CASE FOR SUPPORT

The Role of Values in Responding to Major Social Change: Christian Churches and the Transition Town Movement

I Research Questions

The aim of the research is to provide the first analysis of the values which underpin the Transition Town Movement (TTM) and to undertake an interrogation of TTM values and practices through Christian beliefs and practices and vice versa.

The TTM, currently one of the fastest growing social movements around the world, began in Kinsale, Ireland, set up in Totnes in 2005, and now numbers more than 100 towns and cities in Britain, and has spread to Europe, the United States, Latin America, Japan, and Australasia. It aims to prepare communities for the likely consequences of resource depletion ('peak oil') in terms of food security, jobs and lifestyle, and the potentially disruptive impact of climate change. Responding to climate change and resource depletion is a critical collective choice problem and therefore the question of the values which guide decision making and action will be crucial. Since the Church can also be understood as a change directed, value-led, social and ‘spiritual’ movement we believe that a comparison of the TTM and Christian communities will yield a better understanding of both, and of effective ways of responding to change.

There are three principal research questions:

- What are the values, assumptions and processes of the TTM and how are these mediated by key narratives?
- What analogies and what contrasts exist between the TTM and the Christian church as a social movement?
- What resources for mediating and shaping major social change are there in the TTM and in the Christian tradition?

These questions will be pursued along two main avenues of enquiry:

1. Values and Assumptions which underpin constructive response to change

The TTM is a social movement, and is not text based. Nevertheless it draws on a wide range of writing which includes ecopsychology, the psychology of addiction, psychotherapy, and a range of spiritualities including those of Buddhism and earth-based religions. Transition communities characteristically have ‘Heart and Soul’ groups, the purpose of which is to identify spiritual, ethical and cultural resources for responding to
major social change and for adjusting to a post-carbon lifestyle. The literature appealed to here is ‘popular’ and under researched.

The research will in the first place aim to clarify the spiritual and value assumptions embodied in this literature. We shall seek to understand how the values expressed in this literature function in relation to major social change.

Secondly, the research will seek to compare these value assumptions with those of the Christian tradition. We shall seek to understand, first, how Christianity responds to the problems posed by resource depletion and climate change on the ethical, theological and spiritual level and how its understanding of spirituality differs from that to which the TTM appeals. This aspect of the research is therefore comparative. It touches on the most fundamental construals of the nature of Christianity, including the ideas of salvation, sin and grace, and the work of God in and beyond the Church. We shall consider the extent to which Christian beliefs and practices can be used to interrogate the assumptions that are predominant in the TTM and vice versa. The research will throw light on the nature of contemporary spirituality and will issue in a constructive and critical assessment both of TTM and of Church beliefs/practices.

2. Processes and Practices which promote constructive response to change

As a social movement the TTM espouses no leading political ideology. However, it seeks to change the nature of society and its proposals have profound social and political implications. It has no executive, espouses subsidiarity, and adopts inclusive decision-making processes such as open space and visioning. Each Transition community is empowered within its own locale. Co-ordination by the Transition Network enables communities around the country to share best practice.

Expanding on the second and third research questions, above, we shall ask

- What can be learned from the TTM about how society is changed?
- How action is initiated and carried through in the absence of an executive, and how this relates to the wider political process.
- What can be learned about the possibilities of consensus decision making? If the TTM is primarily a process, what values and dilemmas are acted out in this process?

In answering these questions we shall aim to provide a clear description of the TTM as a social movement.

The Church can also be regarded as a social movement (e.g. Gutterman 2005), which has played a part in changing values and practices as diverse as the abolition of slavery, reforming prisons or ending apartheid. In some manifestations it works through representative democracy (for example, in synods and assemblies). We will consider what can be learned from Church practice about the ways in which communities respond to major challenges and possibly profoundly disruptive change. We shall ask whether there are lessons which can be learned from, for example, Christianity’s monastic
tradition or the base communities of Latin America. Here again the work is comparative. Age and class profiling will be important in our analysis of the TT and Church groups with which we work.

In relation to the first of the bullet points above, the TTM believes that rapid social change requires rituals of celebration, healing and mourning. Rituals stand centrally at the heart of ecclesial process. There are two questions here: First, How do rituals function in relation to social change? What is their source? Second, how might the Christian rituals of celebration, healing and mourning be used to speak more clearly to the change likely to result from climate change and resource depletion?

Again in relation to the way in which change is effected, the TTM uses visioning and story telling and does not limit itself to the usual means of political argument. This has an analogy in the long tradition of Christian apocalyptic. In both the TTM and the Church context we need to consider the role that story, visions, dreams, prophecy, symbol and myth play in the process of social change. We shall ask how these are to be understood in a secular world and the role they play in the emergence of the critical mass necessary for effective social change.

In relation to all these points we want to ask how a minority group communicates effectively to the larger population.

II Research Context

As a new movement the TTM is only just beginning to attract research interest. This is listed on the Transition Network site and none of it so far has been from the standpoint of Theology, or raised the question of the values which underpin the movement. Our research is therefore path breaking, but it draws on, and seeks to contribute to, the following established areas of research:

- Some secular ethicists have addressed the question of the importance of values in dealing with change (e.g. A.K. Sen, Collective Choice and Social Welfare, 1979; T. Kasser ‘Shifting Values in Response to Climate Change’ State of the World 2009). M.Hulme (Why We Disagree about Climate Change 2009) examines both the role of values in responding to climate change and in particular the role of different religions and notes that climate change is increasingly discussed using language borrowed from religion, theology and morality. Thomas Dunlap (Faith in Nature 2004) argues that environmentalism is an emerging religious tradition. This line of ethical thinking has not so far been addressed by theologians. Our research will seek to do this, and will take Hulme and Dunlap’s arguments further, in relation to the values and spirituality which underlie the TTM.
- There is a very extensive literature on Christianity and the Environment (e.g. Moltmann, God in Creation, 1984; Horrell, forthcoming), and a growing literature on Christianity and Climate Change (e.g. Northcott, A Moral Climate 2007; Atkinson Renewing the Face of the Earth 2008). Resource depletion is addressed
by Daly and Cobb *For the Common Good* 1989. All this literature raises the question of the need for social change, though it by and large stops short of asking how this should be brought about. Our research will build on this literature, asking specifically how values affect change, and how this should be understood in relation to the TTM.

- There is a growing literature on the likely social impacts of climate change (e.g. C. Jaeger, *Risk, Uncertainty and Social Action*, 2001; Giddens *The Politics of Climate Change* 2009). This literature tends to underplay resource depletion, and by and large it overlooks the contribution of spirituality. It also, of course, overlooks the TTM. We shall consider how the TTM is situated in relation to this discussion and how spiritualities contribute to the management of social impacts.

- There is some literature on the role of ceremony, symbol and myth in bringing about social change (e.g. Benford and Hunt in Lyman (ed) *Social Movements: Critiques, Concepts, Case-Studies* 1995; Diani & Eyerman *Studying Collective Action* (1992) Kertzer *Ritual, Politics and Power* 1988). Politically radical Christian churches have been studied as important social movements (Gutterman *Prophetic Politics; Christian social movements and American democracy* 2005). We hope to make a contribution to this literature by considering the transformative potential of mainstream churches alongside the ceremonial and symbolising practice of the TTM.

- The project builds upon both the first Co Investigator’s Nuffield Foundation funded research project, ‘Climate change and the Church: An examination of the attitudes and practices of Cornish Anglican Churches regarding Climate Change’ and on the second Co Investigator’s ongoing Community Climate Change Research Project funded by a Lottery Development Grant, (2008-09).

There are four ways in which the University of Exeter also provides a research context for this project. First, our work will be based in the Centre for the Learning Church at the University, the focus of which is how the Church can be informed by research and reflection and thus make a contribution to contemporary society. Secondly, it builds on the work of the AHRC funded project The Bible and Environmental Ethics, in which Prof. Horrell was PI. Third, it builds on Dr Barr’s Community Climate Change Project, based in Human Geography. Fourth, it relates to the University’s new science strategy which includes Climate Change and Sustainable Futures as one of its five themes. One of the aims of this strategy is to examine the process of communicating climate change and effecting behavioural change to mitigate its effects, and our project will address this question directly.

The South West of England (Devon and Cornwall) is a particularly appropriate base for this research because it is the cradle of the Transition Town Movement in England, and as of July 2009 21 of the more than 100 Transition communities are in Devon and Cornwall.
III Research Methods

There will be three principal methods of investigation.

First, as noted in the first research question, although the TTM has no ‘canon’ it does have literature which is widely drawn on. Our task will be to make a full literature survey and to analyse this in terms of values and assumptions. This will be the bedrock of our research.

In addition to this popular literature there are rich and unresearched resources in the form of other media, including DVDs, newsletters, and recordings of conference presentations, which we shall include in this survey. This will be the task of the Principal Investigator (Prof. Gorringe) and the first Co-Investigator (Dr De Lashmutt) whose academic specialism is popular culture.

Secondly, because the TTM is primarily a movement, and essentially participative, we consider that participatory action research (PAR) is an essential mode of inquiry. The second Co-Investigator, Dr Barr, who is a geographer as well as a member of a church community and familiar with the TTM, is highly experienced in this mode of inquiry and will coordinate this side of it. Our aim will be to develop learning histories between researchers and protagonists through workshops held with three local TT groups. Organising and facilitating these will be the task of the Research Assistant, supervised by Dr Barr. The postholder will encourage participants to share their experiences of the TTM. This will start with an exploration of life histories and developing an understanding of how individuals have moved into TT groups, an approach similar to that applied by one of the applicants in exploring support mechanisms for TT groups in the South West (Barr, 2009). On the basis of these narratives, participants will then be asked to share their learning experiences by reflecting on their own practice, their role in the TT group and the TT group’s role in the wider community. Finally, participants will be invited to ‘vision’ the future of their group and its contribution. We hope in this way to contribute to the TTM by helping to explore and articulate key learning points.

Thirdly, in the second year we propose to use focus groups and semi-structured interviews with the wider TTM and Christian organisations in order to clarify the processes, aims and values of the two groups. Specifically we shall do this through focus groups organised at the annual TT conference (3 in total), and with three Christian environmental organisations: Christian Ecology Link, the Eco congregation movement, and Operation Noah (1 group for each organisation). The organisation of these will be the task of the RA, who will be responsible for recruitment. Those recruited at the annual TT conference will be asked to participate through advertisements in the conference programme. Those in the three Christian environmental organisations will be recruited through internal e-mail and advertisements sent by our contacts in all three organisations. The focus groups will permit the research team to explore common values, concerns and issues with members of each organisation and to identify common discourses and practices for these groups. However, in-depth interviews will also be required to explore the motivations, values and concerns of individuals who may not be able to share certain
views amongst other participants. A total of 24 interviews will be undertaken (12 with TTM members and 12 with members of Christian environmental organisations). Each focus group and in-depth interview will be recorded and transcribed, and will then be the subject of discourse analysis. The aim is to clarify how the understanding of the need for social change is arrived at and what the barriers to such an understanding are.

**IV Project Management**

The research will be based at the University of Exeter in its Centre for the Learning Church. The PI will be responsible for the overall management of the project and will divide the 20% allocated time between research and project management. The first Co Investigator (Dr DeLashmutt) will allocate 20% of his time to the project: 10% will be focussed on research and 10% will be given to assisting the RA with setting up and running the seminars and workshops and preparing an edited volume of essays. The second Co Investigator(Dr. Barr) will allocate 10% of his time which will be spent overseeing the focus groups and interviews.

The project will employ one research assistant whose task will be divided between active research (60%) and help in administering the project and organising the workshops, seminars and conference (40%). The RA will have a doctorate in a related topic and will be directly supervised by the PI. The RA will write an article of 7000 words to be published in the journal *Political Theology* at the end of the project.

The project is for two years. In relation to the first form of investigation we propose to hold six seminars in the University to which guest speakers from the TTM and with expertise in Ecological Theology or Ethics will be invited and paid for. The aim of the seminars is to deepen our understanding of TT resources, and to facilitate constructive comparison with Christian spiritual resources. These seminars will extend over both years and Dr. DeLashmutt will edit these essays for publication.

In relation to the second strand of investigation we will run workshops with the concerned TTM groups in both years(nine in all). These will be held in the towns where the groups are active. In the middle of the second year we shall hold a one day conference with these groups to reflect on the narratives developed in the previous two years.

At the end of Year 2 we will hold a one day conference on Values and Transition to be held in Exeter which will involve three keynote speakers. The RA will undertake the organisation for this. The likely keynote speakers would be Rob Hopkins, founder of TTM, Chris Johnstone, who works on addiction, and Nick Spencer, who has written on Christianity and Sustainability.

To ensure that the project provides value for money and obtains its objectives there will be a small advisory panel to provide academic and practical advice. This will meet at the end of year One.
The following have agreed to serve on the panel:

Professor Robin Gill, University of Kent, Canterbury (Christian Ethics)
Professor Michael Northcott, University of Edinburgh (Theology of Environment)
Professor Alistair McIntosh, University of Strathclyde (Theology and Social movements)
Nick Osborne, Business Consultant and Transition Trainer.

V Dissemination

The plans for public output are as follows.

- The PI will write a monograph on Theology, Values and Transition which will be submitted to Cambridge University Press.
- Two refereed journal articles by Dr De Lashmutt aimed at major journals in Christian Ethics such as Modern Theology or Ecclesiology and an edited volume of essays on Church and Environment.
- Two refereed journal articles by Dr Barr aimed at major Geography journals such as Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, Global Environmental Change and Environment and Planning A.
- A refereed journal article by the RA arising out of the action research.
- A short theological reflection on the TTM Handbook written jointly by Dr De Lashmutt and the RA targeted at church members to help them engage with the TTM process.

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