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The Emerging Church Movement: A Sociological Assessment

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What we bring to the study of the Emerging Church Movement

With so many voices, groups, and organizations participating in the Emerging Church Movement (ECM), few are willing to “define” it,¹ though authors have offered various definitions.² Emerging Christians

1. Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” *Christianity Today*, 51.2, February 2007: 35–39.

2. James Bielo, “The ‘Emerging Church’ in America: Notes on the Interaction of Christianities,” *Religion*, 39, no. 3 (2009): 219–232; James Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005); Lloyd Chia, “Emerging Faith Boundaries: Bridge-Building, Inclusion and the Emerging Church Movement in America” (The University of Missouri, dissertation, unpublished, 2010); Gladys Ganiel, “Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland: A Case Study of the Zero28 and Ikon Community,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 6, no. 1 (2006): 38–48; and Robert E. Webber,

avoid offering any systematic or coherent definitions, which contributes to frustration in isolating it as a coherent group—especially for sociologists who strive to define and categorize. In presenting our own understanding of this movement, we categorize Emerging Christianity as an *orientation* rather than an *identity*, and focus on the diverse practices within what we describe as “pluralist congregations” (often called “gatherings,” “collectives” or

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“communities” by Emerging Christians themselves). This leads us to define the ECM as a creative, entrepreneurial religious movement that strives to achieve social legitimacy and spiritual vitality by

Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007).

actively disassociating from its roots in conservative, evangelical Christianity. Our findings and rationale for terms and definitions for grasping the ECM are extensively developed in *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*.³

Our interest is in the persons, practices, and sociological significance of Emerging Christianity. Our consequent labeling and isolating of the ECM is not intended to ignore the varied and evanescent strands of the movement, particularly when the movement values autonomy, diversity, and dissent, but to find analytic ways to examine the ECM as an intriguing instance of institutional innovation. We do not rely on our theological convictions or on presumptions regarding what the Christian church should be or should not be doing. The ECM has both sympathizers⁴ and critics,⁵ yet we assert that our interests lie neither in forwarding or retracting the ECM. Rather, we pay close attention to observations of Emerging Christians and their congregations in the United States, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom in order to understand them on their own terms.⁶ In our work, we went

to pubs and restaurants, small informal gatherings and large formal conferences, public events like “beer and hymns” nights and lectures by Brian McLaren, as well as private events like hanging out in people’s homes and attending overnight dialogues that included sleeping on couches and making breakfast together. We participated in these and other settings, saturating ourselves in conversation and reminiscence, because the ECM is a diffuse phenomenon that is not readily captured in any single place or person. Regardless of the (often controversial) figures who write and speak regularly like Rob Bell, Nadia Bolz-Weber, Peter Rollins, and Tony Jones, none of them “define” the ECM—yet they all are manifestations of it.

Within the seeming cacophony of talk and happenings, we find the ECM to be a far-from-settled social occurrence. The relatively small numbers of people who identify as Emerging Christians, or who attend recognizable emerging congregations, has led some observers to proclaim the death of the ECM.⁷ Nevertheless, the ECM’s resonance with wider trends and values of “Western” society lead us to conclude that Emerging Christianity will persist, even thrive, as it continues to

3. Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

4. Doug Gay, *Remixing the Church: Towards an Emerging Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

5. Carson, Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)* (Chicago: Moody, 2008).

6. Other recent efforts include Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*; Chia; Philip Harrold, “Deconversion in the Emerging Church,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 6, no. 1 (2006): 79–90; Cory E. Labanow, *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church: A Congregational Study of a Vineyard Church* (Surrey, England/Burl-

ington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009); Josh Packard, *The Emerging Church: Religion at the Margins* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 2012); and Jason Wollschleger, “Off the Map? Locating the Emerging Church: A Comparative Case Study of Congregations in the Pacific Northwest,” *Review of Religious Research*, 54 (2012): 69–91.

7. On the number of Emerging Christians, see Marti and Ganiel, chapters 9–11. On the death of the ECM, see Scott Daniels, “The Death of the Emerging Church,” *Pastor Scott’s Thoughts*, April 10, 2010, http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor_scotts_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html, (accessed December 22, 2014).

influence the organization and values of even the most established and “traditional” Christians and their denominations. In the end, sociological study of the ECM contributes to more general understandings of the ongoing relationship between modern religion and contemporary social change, helping us to better grasp how processes of religious individualization take place and are encouraged even within religious communities.

The social world that prompts the “Emerging” of the ECM

After more than a decade of observation and systematic research on the ECM, we see the “deconstructed churches” of the ECM as a response to the crisis of modernity, not only in religion but also across all spheres of life. Part of the crisis of modernity is the proliferation of institutional demands such that people no longer rely on singular institutions for their ethics, beliefs, or values. Overall, established religious institutions have not adjusted well to these changes. Rather, they cultivate broad and distant organizational forms that remove intimacy and ignore the complexity of selves who can no longer give themselves up to a monolithic religious identity. In contrast, the ECM responds to the lack of trust in religious institutions by deliberately creating “anti-institutional” structural forms, including pub churches, experimental congregations, and neo-monastic communities. Unlike traditional congregations, which evaluate their progress in terms of numerical growth, church attendance, and adherence to creeds, Emerging Christians shun such measures of “success.” Rather, for Emerging Christians success may mean the death of their existing community after a certain period of time, and developing

a flexibility of mind and spirit that questions the very validity of core beliefs. For example, Peter Rollins has talked about deliberately short-term “pop-up churches” as a vital form of Christianity.⁸ Even more, Emerging Christians’ standards for measuring success are a challenge not only to traditional Christianity, but also to sociologists of religion who have relied on indicators such as church attendance and adherence to core doctrines as measurements of religious vitality.

Other aspects of the crisis of modernity are increased pluralism and the hyper-individualization of the self.⁹ People’s greater awareness of the plurality of expressions of not only Christianity, but also other faiths, has made over-arching narratives in which one’s own religious community has all the right answers seem implausible. Multiple institutional demands prompt the need for understanding how religious commitments fit with various, contradictory domains.¹⁰ The challenge of religious authority (which cannot be imposed) and the challenge of understanding oneself among so many competing institutional imperatives (which cannot be avoided) leads to people having to individualize

8. See Gladys Ganiel, “The Deconstructed Church at Peter Rollins’ Holy Ghost Festival” (May 15, 2014), <http://www.gladysganiel.com/social-justice/the-deconstructed-church-at-peter-rollins-holy-ghosts-festival-in-belfast-part-i/>, (accessed December 22, 2014).

9. Ulrich Beck, *A God of One’s Own: Religion’s Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in the Pluralist Age* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014).

10. Gerardo Marti, “Religious Reflexivity: Synthesizing the Effect of Novelty and Diversity on Personal Religiosity,” *Sociology of Religion*, 76, no. 1 (Forthcoming).

their understandings of religion.

The demand for individualization originates in changed social structures that affect every area of life, including religion. The lack of a single, primary “foothold” for personal identity stimulates the peculiarly reflective nature of modern individuals. People are constantly forced to reflect and rationalize their lives in a quest for meaningful coherence of the self. In this context, freedom and autonomy are especially important.¹¹ Individualism is not simply a value; it is a socially structured and morally enforced “*institutionalized individualization*.”¹² The imperative for individualization does not therefore indicate the receding of structures but rather the reorientation of structures such that new forms of agency are created. The consequence for religion is not abstract syncretism; rather, believers from different backgrounds discover new religious freedoms, change their old religious worldviews, and develop religious identities from a range of sources.¹³ One pastor we spoke with painted a picture of what this looks like in practice: “Early on we called it ‘liturgical eclecticism.’ We took a lot of stuff from the Book of Common Prayer, a lot of Catholic stuff. We felt free to borrow not only from our specific tradi-

tions but also from the whole tradition of the church.”¹⁴ In these ways the modern self is faced with an array of competing secular and religious structures through which to enact its beliefs and practices.

But even when principled action seems rooted in individual conviction, it takes its force from being legitimated. So what is crucial here is that the legitimation of beliefs and behaviors do not come from within individuals, they come from

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11. Gerardo Marti, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Gerardo Marti, “Ego-affirming Evangelicalism: How a Hollywood Church Appropriates Religion for Workers in the Creative Class,” *Sociology of Religion*, 71, no. 1 (2010): 52–75; Gerardo Marti, “The Adaptability of Pentecostalism: The Fit between Prosperity Theology and Globalized Individualization in a Los Angeles Church,” *Pneuma*, 34, no. 1 (2012): 5–25.

12. Beck, 95.

13. *Ibid.*, 140.

organized groups. The ECM has responded to individuals’ needs for legitimation by creating religious communities with loose boundaries of belonging and belief, where pluralism is not just tolerated, but celebrated as a positive religious value. At the same time, emerging congregations encourage people to follow individualized religious paths. One of our respondents put it this way: “Yes, that’s what I envision

14. Marti and Ganiel, 109.

a church should be: a lot of people doing things that feel right to them—but doing it together.”¹⁵ When religious individualization is complemented by a fierce relational ethic, it creates a type of “cooperative egoism” that sustains community life.¹⁶ Emerging congregations straddle the tension between individualization and the longing for community more effectively than traditional religious institutions, with their demands for uniformity and the sanctioning of those who do not conform.

Distinctive sociological aspects of the ECM

One of our sociological contributions to understanding the ECM is that Emerging Christians share a *religious orientation* built on a continual practice of deconstruction. We deliberately chose the term “religious orientation” rather than “religious identity” as we sought to categorize the ECM. The concept of religious identity has been used extensively in the sociology of religion, but we thought it was too rigid to capture the fluid and deliberately boundary-crossing nature of Emerging Christians—especially those who do not consciously identify with the ECM yet share its values and practices.¹⁷ Of course, a number of distinct religious identities already exist *within the ECM*, ranging from those who explicitly identify with labels such as “emerging,” “emergent,” and “emergence,” to those who discard (or are not aware of) these labels. We stress deconstruction as a practice, noting with Stephan Fuchs and Steven Ward that the

practice of “deconstruction” is a form of micro-politics in which actors establish competitive arenas in response to pressures for conformity.¹⁸ When they talk about their previous experiences of Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity, Emerging Christians say they felt like they were forced to adopt a false identity, one that indicated a correct religious persona. Now, they encourage each other to critique the beliefs and practices that have wounded them, and refuse to insist on what beliefs and practices to maintain or adopt. The freedom people experience means they frequently describe their congregations as “not judging” and “not legalistic.”

Another of our sociological contributions to understanding the ECM is that Emerging Christians are creating innovative religious structures—what we describe as “pluralist congregations.” This does not necessarily mean that pluralist congregations are diverse in terms of ethnicity or socio-economic backgrounds. Rather, pluralist congregations strive to be open to all and to provide an environment where a range of religious practices is both acceptable and legitimate. Many Emerging Christians have been immersed in multiple Christian traditions through their own life experiences. Drawing on their varied experiences, Emerging Christians actively challenge the forms of religious conformity they encountered in their past and heartily welcome all critiques of institutionalized Christianity. In their quest to create Christian communities where a broad scope of freedom in individual belief and religious conviction reign, they adopt a plurality of beliefs and practices—some of which may

15. *Ibid.*, 34.

16. *Ibid.*, 190–192.

17. See Marti and Ganiel, chapter 4, for fuller descriptions of the values and practices that define this religious orientation, including distinct ways of thinking about the nature of truth, doubt, and God.

18. Stephen Fuchs and Steven Ward, “What is Deconstruction, and Where and When does it take Place? Making Facts in Science, Building Cases in Law,” *American Sociological Review*, 59, no. 4 (1994): 481–500.

contradict each other. In short, Emerging Christians embrace pluralism and value the exercise of religious freedom—*within their own congregations*.

Some of the most important practices of pluralist congregations have been encouraging conversation, dialogue, and debate. While it has been the leaders and public figures of the ECM who have most forcefully articulated the idea of “faith as conversation,” all participants in our research spoke about how important

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conversation, dialogue, and storytelling are to their faith and how their congregations provide a unique arena for this. The aim of Emerging Christians’ conversation is not to settle on established positions or to reach a point where all can agree and therefore stop talking. On-going conversation is in itself a mechanism or a strategy to maintain a plurality of identities and positions. For Emerging Christians, dialogue simply means listening to others’ points of view or positions without trying to change them. This approach to dialogue contrasts to what Emerging Christians see as evangelical dialogic practices: the evangelical has the “right” answers and the purpose of dialogue is to convert others to

that point of view. It also differs from the ecumenical approach to dialogue, which is focused on discovering points of commonality. Participants instead describe the process as a form of pedagogy in which people strive for mutual understanding. People are encouraged to share stories about their personal experiences of faith with others. The open, fluid nature of the ECM conversation places few demands upon people to believe the same things. Indeed, it could be said that for many within the ECM, the purpose of conversation is to generate more questions.

Emerging Christians believe they are living in a changed religious landscape in which foundational Christian doctrines are no longer assumed and many traditional church practices are irrelevant. Moreover, Emerging Christians see themselves as rescuing core aspects of Christianity from the entanglement of modernity, bureaucracy, and right-wing politics. In these ways, Emerging Christians actively deconstruct congregational life by placing into question the beliefs and practices that have held sway among traditional Christians. Emerging Christians also see themselves as rescuing their own selves from the shallowness, hypocrisy, and rigidity of their religious past. We see Emerging Christians as themselves caught in a distinctively sociological dilemma: how to revitalize the Christian “church” while simultaneously avoiding what they see as the “trappings” of church institutions, including robust institutions. Their redefinitions of success (or perhaps *authenticity* is a word they would more likely use) in terms of smallness, impermanence, and open-endedness are important strategies for revitalization.

Sociologists also face a dilemma when it comes to understanding the social organization of the ECM. There is so much variety among emerging congregations that it is difficult to generalize about their

structure or form. The purposes of gatherings are not to “convert” or “lead” people to God through established recipes but to create open opportunities to see, hear, and respond to God. More importantly, the ECM legitimizes individualized/questioning/ambiguous approaches to religious convictions, and that seems to have unique challenges for crafting “religious” organizations (multiple forms and options) and unique challenges for creating cohesive communities (conversation, authenticity, tolerance). What holds almost all these congregations together is their openness and commitment to diversity, and this translates into their willingness to incorporate a range of practices. These “pluralist congregations” promote individualism while at the same time providing a basis for community around shared experiences and relationships. Emerging congregations strike a contradictory balance as they create religious communities in which the autonomy of the individual is held as a core value in the very midst of an often-stated emphasis on relationship and community. Because being an Emerging Christian is a form of personal religiosity that is expected to be intentionally (rather than customarily) enacted, this type of religious self cannot avoid being strategic in its activities, which are selected and enacted according to individual choice.

In short, the ECM does not exist as a free-standing religious form; rather, all the values and practices of Emerging Christians exist within an overarching religious orientation that deconstructs traditional expressions of Christianity and strives to keep conversation flowing. Crucially, this religious orientation is not confined to the pluralist congregations of the ECM but can be found among Christians in traditional denominations as well.

The future of the ECM and the future of Christianity

On the surface the ECM may appear to be a free-wheeling heterodoxy reacting to the established institutions of contemporary Christianity. But on closer investigation Emerging Christianity can be understood as a peculiarly “modern” religious orientation played out in a distinctive societal context. The practices of the ECM legitimate, and help to create innovative, “pluralist congregations” that straddle the tensions between individualization and community. Yet despite their effectiveness in helping people to critique existing expressions of Christianity and to resist religious institutionalization, emerging congregations remain a minority in all parts of the West, even in the U.S. where they are most prominent. Ultimately, the influence of the ECM may be better judged not by the conventional measures of the sociology of religion—such as growth, identification, attendance, and adherence to particular beliefs—but by how Emerging Christians influence the values and behaviors of Christians outside the movement, drawing others into this distinct religious orientation while remaining within traditional Christian institutions.

This dynamic of influence from emerging to traditional congregations is most obvious in the “Fresh Expressions” movement, which we consider the most prominent example of the ECM in the U.K. Fresh Expressions congregations are typically linked with already existing Anglican or Methodist congregations and command various degrees of autonomy from these traditional denominations. In the U.S., two nationally prominent emerging congregations—Church of the Apostles in Seattle and House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver—are affiliated with the Episcopal Church/Evangelical

Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and the ELCA, respectively. In such contexts, there is more likely to be significant cross-fertilization of ideas and practices between emerging and traditional congregations. Given the way that Emerging Christians' religious orientation resonates with the individualized yet pluralist West, it seems unlikely that traditional congregations will remain unaffected by Emerging Christians' innovations. Of course, this dynamic may also work in the other direction, with Emerging Christians—while ever eager to deconstruct tradition—potentially softening their critiques of traditional expressions of Christianity.

There is also evidence that the influence of the ECM within traditional denominations is more widespread than has been supposed. In our own qualitative research, we came across multiple examples of pastors and leaders within traditional denominations who sympathized with the ECM but did not want to be publicly "outed" for fear of recrimination or loss of employment. We also observed multiple examples of congregations in traditional denominations, which exhibit high degrees of internal diversity and have adopted some emerging-like practices, such as Fitzroy Presbyterian in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Further, in the U.S., Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe's quantitative study found that a surprisingly (even to us) high 7 percent

of clergy in mainline denominations identified as "Emergent."¹⁹ This ranged from 1 percent of Southern Baptists to 14 percent of Disciples of Christ. Given that many Emerging/Emergent Christians choose not to use the term, these figures may even under-represent their presence among clergy.

The ECM is constantly shifting and current terminology may get lost in the currents of change. Nevertheless our goal has been to describe a type of religious orientation that is not only recognizable across persons and formats transnationally, but more importantly will become more pervasive in all religious environments. As one Emerging Christian told us, his congregation is an "open space where individuals get to work out whatever they need. Individuals are coming together."²⁰ Overall, our evidence suggests that patterns of religious individualism, the formation of pluralist congregations, and the desire to construct a personal faith within a cooperative setting will be a diffuse and widely practiced element of modern religiosity.

19. Ryan P. Burge and Paul Djupe, "Truly Inclusive or Uniformly Liberal: An Analysis of the Politics of the Emerging Church," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 53, no. 3 (2014): 636–651.

20. Marti and Ganiel, 195.