastical polity with accidental social consequences.[2]

So I seek to aid the revival of Anglican ecclesiology, theology and self-understanding, by re-setting contemporary Anglican thought and practice within a broader social and intellectual framework. I take my cue from Richard Hooker, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, T. S. Eliot, Daniel W. Hardy and others, who in their different ways, have asserted that Anglicanism is, first and foremost, a social vision. It is about the shaping of true sociality, rather than imagining a purely ecclesiastical polity. It does this through offering inclusive space - 'low-threshold' environments or institutions, rather than 'member-based' high-threshold organisations that require prescriptive terms and conditions of entry.

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[1] See John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. 39.

[2] On this, see Paul Avis, 'Polity and Polemics: The Function of Ecclesiastical Polity in Theology and Practice', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, Vol. 18, 2016, pp. 2-13

Such boldness, I must add, with due ecumenical humility, is hardly confined to Anglican polity. One need only scan the headline of one report from the World Council of Churches in 1966, to read that 'the world is the agenda, not the church'. As Walter Hollenweger noted in his editorial of the report, 'when the Church takes seriously the agenda of the world, this does not mean the Church is ready for compromise.'[3] Rather, suggested Hollenweger, if one began with a serious theology of the Kingdom of God, rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus, then challenging and changing the injustices of the world would be the first task the church turned towards. That is what the 'space' of the Kingdom of God is about.

According to John Kay, the concept of obliquity describes a simple process: that of achieving complex objectives indirectly.[4] One thinks immediately of Emily Dickinson's poetic invocation to tell the truth, but only in such a manner that it is slanted, lest the light dazzle and blind us all.[5] Or of Polonius' speech in Hamlet, where he suggests we reach our wisdom and goals through indirect means.[6] Kay discusses the verdict of Charles Jencks, the architectural commentator, who opined that modernism ended at 3.32 pm on July 15th 1972. That is the date when contractors detonated fuses that blew up a housing development in St Louis. Only two decades earlier, such housing – high rise tower blocks, most notably – had been feted by Le Corbusier, who famously claimed such buildings were the supreme expression of modernism, and that a house was (merely) 'a machine for living in'.

But as Kay points out, the modernists knew less than they thought. A house is not simply a machine to live in. Indeed, there is a difference between a house and a home. The utility of property and its actual functionality is only one element in design. The spaces that we inhabit are formational. They say things about individuals and groups. They arrange social living. Buildings have aesthetics that can promote subtle qualities and values. Some prompt alienation and individualism. Others, in contrast, can foster civic sociability, generosity and mutual flourishing. Churches, in particular, have special responsibilities here - because they are offering socio-sacred spaced that is profoundly inclusive and public, not merely private.

Kay's concept of obliquity is more fertile than it may at first appear, and especially in relation to missiological or ecclesiological constructions of ecclesial polity. To take church growth as an example: is this best achieved by clear aims and objectives, and with clarity on programmes and activities? Or, is growth better achieved through

[3] W. Hollenweger (Ed.), *The Church for Others: Two Reports on the Missionary Structure of the Congregation*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967), pp. 3-4

[4] John Kay, *Obliquity*, (London: Profile Books, 2011).

[5] Emily Dickinson, from '*Tell All the Truth, But Tell it Slant*'. (ed. Harold Bloom), *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 1985), p. 18.

[6] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 1; Polonius' speech (London: Signet Classic edition, 1998).

oblique means? To some extent, the answer will depend on what is meant by 'growth'. If measurable numerical growth is the primary goal, and is rooted in a concept of member-based organisation, then yes, straight, direct and forthright programmes will be cherished and valued. The missional activity will have manifest intent, and a clarity to its aims, objectives and outcomes that is often 'measurable'.

In contrast, an approach to missiological or ecclesiological endeavour that is rooted in the concept of obliquity might be more circumspect. Pastoral care, programmes of theological or spiritual exploration, an investment in aesthetics (e.g. art, music, etc.), an emphasis on the wider neighbourhood, and programmes fostering social wellbeing and renewal will more likely be to the fore. These will not necessarily build manifestly bigger congregations. But the latency of such an approach to mission and ministry will produce, often, a profound sense of home.

Because churches are essentially 'households of faith', in that telling biblical phrase (Galatians 6.10) adopted by James Hopewell,[7] the very shaping of their spatial environment matters more than most ministers, denominations, congregations and theologians will usually allow for. Hopewell writes of how churches – and especially missiological or ecclesiological constructions – tend to see themselves in mechanistic, contextual, symbolic or organic terms. And as we shall suggest, this has implications for how people might enter the (Anglican) household of faith.

How is this so? Take the sense of smell as just one example. What does your home smell of? Real Estate Agents will tell you that if you want sell your home, fill it with the fragrance of baking bread and freshly brewed coffee. The smell immediately says 'home' to a prospective buyer. And what do our churches smell of? Flowers, incense, leather books, wood, polish; these represent the combined scent of heritage, freshness and mystery. The extensity of the church – rooted in obliquity – does grow, as the capacity of the church extends to being a being a broad institution, in which many share, participate in and cherish the values of the church, without necessarily becoming 'obvious' members. Smell, touch and taste all convey the sense of belonging, as much as any words.

I take the fact that every denomination is, to some extent, and to borrow a phrase from John Caputo, an attempt to express the 'mood of God'.[8] Ecclesial life is, inevitably, the social reification of any group's theological priorities and spiritual proclivities. It follows from this that the actual mood or feel of a congregation has a more direct bearing on the wider sociality than it may know.

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[7] James Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Strictures*, (London: SCM, 1987).

[8] See Gary Gutting, "Deconstructing God," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2014, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/09/deconstructing-god/?_r=0, in an interview with John Caputo discussing his book, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

So the very essence and feel of spiritual space has a bearing on how people belong, pray, move and feel. Spiritual space helps form the 'grammar of assent' and the social bonds that give distinctive identities to our churches. This has an indirect and direct bearing on how society is formed.

So in terms of mood, let me say that as a specific 'mood of God', Anglicanism's Broad Church was, quite simply, temperate and measured – reflective, cool and capacious: above all, mild. It was an embodiment of the faith in the church as an open, non-membership-based institution. It eschewed sectarianism, and sought to serve the whole of society. It was clement and mild, and so perfectly suited to the pastoral climates it served – at least in England. So there are parallels between Broad Church and broad-casting. Michael Sadgrove, in a recent short essay, and quotes a 'convert' (I use the word advisedly) to BBC Radio Three's *Choral Evensong*. The listener writes:

> I turned on *Choral Evensong* by accident one afternoon a year or so ago and I've been listening ever since. The music is beautiful, but the special quality of Evensong lies in other places too, in the paradoxical contrast between the sinewy intricacy of sixteenth-century language, and the simplicity of the thoughts it expresses: prayers for courage, for grace, for protection from the dark, for a good death. These are things to which our minds have particularly lately turned in the aftermath of recent terrible events, but they were there all the time in the psalms and collects of Evensong. For almost 500 years the same words have been repeated by people in times of trouble or of triumph. The presence of that cloud of unseen witnesses lends an intangible quality to Choral Evensong. You could call it calm or spiritualty. You could call it holiness. But it's very precious …'.[9]

This outcome is arguably not the manifest intention of the broadcaster, but it is the outcome for this listener. Obliquity, then, is an important concept for comprehending the deeper ways in which churches and denominations – here Anglicanism – might shape society. So where does the mission and ministry of the church belong in such a world, and perhaps especially in contemporary culture?

Clearly, it lies in keeping space for the sacred and pastoral both possible and open, as well as alive and engaged. In offering faith both to and for institutions, churches and clergy have a unique role in calling individuals and bodies to the horizons that lie beyond the scope of immediate priorities. The role might be said to consist of pastoral care in the present (of course); but pointing beyond the temporal and pragmatic to the world of the spiritual, the domain of values, and to the social transcendent. Indeed, churches continue to occupy and bridge the gap between

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[9] Michael Sadgrove, 'Choral Evensong', *Prayer Book Society Magazine*, Lent 2017, pp. 11-12.

created and redeemed sociality. The church holds the world before God. It is the social-sacramental skin for the community. It is not an enclave for the redeemed, but rather a resource for all seeking meaning and truth in a world longing for hope.

In articulating Anglican identity in the past, I have argued before that the Anglican Communion can be visualised analogically as a vast mansion, replete with newer Evangelical and Catholic wings, added in the nineteenth century.[10] It remains a large stately home. This Cathedral, much like our beloved Anglican Communion can also evoke what Benedict Anderson describes as an 'imagined community'.[11] Members will readily acknowledge a deep, horizontal comradeship of belonging. The Communion is bound together by an ethos, codes, memories and aspirations that allow it to cohere in the minds of its members, but without that coherence necessarily being practised at either a deep or extensive level.

There can be no question that Anglicanism contains elements of coherence, and a notion of a shared life and identity, bound together through a common sense of purpose, history and teleology. But what exactly are the elements that are particular to Anglican identity? From a more sociological perspective, we can point to Pickering's work that identifies ambiguity and aesthetics as being culturally significant. More generally, however, and to return to the concept of obliquity, the phenomenologist Thomas Tweed frames the importance of values and behaviour in faith communities when he writes that religions, at their best, are 'confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and supra-human (i.e. divine) forces to make homes and cross boundaries'.[12]

This definition of religion suggests that grounded pastoral faith performs four important functions that will be familiar to most Anglican churches. First, practised faith intensifies joy. It takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary. It knows how to celebrate lives, love and transitions. It blesses what is good, and raises hope, thanks and expectation in prayer and praise. It lifts an institution and individuals to a new plane of existence – one of the blessing and thankfulness for what is and can be. And it not only moves, but also intensifies. Just as a birth becomes even more in a baptism, so in ministry does a ceremony become more with prayer and celebration.

Second, suffering is confronted. Pain, bereavement and consoling will be familiar to all clergy and congregations, providing the safe space and expertise that holds and

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[10] M. Percy, 'Reluctant Communion' in J. Jobling and I. Markham (eds.), *Theological Liberalism : Creative and Critical* (London: SPCK, 2000), pp. 114-125).

[11] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 6–7 and* pp. 15-16.

[12] Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006), p.12.

slowly resolves the suffering that individuals and institutions carry inside them. Third, the making of homes is a profound analogical – and literal – reference to the function of faith. Making safe spaces of nourishment, well-being, maturity, diversity and individuation; our 'faith homes' are places both of open hospitality and security. Fourth, faith helps us to cross boundaries, to move forward and over the challenges of life to new places. It can be crossing deserts to find promised lands or passing from darkness to light. Religion never keeps us in one place; even within our homes, it moves us on.

James Hopewell's work – in effect, a kind of 'cultural reading' within the field of ecclesiology – can be of further help in our understanding of obliquity and identity in Anglican polity. Hopewell points out how some who are looking to join a church – choosing a household of faith – behave like 'house hunters'. Some 'buyers' focus on the *contextual* nature of the dwelling: 'viewed in this way, a dwelling is a texture whose weaving reveals the strands that originate in the larger context of the neighbourhood'. Alternatively, some focus on *mechanisms*, 'and how well the house does its job'. Typical features of 'mechanistic' approaches to church life and education focus on aims, outcomes, programme effectiveness and demonstrable success. Hopewell likens mechanistic approaches to church life as engineering.

Now this approach is in stark contrast to those who value churches as *organisms*, where the interior and exterior of the house are primarily assessed on their aesthetics, and the ability of the building to 'fit' with the natural biography of the house hunters. Hopewell equates this approach to church life as architectural. The *symbolic* approach explores how the building conveys and reifies meanings, and what it communicates to its wider context. Symbolic concerns typically focus not on effectiveness, but on reception and meaning within a wider community. In each of these approaches, knowledge, reflection, mission and pastoral care are handled and valued in different ways by individuals and communities. Apparently trivial reflections (e.g. how does our church *look*?) takes on a whole new significance.

**Conclusion**

All of this has rich implicature for what it means to be a Cathedral, and for consecrating this space. So let me conclude. In Ulrich Beck's teasing thesis*, A God of One's Own* (2010) he has some pertinent things to say about our present time. Writing as a sociologist and religious commentator, Beck suggests that just as one has a life of one's own and a room of one's own, western modernity has created an ethic of individual self fulfilment that allows believers to shape and determine the God they believe in. This powerful current is channeled through the individual's life, experience and self-knowledge, permitting religious people to construct their own religious shelters, thereby making decisions about faith rather than deferring them to

the power and authority of the institution to which they belong. Indeed, the very act of belonging, and of believing, is defined on terms set by the individual.

In contrast, a Cathedral stands out against this. It is not 'a room of one's own'. It is always bigger than the worshipper. It cannot be possessed by any one individual. And yet all may belong. A Cathedral is a "Marquee for God": it welcomes all. It is, to quote Albert Van Den Heuvel during the rededication of Coventry Cathedral in 1966.

> A sign of pro-existence.
> A symbol of diversity in unity.
> A Pentecostal laboratory.
> A theatre of basic drama.
> A temple of dialogue.
> A centre of creativity.
> An academy of committed information.
> A clinic for public exorcism.
> An international exchange.
> A broadcasting station for the voice of the poor.
>
> A tower of reconciliation.
> A motel for pilgrims.
> A house of vicarious feasts.
> The hut of the Shepherd.[13]

Of course, for many people, the lack of any episcopal reference in this lecture will pose a question: isn't a cathedral the seat of the bishop? Yes, of course. But it is always, always, much more than that, as Ven Den Heuvel points out. Enquirers and pilgrims don't come to cathedrals to find Deans or Bishops. They come seeking God. "Sir, we want to see Jesus" is how the Gospel of John expresses this. The space we anticipate consecrating in the months ahead is a space for people to find God; to worship and wonder; to be in awe and silence; to pray; to find peace and solace; to be moved; to be affirmed; to find ourselves; to know that in this House God abides with us, always. Thus, and in a highly influential essay, Dan Hardy writes that,

> The task of theology, then, is to begin from common practice and examine its quality in open trial by the use of natural reason in order to discover the truth of this practice, by a truth-directed reason … (including) practical reason. And the outcome … should be an agreement on the proper organisation of common life which would actually promote the practice of society …. The concern is

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[13] M. S. Stancliffe (former Dean of Winchester) seems to have quoted them, and expanded on them, in an article in the February 1970 edition of 'Theology'.

> public … the use of public reason, open trial of the truth and the achievement of truly social existence (D.W. Hardy, 1989, p.33)

The burden of such places, and the vision for such spaces as this, is not simply that they serve the church, or even that they are at the disposal of their local communities. It is, rather, that as holy and inhabited places, they actually make for a better society. As Hardy says, the outcome 'should be an agreement on the proper organisation of common life which would actually promote the practice of society'. It is here that we may find the coalition of Christian belief, practice and artifact - Cathedrals as sacred spaces and places – can be at their most dynamic, and truly shape the common practice of our social life.

John Robinson used to remark that all the church was ever meant be was the constructors hut on God's Building Site – which is the world. The church is transitional: a means to an end; and that end is the Kingdom of God. This is what it means to pitch God's tent in every age. We are God's polyphony: though many, we are one body. Such a vision for the world, under God, to be enabled and achieved, requires us to continually consecrate together the spaces and places we inhabit, and the peoples we serve. When we begin to reflect deeply on the space God occupies, we can also glimpse some of the possibilities for the people and places that God's Kingdom might now intend. How Christ's own nature, power and love might shapes the church. So let me leave the last word on space and formation to a goodly poet. Malcolm Guite's "Sonnet to the Trinity" perhaps best dedicates this Cathedral today, preparing *this* ground for *your* consecration:

> In the Beginning, not in time or space,
> But in the quick before both space and time,
> In Life, in Love, in co-inherent Grace,
> In three in one and one in three, in rhyme,
> In music, in the whole creation story,
> In His own image, His imagination,
> The Triune Poet makes us for His glory,
> And makes us each the other's inspiration.
> He calls us out of darkness, chaos, chance,
> To improvise a music of our own,
> To sing the chord that calls us to the dance,
> Three notes resounding from a single tone,
> To sing the End in whom we all begin;
> Our God beyond, beside us and within.[14]

The Lord Be With You.

[14] Malcolm Guite, Sonnet to the Trinity, 2013.