

# THE UN-USUAL SUSPECTS

By Simon Cross



## INTRODUCTION

This is a paper that I wrote for a theological conference a couple of years ago. As such it is both more “religious” in terms of its language than regular readers of the Longform series will be used to, funnily enough however, it was certainly not quite religious enough in its sentiment for many of the people who heard it. It is also written for more of an academic readership than most of my longform articles are – however I think it’s got some interesting stuff in it – so I’ve chosen to reproduce it in its original format, rather than do a rewrite.

### **Abstract:**

*It's a common mistake to characterise post-Christian society as 'secular'. In fact, as Habermas noted, much of society is now very much 'post secular', as religious thought continues to play an important role in social and cultural discourse, actively shaping what he describes as 'social life at different levels and in a variety of forms'. Societal attitudes are not after all resolutely secularist: in the UK, approximately 30% of those who belong to no religion claim to believe in life after death; 7% of self-professed atheists believe in angels; and approximately a quarter of the population believe in reincarnation, including one in seven atheists. At the same time however, it is true that the church in its gathered ecclesial form is changing beyond all recognition, with approximately half of those who claim their faith makes a difference to the way that they live, choosing not to attend church.*

*This leads us to a number of important questions, in particular to dialogue with Bonhoeffer's concept of a 'religionless Christianity', and the idea of 'the Christian' as perhaps being intrinsically or most authentically without religion: "The Christian is not a homo religiousus, but simply a human, as Jesus was human..." In such a context, assuming that the church is the means of God's earthly activity, how does 'the work of God' get done? In answering this I will explore the idea of 'gift' in interaction with the sociological language of 'capitals' to suggest that God remains very much at work in a post secular society, but by means of an unlikely set of co-conspirators, from political protestors to cancer survivors (among others), all of whom are profoundly engaged with a Tillichian sense of 'ultimate concern', and will suggest that this has direct implications for our sense of Missio Dei.*

## **BELIEF AND SECULARISM**

In 2009 something important happened: for the first time the number of so called 'nones' (those who consider themselves as having no religious affiliation whatsoever) outnumbered the totality of Christians in the UK (Bullivant, 2017). This point was predictable, based upon the historic growth of 'nones' and the general decline in number of Christians over the years preceding it. Subsequent to this point, 2011 seemed to buck the trend with the number of nones dipping slightly below the number of Christians again, but since then the trend has

continued broadly as predicted – *nones* increase, overall numbers of Christians (particularly Anglicans) decline. Some will be keen to point out that the decline in Anglican numbers has been considerably more marked than the number of those who fall into ‘other Christian’ categories, which like Catholics, who represent the smallest part of the three categories of Christian, has remained more nearly stable over the last decade. It will take some more time to adjudge whether or not this is to continue, however.

Some argue that this picture is indicative of growing secularism, but the picture is not quite so clear. The year 2008 was the last time that the British Social Attitudes survey data showed the breadth of belief in God, of British *nones*, and at that point 65% of *nones* held what we might consider to be classic atheist or agnostic views. (I don’t believe in God, or, I don’t believe in God and I don’t think there’s any way we can find out). That means that the remaining 35% held views that indicated that they weren’t entirely closed to the idea of God: for instance 16% of *nones* said that while they don’t believe in a personal God, they do believe in a *higher power* of some sort. Similarly, in a report from the think tank Theos in 2012, approximately 30% of *nones* claimed to believe in life after death; 7% of self-professed atheists said they believe in angels; and approximately a quarter of the entire population believe in reincarnation, including one in seven self-described atheists (Spencer & Weldin, 2012). Without going into depth concerning the breadth of social attitudes at play, I would simply suggest that contemporary Britain is not indeed secular, but post secular. Britain today is a space where the waning power and influence of a dominant religion, (in this case Christianity), or at least of the mainstream religious institution (in this case church), is increasingly apparent, but belief of one sort or another appears to remain in a sizable chunk of the population, even of those who have abandoned religion altogether.

Private spiritual beliefs have a number of key differences to adherence to religions, one of the most notable being church attendance, which is in decline even among those who maintain an adherence to Christianity. Recent figures show that a large proportion of people who identify as Christian, reporting that their faith makes a difference to the way they live, do not attend a church on a regular weekly basis (Aisthorpe, 2016), this, researchers report, is for a variety of reasons, ranging from break down in relationships to work commitments among many others. This lack of regular ecclesial engagement is notable for a number of reasons, one of the most practically important being the historic role of churches in the resourcing of what we might simply describe as ‘God’s work’, acts of mercy such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless etc. Historically people of faith have been over-represented in the initiation of projects and the development of charities the aims of which are directly linked to the

alleviation of societal problems. So much so in fact that secularist commentators have openly written about their concern that the diminishment of religion leaves us with a gap in non-governmental welfare provision initiators. Even now it is churches and other religious groups that seem most ready to respond to public need, taking aid to communities in need, establishing food banks, opening their doors to victims of disasters and so on. The agency that such institutions have is sometimes theorised as deriving from 'spiritual capital', itself a sub-subset of social capital, arising from a shared sense of sacred motivation, community building rituals and activities, physical resources, and extended human networks. Accordingly the diminishment of church congregations leads to a diminishment of spiritual capital, which leads, in theory to a diminishment of the ability of the church to get God's work done.

## CAPITAL AND GIFT

This sense of capital is part of a wider idea of capitalism, as the means by which society operates, but to what extent can this be said to be true? And what alternatives are there for understanding how God's work may be developed? I take as my starting point here, the approach of process theologians, in particular with regard to the power of God who have asked 'in what sense can we say God is powerful?' Biblical translators have left us with the word 'almighty' which is taken to mean that God can and does effect direct change, without experiencing change in him or herself. The process counterpoint to this is that God is not without power, but that God's power lies not in the ability to compel, but to persuade. This persuasive power of God, which process theology outlines as the greatest form of power can be understood as a form of capital, but is perhaps better understood as gift. The classic means by which one develops capital in economic or social terms, is to earn it, in terms of spiritual capital the resource is earned by means of participation in the life of a faith community, and so on. But if we were to reformulate our way of understanding this resource as gift rather than capital, then we move into a different economic paradigm.

What implication does this have for our understanding then of the role of the church in the Missio Dei? Here I would refer to Bonhoeffer and his idea of religionless Christianity, for Bonhoeffer the Christian is not religious, they do not effectively derive spiritual capital from engagement in religion. The Christian, argues Bonhoeffer is simply human, as Jesus was. (Kelly & Burton Nelson, 1995, p. 510) The authentic Christian is then one who follows in the way of Jesus, which doesn't mean that they have an orthodox Christian spirituality, it doesn't mean that they go to Church, it doesn't mean that they self declare as Christian on a form. Rather it means that they are engaged in the work of God, in the Missio Dei. My interest is then in whether there is evidence that the Missio Dei, the identification with and work on behalf of the most

marginalised members of global society can be said to be-being carried out beyond the boundaries of the church, and to what extent the work is conceived of as being sacred or holy by those concerned in it.

## ZOMBIES AND THE MISSIO DEI

I will give two examples of the way in which the Missio Dei is being achieved or at least pursued, by people who identify as being very much beyond the boundaries of orthodox Christianity: the first is the most spectacular. Officially Slovenia's fifth biggest religion, with 12,000 adherents: the Trans Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing (the Zombie Church) was founded in 2013 during a period of intense economic and political turbulence in the former eastern bloc state. They owe part of their name, and a great deal of their popularity to the controversial former prime minister Janez Jansa who faced calls for his resignation in 2013, and in his fightback labelled his detractors 'zombies'. Born out of the political protest movement of the time, the Zombie Church became a figure-head group in the ongoing fight for transparency and fairness in high office. The Zombie Church operate in two main ways. In the first place they use online social media and mobile technology to communicate and organise: Using Facebook groups they discuss beliefs and formulate doctrine – the process of formulation appears to be democratic and ongoing, with no sense that they have reached, or necessarily even expect to reach a definitive position on matters of dogma. Beyond their online existence groups of members meet together to celebrate mass – in a provocative stance that I would describe as 'mass demonstrations', they frequently hold their meetings outside of government buildings in order to protest against what they see as ongoing issues of corruption.

While on the face of it, the Zombie Church may appear to have similarities with the Jedi movement, or the Pastafarian movement (Church of the flying Spaghetti Monster), they deny this – saying definitively that they should not be seen as a parody religion, indicating that they do indeed have a sense of Tillichian 'ultimate concern' at the heart of their belief system, indeed that they are motivated, driven, or lured by the 'divine beauty which is beyond all other beauties' which is love (Hartshorne, 1984, p. 14). It may indeed be that they have more in common with the short lived 'Church of the Kazoo' which was formed by the musician and campaigner Jonny Walker in 2014 to circumvent and protest against rules which prevented buskers from performing on the streets of Camden. By declaring his performances 'religious services' and by encouraging the audience to participate in them by blowing kazoos along with his songs, Walker used the idea of a transcendent otherness – in this case the freedom of artistic expression and in a Tillichian sense the 'sacredness or holiness' of street culture – as a site of religious ritual and as

a recruiting ground for new protestors: “busking is a **sacred** act for the Church of the Holy Kazoo, and our hymnbook is every piece of music ever written and performed...” (Keep Streets Alive, 2014) (emphasis added). In both cases, protestors were, or are, willing to risk imprisonment or other punishment for their ‘religious activities’.

The Zombie Church use their meetings for the purpose of visible protest, and also as a locus for the collection of goods to be distributed among the poor – in this sense they act just as any church might normally be expected to, demonstrating acts of corporal mercy. They also self-declare genuine allegiance to a divine being whom they call ‘the Bell’. There is no sense in which the Zombie Church might be said, in Christian terms, to be ‘orthodox’ but their socio political orthopraxis and is more difficult to dispute.

A second example is that of a small charitable foundation which exists to provide help and support for the homeless, specifically by providing food and clothing for free, using donations and a team of volunteer cooks. The charity was founded by a husband and wife team who were motivated by a genuine sense of compassion and a wish to help others – this came after a life changing cancer diagnosis as a sort of epiphany, a sense that this is what they were meant to be doing. Neither one at that time self-described as a believer, although the husband has since begun to embrace a sense of Christian faith, motivated partly by his interaction with Christians who are also engaged in the same sort of work. He speaks of the way in which participating in rituals of prayer and meditation help to restore and renew him as he seeks energy to continue his work. He describes himself currently as a ‘Christian on a Buddhist path’. A number of similar examples exist of people who identify with ‘new age’ or ‘pagan’ beliefs and are similarly engaged, gifted I want to suggest with a concern for others by a God who, in the words of John Cobb: “*cares much more about the future of the world than about who believes in him and who does not.*” (Cobb, 2016)

Returning to Bonhoeffer’s sense of a religionless Christianity, I would suggest that this has some relation to what we’re experiencing here – a commitment as Bonhoeffer might have put it to the principals of the sermon on the mount, albeit without all the beliefs and commitments generally considered necessary for one to be classified as a Christian. Examples like this have direct implications for our sense of Missio Dei, which I want to characterise by identifying the activity of the spirit of God, in unlikely places, specifically the margins of society where brokenness and desperation are writ particularly large. This kind of Missio Dei is quite clearly not restricted to ‘the church’ as understood in its gathered ecclesial form. While I would assert that God’s work is indeed being done by God’s people, those people aren’t necessarily who, or where we might expect them to be, they are not *the usual suspects*. The challenge for the

church is how to develop and support this work, without insisting that it become intertwined with religion.

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## IMAGE

The logo of the Trans Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing

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