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# Forest, Grove, or Tree? Predilection and Proximity in Jones' the Church is Flat

Anderson Campbell

I come to Dr. Jones' book with a muddled history in the emerging church movement (ECM). From 2001-2005 I was actively involved as a commenter on Spencer Burke's TheOOZE website, fascinated by the simultaneous emergence of faith communities who were tired of evangelicalism-as-usual and interested in creating clusters of people who really wanted to live out the faith they confessed in ways that were connected to the deep history of the church, while at the same time exercising a prophetic voice in their present contexts. From 2003-2004 I was involved in co-planting a church in the Tidewater area of southeastern Virginia. Only years after that community ceased meeting would I come to understand that it was part of much larger movement of "emerging churches."

By 2004 I'd grown weary of the siren song of postmodernism's deconstruction of epistemology. The conversation was stuck—late-20th century Protestantism was deconstructed and no one was attempting to build anything from the rubble we'd created. I was also young, without means, unable to travel to the different gatherings held by Emergent, and hence, without a real voice in the conversation (or place to stand under the "big tent"—which had evolved into a "big top" replete with ring leaders). So, I withdrew from ECM as quietly as I had entered and pursued opportunities in college campus ministry.

In my heart of hearts, I held out hope that the influence of those early ECM conversations would bear fruit in subsequent years. Indeed, they have. ECM has gone through several iterations, usually with the same players at the fore, and—love it or hate it—remains part of the broader American evangelical conversation to this day. Tony Jones' voice continues to be one of the consistent voices aligned with ECM, so when he writes about the movement, he writes as one who's been "all in" from the beginning.

It is with no small amount of humility that I write this review of his recently published *The Church is Flat*, which is, essentially, a lightly edited version of his Ph.D. dissertation from Princeton. I understand that Jones will be reading this review and offering a response, so I have included a few questions for him near the end. Now, let's proceed to the book.[\[1\]](#)

Briefly, *The Church is Flat* is Jones' examination of ECM congregations and the distillation of a common set of ecclesiological practices shared by all ECM churches. Jones outlines his methodological approach by appealing first to the relatively recent sociological rubric of "New Social Movements" (NSM). Developed in the 1960s, the NSM rubric is a classification of social movements that examines the struggle for cultural capital, as opposed to the Marxist class struggle for economic capital.[\[2\]](#) Jones highlights the correlation between NSMs and the ECM's shared emphasis on the quest for identity[\[3\]](#) and also draws a strong parallel between the "flat" organizational structure of many NSMs and the propensity for ECM churches to eschew traditional ecclesial hierarchical structures.[\[4\]](#)

Having established his sociological rubric, Jones sketches the theoretical framework that he will employ in assessing his data. He first turns to Richard R. Osmer's "consensus equilibrium" model of practical theology and its four "moments" or tasks.<sup>[5]</sup> Each of these tasks exists in dialogue with the others, creating a kind of hermeneutical circle. Preceding each of these tasks are four corollary theoretical prejudgments that must be articulated by the practical theologian.<sup>[6]</sup> Jones makes his prejudgments plain. He will follow Hans Georg Gadamer's work on theory and praxis, for it best describes his commitment to a Heideggerian hermeneutic circle.

Finally, he looks to transversal rationality, after Wentzel van Huyssteen, as an interdisciplinary conversation partner for Jürgen Moltmann's work on ecclesiology. For Jones, van Huyssteen's work offers the promise to recover rationality from postmodernism's attempts to dispose of it altogether. As a postfoundationalist approach, transversal rationality creates the possibility of "epistemological overlaps"—points of shared dialogue between disciplines—in Jones' case he will explore the overlap between social science and theology.<sup>[7]</sup>

Jones' own work is based upon eight case studies of emerging church congregations he conducted between 2004 and 2006. This is the same data set out of which Jones wrote *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (Jossey-Bass: 2008). The set is intentionally small and is based off of four major criteria: "[the church's] reputation as a representative of the emerging church movement, the presence of the founding pastor, the personal identification of the pastor and the congregation with the ECM, and the willingness of the congregation's leadership to be involved in the study."<sup>[8]</sup>

Combining written surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews, he distills a set of theological and practical practices common to the eight churches. He utilizes a phenomenological method, which he hopes mitigates his personal proximity to the ECM and its leadership, relationally and historically. Whether or not he is successful will be discussed below. From the surveys and interviews he conducted, his goal is to offer a common ecclesiology of the ECM, which he then distills into "concrete practices" (communion, worship, preaching, and community) and "practices of virtue" (hospitality, theology, creating art, priesthood of all believers, and sacred space).<sup>[9]</sup> In his assessment of these nine shared practices, he notes that they are all "practices of relationality [*sic*]"—that is, practices that emphasize "the experience of lived relations between human beings, and between human beings and God."<sup>[10]</sup> The ecclesiology of the ECM is then, according to Jones, a "relational ecclesiology."

Pulling from a variety of Jürgen Moltmann's writings, Jones teases out a distinctly Moltmannian ecclesiology. After a detailed discussion of its development, strengths and weaknesses, Jones concludes that "[m]any congregations in the emerging church movement are instinctively using the very relational ecclesiology that Moltmann proposes."<sup>[11]</sup> He goes on to conclude that what the ECM is already doing instinctively could be done better if undertaken intentionally. To that end, he offers his own working definition of ECM relational ecclesiology:

*A relational ecclesiology* understands the church to be constituted by its existence-in-relationship:

The relationship of the church to Christ and Christ to the church;

The relationships of the human beings who belong to the church, especially as they are bound to

one another by the Holy Spirit;

The relationship of the Christian church to the other religious belief systems of the world;

The relationship of the church of the present to the church of the past;

The relationship of the church of the present to the eschatological church of the future.[12]

Before offering several suggestions about how the ECM might better foster these relationships, Jones returns to his exploration of NSMs, noting that his data compels him to observe that the ECM is made up of mostly young, white, educated, wealthier-than-average Americans. Fighting for cultural capital, as opposed to economic capital, Jones sees the ECM in a perilous position, teetering on the edge of capitulation to a ubiquitous consumer culture and becoming just another brand of American evangelical Protestantism.[13]

To avoid this, he suggests the ECM engage in: “Sacraments of Life”—practices that “(re-) sacralize the world” while at the same time “desacralize the church” through embracing Moltmann’s panentheism; “Relationality”—practices that are grounded in Moltmann’s social Trinity and serve to promote an egalitarian and democratic ecclesial governance; “Public Friendship”—practices that put the ECM into regular interreligious and intrachurch conversations, echoing Moltmann’s Christological office of friend; and “Corporate Interpretation”—practices of dialogical preaching and teaching based on a communal hermeneutic.[14] He offers specific examples of each practice, often drawing from experiences he’s shared at Solomon’s Porch and Journey.

Jones closes the book with one more exhortation for the ECM to rise to the challenge of engaging in deliberate, deep theological reflection:

To avoid the fate of the Jesus Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the emerging church movement needs to undertake serious theological reflection on the practices described above, as well as other practices with which their communities are engaged.[15]

I appreciate Jones’ offering in *The Church is Flat*. To my knowledge it is the first serious academic treatment of the ECM to come from within the movement. More are surely needed. As I mentioned above, Jones employs a phenomenological methodology in an attempt to mitigate his close proximity to his subject. I’m not convinced that he was altogether successful in “bracketing off” his biases in his assessment of the data he collected.[16] I wonder how successful Jones feels he was in his attempt, as he reflects back on the experience?

Regarding his explication of the data he collected in his interviews, surveys, and focus groups, one can’t help but notice the high number of anecdotes Jones uses from Solomon’s Porch and Journey. These two

churches, more than any of the others, seem to provide most of the illustrative fodder for the practices outlined in the book. Yet proportionally, these churches account for only 7% of his data set.<sup>[17]</sup> If the other six churches also engage in the distilled practices mentioned above, why the heavy reliance upon examples from just these two?

There is little mention of ecclesial practices outside of a church's regular weekend gathering. Almost all of Jones' attention is paid to what happens within the confines of the church's gathered corporate life. I'd be interested to know more about what life for an ECM community member is like *between* Sundays. While Jones makes mention of some higher level conversations that occur between churches and with other religious groups, one does not get a clear picture of how the regular, daily life of an ECM participant is changed by their involvement in their church. Perhaps the brevity of his visits to the eight churches didn't allow for observation of activities outside the weekly corporate gathering?

Finally, it is interesting to note that if Jones were to undertake a similar survey today using the same four criteria outlined above, only one church would likely appear again: Jones' own Solomon's Porch. Both Vintage Faith and Pathways Church would not qualify, each having dissociated itself with the ECM, and the other five (Cedar Ridge, Jacob's Well, House of Mercy, Journey, and Church of the Apostles) have all undergone significant leadership changes. In the end, I was left feeling that the book has more to teach the reader about Solomon's Porch's ecclesiology than about a broader ECM ecclesiology.

Jones was at his best in his chapter on Jürgen Moltmann. He clearly has great respect for Moltmann's work and handles it with ease. The way he teases out Moltmann's ecclesiology is a significant contribution to anyone interested in the practical application of Moltmann's prolific writing. Yet Jones' conclusions need not be limited to ECM churches. All churches in all traditions should heed his warning against cooptation by consumer culture, whether Emerging, missional, or something else. It is far too easy for the counterculture of the Kingdom to devolve into easy, theologically light, consumptive practices of worship and hyper-individualistic pop-psychology.

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[1] Jones provided TOJ a copy of the Kindle version of the book, which was forwarded along to me. All citations refer to Kindle location numbers, not pages. Because the book was not downloaded through the Amazon Kindle store, I'm not certain how accurately the location numbers correspond with those in a purchased copy of the e-book. If there are slight discrepancies in exact location, I apologize.

[2] Tony Jones, *The Church Is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church*, Kindle ed. (Minneapolis, MN: JoPa Group, 2011), 328.

[3] He writes, "NSMs often involved the emergence of new or formerly weak dimensions of identity. The grievances and mobilizing factors tend to focus on cultural and symbolic issues that are linked with

issues of identity . . . participants in the ECM, and especially the leaders, consistently express disillusionment and disenfranchisement with conventional forms of Protestantism...” Ibid., 378, 416.

[4] Ibid., 447, 436.

[5] They are: (1) the descriptive/empirical task, (2) the interpretive task, (3) the normative task, (4) the practical/pragmatic task. Ibid., 487.

[6] In corresponding order they are: (1) theory/praxis, (2) sources of justification, (3) interdisciplinary reflection (or cross-disciplinary thinking), (4) patterns of human and divine action. Ibid.

[7] Jones is highly optimistic about this method: “the transversal rationality of van Huyssteen offers the best options for the past-theologians of the emerging church movement and the modern context in which they do ministry.” Ibid., 619.

[8] Included churches are: Cedar Ridge Community Church (Spencerville, MD), Solomon’s Porch (Minneapolis, MN), House of Mercy (St. Paul, MN), Journey (Dallas, TX), Pathways Church (Denver, CO), Church of the Apostles (Seattle, WA), Jacob’s Well (Kansas City, MO), and Vintage Faith Church (Santa Cruz, CA). Ibid., 882.

[9] Jones is applying Nicholas Healy’s taxonomy of practice. “Concrete practices” are those that “take place at a specific time and place” whereas “practices of virtue” are those that “are more ethereal in nature, less contingent upon time and location...” Ibid., 1689.

[10] Ibid., 2044.

[11] Ibid., 2506.

[12] Ibid., 2651.

[13] Ibid., 2691. For more on exactly how today’s counterculture becomes tomorrow’s consumer products, I highly recommend reading Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter’s *Nation of Rebels* (HarperBusiness: 2004).

[14] Table 2: “Motlmannian Doctrine and Corresponding ECM Practice and Characteristics,” *ibid.*, 2723.

[15] Ibid., 2968.

[16] Ibid., 900. While phenomenological research regularly employs empathy as a desirable trait in data collection, assessment of that data may be better left to those without emotional attachments to the outcomes.

[17] Ibid., 3083. See the second table in “Appendix C: Empirical Data.” Of the 2,022 responses collected, Solomon’s Porch accounted for 113 and Journey accounted for 34.