

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*

The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity, by Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 268 pages, £23.49, 2014, ISBN: 9780199959884

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Marti and Ganiel provide a comprehensive panorama of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM). Their choice of the term “movement” allows them to include a wide spectrum of beliefs and practices, and to capture the overarching feature of Emerging Christianity as a *religious orientation* built on a practice of deconstruction. Marti and Ganiel identify this deconstruction of what Christianity has been traditionally construed to be about as the core activity of the movement. It happens, they write, through “talk” framed by “religious institutional entrepreneurs”. In other words, Emerging leaders shape the kind of theological questioning happening in emerging congregations and groups that legitimise such congregations. The deconstruction is thus “strategic”, as it comes from leadership. The centrality of deconstruction often entails, as Marti and Ganiel point out, that ECM’s focus is much more on what they are against than what they are for. They stand in opposition to bureaucratic and hierarchical churches, over-bearing leaders, the Religious Right (in the U.S.), and judgemental attitudes within the church. The authors’ sympathies do not stop them from observing the disorganised nature of ECM congregations, their close-knit, even insular, structures, and the hidden structures of influence that result. The informality and intimacy of ECM congregations are not conducive to transparency, leading the in-crowd to make decisions and exercise leadership with little or no accountability (p. 121).

For Marti and Ganiel, ECM is the fruit of secularised modernity and, in particular, of its individualisation and pluralisation. Emerging Christianity seeks to overcome the divide between sacred and secular, although it is not always clear which values of mainstream “secular” culture it endorses and which it opposes. ECM seems to provide a framework for the individual to develop a non-conformist critical identity through deconstruction, but the authors stress that such individualisation is not *individualistic*; it

is “cooperative egoism”, which “involves the management and assertion of one’s individuated self yet simultaneously involves connection, empathy, and love for others.” (p. 166). As a researcher of new monastic communities, which are characterised by a radical relationality, I found the reduction of new monasticism to politically-minded groups and “cooperative egoism” most inadequate. New Monastic relationality calls for an unseating of the self and a shaping of a self that is inherently interdependent and accountable to others. Further, the notions of individualisation and cooperative egoism seem to be too reliant on Ulrich Beck’s characterisation of secular modernity as a rise in individual religiosity, decline in religious institutions, and an abandonment of tradition. This comes at the detriment of an analysis of the different forms of individuality and relationality that can be found across ECM groups. It is also at odds with an understanding of ECM as a movement that engages deliberately with the historic Christian tradition on one hand, and builds modern inclusive communities on the other. The remit of the book would have not allowed a deeper engagement with theories of modernity and postmodernity. However, a reflection on the secular value of pluralism and how this seems to have been embraced by emerging Christians would have made the account more compelling to students of secularity and non-religion.

The ECM stands for inclusivity, although this is mostly limited to an openness to different ideas about God than demographic inclusivity. As Marti and Ganiel explain, emerging congregations are not diverse ethnically and socio-economically: nearly 93% of respondents identify as White, nearly 40% have college or vocational school degrees, 12% have post-college education and 23% have graduate degrees. They are also overwhelmingly Protestant with over 60% having a background in either from mainline protestant or evangelical churches (p. 205). In the book, the emerging movement comes across as far too cohesive with no reflection on the cultural differences across the US, or between the US and the UK. The US loom large, perhaps inevitably, however British Christianity has a relatively long history in alternative

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worship, from the 'Nine O'Clock Service' to today's 'Fresh Expressions', which long predate the term 'emerging'. Most importantly, the UK more secular context than the US could have inspired a reflection on the relationship between secularisation and shifts in religious consciousness.

The ECM is born out of a critique of what some Christians see as stale bureaucratic churches, as well as 'consumer megachurches'. Christians in ECM want a more genuine, authentic, energising Christianity. They want participatory and non-hierarchical churches, experimental worship based on the talents of individual congregants, and, above all, an emphasis on inclusivity, especially on theological matters. These goals, however, were also those of early megachurches, as described by Donald Miller in his book *Reinventing American Protestantism*. Those churches employed professional and business-like structures to reach as many people as possible. The tide has perhaps turned, as shown by Bill Hybels, leader of Willow Creek, one of the most influential churches in the US, who has admitted recently that the focus on professionalism and participation in church programmes has not led to spiritual growth. Marti and Ganiel do not inquire into the failings of megachurches preferring to focus on the voices of those who have turned to ECM. However, this focus prevents the

authors from considering whether megachurches were always intrinsically too strict, homogeneous, and with consumerist tendencies, or whether the structures and business ethics taken up to ensure church growth have shaped them accordingly. A reflection on this might have gone some way to answer questions over the possibility of the 'emerging church' being just another wave of people seeking welcoming communities that might morph into something institutional tomorrow. It is true that Miller's seeker megachurches did not deconstruct Christianity; indeed, those churches specifically eschewed theological discussion and used the megachurch language of 'purpose-drivenness' to camouflage specific beliefs and narratives. At the core of the emerging church lies, in the account of Marti and Ganiel, a church that deconstructs by engaging explicitly with theology and by retrieving and reinterpreting tradition, something shunned and even condemned by many megachurches. Marti and Ganiel argue persuasively, that there has been a significant change in Protestant consciousness in the US and the UK, making this book a valuable resource for navigating a changing religious landscape.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

How to cite this article: Montemaggi, F.E.S. 2016 A Review of *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity. Secularism and Nonreligion*, 5: 4, pp. 1–2, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/snr.69>

Published: 07 March 2016

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