

# **The Dark Side of Public Theology: Counting the Cost of Encounter**

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## **A Theological Landscape**

A constant concern throughout my ministerial and theological life has been that of how the world of faith – in my case the Christian faith – is to relate to those other worlds which go to make up the context in which we find ourselves. In due course I will describe the various attempts that I have made to describe and analyse this relationship and I will also link those to what is known in theology as the apologetic tradition. Behind this lies a conviction that a religious tradition that attempts to live for itself alone will end up isolated and irrelevant. If matters of faith do have any real meaning and significance then they surely must impinge upon other areas of our lives and that means contact with the worlds of politics, economics and social studies, let alone the spheres of science and technology.

It is clear however that the actual nature of those relationships – should they exist – is going to be controversial and contested, both within theology let alone other disciplines. It is possible to argue that there is a spectrum of possibilities for these relationships and that one can base this upon a model of human relatedness. For the sake of laying these out I will now suggest what this particular theological landscape might look like. Using the language of encounter, it seems to me that there must be at least the following options.

- Encounters are possible but do not in fact occur
- Encounters are possible but happen only rarely
- Encounters are possible but when they do occur they are essentially one-sided and may well represent either a theological or non-theological imperialism
- Encounters are possible, do occur, and recognise that there are shared assumptions and interests – what I have called “blurred encounters”<sup>1</sup>
- Encounters are possible, do occur, and are essentially open-ended and unpredictable
- Encounters are NOT possible for a variety of contextual and contingent reasons that may change at some point in the future
- Encounters are NOT possible for some essential reasons which stem from the nature of the world itself

I am aware that the last two of these appear to be in conflict with the earlier possibility of blurred encounters and my argument that the different worlds can be brought into relationship in ways which are creative and fruitful. It is also obvious that there is a significant difference between the last two. The suggestion that

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<sup>1</sup> John Reader, *Blurred Encounters: A Reasoned Practice of Faith*, (Vale of Glamorgan, Aureus Press, 2005).

encounters do not at the moment occur because of certain contingent factors leaves open the possibility that things can change, that there might be thresholds through which the relationship could pass that could create a new form of relatedness. The second however is of a totally different order – what one might term ontological rather than existential – and states that such a relationship is perhaps logically impossible. Given the nature of things, this is something that simply cannot happen, even at an unknown point in the future. If this seems a strong and overly definitive position to take and one that nobody actually holds, I will show in due course how some philosophy does point in this direction. My immediate concern with it is that it appears unduly deterministic, but that does not mean that it is an illegitimate position to take or that it is an argument that we have no need to take seriously.

In fact what I propose to do in this text is to examine more closely these final two points on the spectrum as I fear that the previous work on blurred encounters needs the more negative possibilities to be examined in order to show its importance and validity in relief as it were. All of the work so far has played on the positive aspects of these possible forms of relatedness, but these need to be compared with the two negative prospects, the first practical and the second philosophical, in order to bring to light the conditions within which blurred encounters can take place or how the thresholds to new encounters become visible. This is also a response to the follow-up book *Entering the New Theological Space*<sup>2</sup> which is a collection of papers from a range of practitioners and theologians illustrating how the concept of blurred encounters assists them in locating their practice and reflection upon contemporary faith engagement with a variety of contexts. Before I present more of the theological landscape, I will offer this short response to my co-editor's approach to blurred encounters in order to show how and why the more negative points on the spectrum are of importance.

### **Thresholds – or how to stand shivering on the brink**

As Chris Baker has said, the intention in this book<sup>3</sup> has been to move thoughts and actions on beyond the blurred encounter or third space and to show how those prepared to engage in imaginative and experimental ways can at least attain a threshold which might be a way into a different space. Before one can become too complacent or optimistic about this prospect though it is important to recognize where the language has come from and the limitations that need to be acknowledged. Is the threshold a point that is reached in a process of linear progression or is it more a stage in a process that is better described as circular? Baker quotes the famous lines from TS Eliot about arriving back where we started and knowing the place for the first time and I agree with him that this is an attractive and powerful image, but is it a bit too romantic, perhaps even convenient, for those who want to claim there has been change and the start of something new when apparently everything appears to be as it was before? Is it possible to take the circular tour, simply covering the same old ground, and then to end up back at the beginning, yet still to claim that something significant has happened in the course of the journey? It would seem so, in which case there need to be ways of evaluating the claims that something important has changed.

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Baker and John Reader eds. *Entering the New Theological Space*, (Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

It is possible that one takes the circular tour to avoid crossing the threshold, retracing one's steps across familiar territory because the truth is that one has stood shivering on the brink, fearful of launching out into the unknown. I think that those of us engaged in the production of this book must face some sharp questions before we can claim to have crossed a threshold.

One source of this language of thresholds and enclosures – because that term also figures in this set of images – is the work of the radical political philosophers Hardt and Negri which I have referred to elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Their interpretation of the current state of global politics is that we are experiencing the “full spectrum dominance” of the Westernized market economy model as represented most obviously by the US, but as part of “Empire” which spreads its tentacles much more widely.

Their thesis is that the form in which globalization has developed has created a situation in which a capitalist economic regime has captured all aspects of our lives. In what they describe as ‘Empire’, they suggest that this particular regime is now all-encompassing and all-embracing, that there is no longer any ‘outside’ from which one can view the present or work for alternatives. We are all inside the current system, whether we recognize it or not, and that therefore if any alternatives are to develop they must be from inside the existing structures. So globalization is an enclosure and it is not easy to see how anybody can break free from this.

One has to be aware that this is part of a wider debate which may not immediately appear to impinge upon the subject matter of this book, but I would argue that one should not adopt the terminology of other authors working within other disciplines without being conscious of how they employ the terms one is using. The challenge then is to show how one's own discipline might be using the terms differently and exactly what one means by them in this context. Does theology have a different and distinct understanding of thresholds and enclosures or is the language used parasitic upon the work of others?

Questions that arise from the ideas of Hardt and Negri are whether they are correct that there is no longer any location “outside” the global economic system and, if they are, where are potential “sites of resistance” or a realistic hope of alternatives? Their claim that we are now inside this enclosure reminds us perhaps of the film “The Matrix” in which only a few rebels are even aware that the rest of humanity is trapped inside a world that is keeping humans alive to feed some all-consuming machine. Hardt and Negri present the idea of the multitude as a possible source of resistance, arguing that the seeds of change are already within the system and will eventually subvert and destroy this from inside. The problem with this is that it might be another version of the romantic TS Eliot view – one can claim that things are really changing while, in reality, everything remains the same. How can anything new actually happen? Certainly if the system is as all-consuming and dominant as Hardt and Negri argue it is difficult to see any potentially subversive movement or idea not being swallowed up and appropriated by the existing power structures. Reverting to the language of blurred encounters, any site of resistance runs the risk of being appropriated or “eaten” by that which it aims to challenge or critique.

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<sup>4</sup> John Reader, *Reconstructing Practical Theology: The Impact of Globalization*, (Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p 12.

I want to add another set of ideas to this somewhat uncomfortable debate and these come from the French philosopher Badiou.<sup>5</sup> In this particular book which contains a series of lectures given around the turn of the millennium, Badiou is reflecting upon the Twentieth Century less in terms of the actual events and more in respect of the thinking that underpinned them. Without going into detail of what is a fascinating and challenging interpretation of this recent history, I want to highlight what Badiou says about thresholds as it adds another perspective to that of Hardt and Negri. His view is that the Twentieth Century was the time when the ideals and dreams that emerged during the previous century were put into practice – or at least, when this was attempted. We lost patience with simply talking about the possibilities for a new autonomous humanity – because that, he says, is the essence of those dreams and ideals – and various political regimes attempted to make them happen by forcing them into existence. In this atmosphere, individual human lives became expendable, and thus we saw the rise of violence and apparent inhumanity as first communism took the form of Stalinism and then fascism took a more conservative stand in the form of Nazi Germany. The (human) cost of these attempts to realise the dreams of a new humanity has led to an inevitable backlash and almost complete abandonment and withdrawal from such attempts over the last 20 years. The ideals have been left behind in favour of a supposedly neutral economic and political system that may exercise power just as brutally but without any ideological foundation beyond that of the profit motive.

Badiou's own political position based on what is a complex philosophical structure is that the objective of creating a new overall system is now no longer achievable, but, unlike Hardt and Negri, he argues that the new can only truly happen from outside that system. Hence he presents the ideas of the "event of truth" and the suggestion that subjectivity only occurs when individual human beings display a fidelity to those truth events. In terms of thresholds though he argues that we (the human race) have reached a point, or threshold, where we can go neither back into the past nor forward into a different future. The threshold is impassable and there is no entrance to a better world. We have taken the path of attempting to put the dreams into practice and the result was violence on a scale that we are not prepared to pursue any further. There can be no retracing of our steps though to a place which came before these attempts, but nor can there be a movement beyond as, apart from the global market system, we have run out of ideas let alone the courage to turn them into reality.

The image which Badiou employs and which I find particularly powerful comes from a story of classical Greece. The story is of a military force which finds itself on alien territory, the original purpose for its presence there having been destroyed, then faced with the question of where to go and on what grounds to base its continued existence. It is the homeward movement of lost men (in this case), who are out of place and outside the law, having to fall back upon themselves without any purpose or direction to guide them. The Greek term for this is *anabasis* – the principle of lostness, a wandering in a strange land without any obvious means of return but no way forward either. Badiou uses this to suggest that we are now "far out/ into the unnavigated" needing to somehow develop a new relationship between the individual

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<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, (Cambridge UK, Polity Press, 2007), pp 81-97

search for meaning and the collective attempts to create a new humanity which soured the previous century.

How all or any of this might fit with or conflict with theological notions of enclosure and threshold is yet to be tested I would suggest. The work of Badiou and Žižek which I used in my chapter is only just beginning to be available and thus processed within the English speaking philosophical and political world let alone to have any impact upon theology. It may be there is nothing to be learnt or gained from such a blurred encounter and that theology proceeds on its journey without reference to such disturbing interpretations and ideas. My judgement however is that those of us who wish to employ the terminology of thresholds and enclosures would do well to give attention to this work if only to sharpen our own distinct and different understandings of these terms. What is the Christian dream or ideal of a new humanity and how might this challenge and critique the ideals which caused so much suffering in the Twentieth Century? We are eager to launch our attack upon the reductionist view of human nature contained within global market capitalism but how can we be sure that we are not simply being appropriated by those very same values? Do we claim authentic sites of resistance to the current system or are we in fact circulating around the same point claiming to have seen and put into practice something new when nothing really has changed? A deeper examination of the work of Badiou might yield a more self-critical and insightful grasp of our own enclosures and thresholds – an “event of truth” that can only arise as a result of our fidelity to our own tradition in the light of an encounter with the strange and unfamiliar.

### **Contemporary Apologetics**

Simply in order to illustrate that my approach stands within an established theological tradition I will refer briefly to the major figures within apologetics of the last couple of generations. The key theologian in this respect is undoubtedly Paul Tillich whose work I encountered in the 1970s when I was an undergraduate. His “method of correlation”<sup>6</sup> undoubtedly set the agenda as far as I was concerned. He argued that systematic theology uses this method of correlation, more or less consciously, and must do so if the apologetic (or answering theology) is to prevail. For Tillich, this is a theological statement and reflects his belief about the nature of God:

The divine human relationship is a correlation also in its cognitive side. Symbolically speaking, God answers man’s questions, and under the impact of God’s answers man asks them. Theology formulates the questions implied in human existence, and theology formulates the answers implied in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence. This is a circle which drives man to the point where question and answer are not separated.<sup>7</sup>

Without going further into the details of this, and without denying the power of Tillich’s subsequent work and the levels of engagement with other disciplines, the limitation of Tillich’s approach is that it is too “top down”. The significance of the questions arising from human existence is still determined by the theological agenda and those who then adapted and developed this model have wanted to give greater emphasis to the relative autonomy of the other sources of insight into the human condition. So, for instance, David Tracy has proposed a revised or critical

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Part 1, Reason and Revelation*, (London SCM Press Ltd, 1978), pp 59-66.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

correlational method in which both sides in the relationship pose questions and provide possible answers.<sup>8</sup>

This leads to a more complex and indeed blurred set of encounters in which the task is to identify and unravel the exact nature of the engagement.

At one time, an identity of meaning between situation and response may be the key: at another, confrontation between two opposed meanings: at most times, for myself, the major key for Christian systematic theology will be the transformation of both questions and the responses in the situation by the classic, paradigmatic, disclosive and transformative power of the event. Which route ( identity, confrontation, transformation,, paradoxical relationships or relationships of sublimation from the ‘Christ above culture’) is needed for a particular correlation of the interpretations of situation and event cannot be decided *a priori*.<sup>9</sup>

In many ways this sounds like one of the possible models of relatedness with which I began this exposition. One cannot know in advance how a particular encounter will take shape or which elements of either tradition or situation will prove to be appropriate as a response is formulated. It is interesting that Tracy also talks about “the Event”, language that he probably inherited from Heidegger but which has more recently been developed and changed by Badiou as has already been seen. Thus the encounter is open-ended and unpredictable, but there is still the underlying assumption that such encounters do and will occur.

Perhaps the most recent attempt to pursue this approach has come from within the field of Practical Theology and the work of Don Browning, once again from the US<sup>10</sup>. Browning proposes extending Tracy’s method to Practical Theology in order to show how the encounters with other disciplines operate in practice. Four basic questions will need to be addressed in this process. How do we understand the concrete situation in which we must act? What should be our praxis in this concrete situation? How do we critically defend the norms of our praxis in this situation? What means, strategies, and rhetorics should we use in this concrete situation?<sup>11</sup> Browning suggests that all practical theologians will engage in this critical correlational method and must draw upon the resources of other traditions and disciplines as they engage with the questions of how to act as Christians and how to justify those actions.

Yet it is clear that Browning, like Tillich and Tracy, take for granted that the encounters between the Christian tradition and other spheres of human existence and their theoretical analyses, do and will take place. The challenge is to broker the relationships when they occur and how to remain faithful to the sources of the faith. The more complex and challenging this process becomes and the more that is demanded of theologians as they struggle to understand and interpret (critically) the ideas of other disciplines with which they may well not be familiar, the more likely it becomes that the task will appear simply too challenging and they will retreat into the safe territory of their own discipline. This is why I suspect many theologians shy away from any form of critical correlational method. There are however good practical and pastoral reasons why these challenges cannot be shelved and must be looked at again whatever the difficulties and complexities.

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<sup>8</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1981), p. 376.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 376.

<sup>10</sup> Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, (Minneapolis, US, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 55-6.

## Current Encounters

Having referred briefly to the recent history of Christian apologetics I want to illustrate how the encounters between the faith tradition and other areas of human experience are “live issues” and why one cannot avoid the question of the exact nature of the relatedness that is so often taken for granted. On February 7<sup>th</sup> 2008 the Archbishop of Canterbury gave a lecture on “Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious perspective”. This was immediately picked up by the UK press and portrayed as Rowan Williams suggesting that Sharia Law should be given a status that many saw as undermining or challenging the UK legal system. In fact his argument was much more subtle and complex than this and served to raise the public profile of the wider issue of how religious groups of any description are to relate to legal and political structures that are either indifferent or even hostile to faith traditions. How much accommodation should the law of the land make to minority communities who have their own strongly entrenched legal and moral codes? Williams makes it clear that he assumes that contemporary society is made up of people who have dual and often multiple identities and so no one exclusive set of relations or mode of belonging determines who we are. Christian are also citizens of the state as well as being members of families, possible employees of organisations and engaged in various social or voluntary activities. Within this complex – or as I would describe it – blurred situation characteristic of an increasingly globalised culture, how is society to hold together and what exactly is the role of law within this context?

Williams argues that since both society and individual identity represent a plurality of views and beliefs, then our common life cannot rest upon certain kinds of affiliation being marginalized or privatized and thus excluded from debates about public life. The role of “secular” law then must not be the dissolution of these affiliations in the name of universalism, but the monitoring of such affiliations to prevent the creation of mutually isolated communities in which human liberties are seen in incompatible ways and individual persons are subjected to restraints or injustices for which there is no public redress. Law must establish a space accessible to everyone and within which a commitment to defend human dignity can be protected. He describes this general process as “interactive pluralism”.

I mention this episode because it emphasizes the practical and political importance of the discussions about the nature of the relationship between the Christian tradition and the state and of course, just as importantly, the nature of the relationship between Christianity and other faiths. It also shows how the approach advocated by the Archbishop rests on certain assumptions about how these relationships might be conducted and mediated and indeed how they should be conducted in the current context. It seems that he supports the general “blurred encounters” approach in that he believes that encounters do and will occur and that these will reveal a degree of shared values and understandings but that these are not so open-ended and unpredictable that they fail to be contained within wider social and legal structures. But what if these encounters are in fact not taking place at the moment for specific and identifiable reasons, or if, even more worryingly, they are simply not possible under any circumstances? What are the grounds for optimism that engagement between different traditions and their adherents can actually happen?

Interestingly, a report entitled “Moral, But No Compass: Government, Church and the Future of Welfare” and published in June 2008 as a report from the Church of England to the nation<sup>12</sup> rather suggests that the encounters between the government and the Church of England leave much to be desired. Although this has been an exploratory study:

Its basic conclusion is that while the government’s faith-based agenda means well, and is backed by individuals of integrity, enthusiasm and skill, it lacks nuance and rich insight despite the best efforts of these individuals. In turn this is likely to hamper the faith sector’s civic contribution in general and that of the Christian churches – and especially the Church of England – in particular. This lack of nuance is significantly enhanced by omissions in the work of the Charity Commission and goes right to the heart of debates regarding English identity.<sup>13</sup>

The report is based on interviews and workshops involving over 200 bishops, community activists, voluntary sector leaders, parliamentarians and academics. Although it is only the first stage of a longer process of research into the relationship between the churches and the current political administration it does point out that these relationships are not as well established and grounded as some would like to believe or suggest. A particular source of tension is the fact that government agencies have extensively mapped the contribution made by Muslim groups and communities to overall levels of social capital, but of course it is obvious to everybody why this should be the case. On the general spectrum of encounters, the evidence of this report would suggest that this is in the range of encounters happening only rarely, or even being one-sided or imperialistic when they do occur. Why this should be so is a matter for concern and for further analysis and investigation.

Another contemporary example of this general range of issues comes from a recent book by the German philosopher and social theorist Habermas.<sup>14</sup> The title of the book is itself an interesting reflection of where the author locates the problem that he seeks to address. In his attempt to take seriously the revival of religious movements globally and to examine how representative the supposed secularization within Europe actually is, he argues that what needs to be created is a relationship between the claims of faith and the claims of naturalistic worldviews. At a later stage I will return to this text in greater detail, but as a foretaste of this I will briefly refer to the chapter on religion in the public sphere and describe Habermas’ proposals for how faith traditions must conduct themselves in the current political context.

The situation is very much that described by Rowan Williams: increased religious pluralism, the emergence of modern science, and the spread of positive law and secular morality. So traditional communities of faith have to process cognitive dissonances that are not likely to arise for secular citizens. This requires that:

Religious citizens must develop an epistemic stance toward other religions and worldviews that they encounter within a universe of discourse hitherto only occupied by their religion. They succeed in this to the extent that they relate their religious beliefs in a self-reflexive manner to the claims of competing doctrines of salvation so that they do not jeopardize their own exclusive claim to truth<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Davis, Elizabeth Paulhus and Andrew Bradstock, Von Hugel Institute, *Moral, But No Compass: Government, Church and the Future of Welfare*, (Chelmsford, Matthew James Publishing Ltd, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

They must similarly develop an epistemic stance towards the internal logic of secular knowledge and towards the institutionalized monopoly on knowledge held by scientific experts. So the autonomous progress of knowledge cannot conflict with articles of faith. What is also required is an approach which allows faith communities to exist within a legal and social structure in a way that does not compromise their own central beliefs and practices – very much the same concern as the Archbishop’s.

So here again there is a set of assumptions about what might and hopefully will be possible in terms of the relationships between faith-based identities and the ideas and sources of a culture that does not itself rest upon any particular religious beliefs. These would fit closely with my blurred encounters scenario where the relationships are not open-ended and unpredictable but are both structured and mediated in the light of certain contextual and political constraints. What they demand however, in Habermas’ view, and also in mine, is a willingness from those of faith to be reflexive in terms of their own beliefs, so this would be one of the conditions of the relationships.<sup>16</sup> If such a reflexivity is neither desirable or achievable however, and if there are external or internal faith factors that militate against such a development, how can the required relationships develop or the encounters take place? These are the hard questions which the blurred encounters approach has so far glossed over and which now demand more detailed attention.

## **Conclusion**

To return to the initial spectrum for encounter, one can see that there are good reasons to question exactly where contemporary examples of relatedness are to be located. These will be described in more detail as the text unfolds. There is a considerable difference between advocating a particular way of relating as the way in which faith sectors should develop their own self-understanding and identity and convincing oneself and others that these reflect what is actually happening. What then is to be learnt from counter examples? Do they undermine the argument that a blurred encounters movement is both feasible and possible? Perhaps they bring to attention the conditions which enable blurred encounters to occur and thus the barriers which need to be acknowledged and overcome if such relationships are to develop. Or perhaps the arguments are more depressing and disturbing than that and one might be forced to conclude that the relationships are in fact not possible under any circumstances. Hence the arguments require both a practical and philosophical dimension and a willingness to face some uncomfortable possibilities.

## **Interactive Pluralism in a Rural Context**

In order to focus on some case studies I will take as a starting point Williams’ notion of interactive pluralism. In this context however I will not be talking about the relationship between Christianity and other faiths, but rather about how the faith tradition relates to certain aspects of government policy and responses to that, and indeed about how specific government policies relate to each other. In other words, there is a plurality of approaches to the rural even from within what one might

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<sup>16</sup> John Reader, *Reconstructing Practical Theology: The Impact of Globalization*, (Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p. 14-17.

imagine would be a unified and coherent body of thought and action. It will be seen that the interactions between them leave a lot to be desired.

Before examining the details of this, two particular assumptions need to be registered though. The first is clearly an agreement that there are indeed different and distinct spheres of operation, often backed up by the concept of different disciplines and understandings of the world. The Archbishop accepts that human identity is constructed from a variety and plurality of traditions and social roles as has already been seen. I had reached the same conclusion by a different means through an exploration of the philosophical ideas surrounding the discussions about post-modernity. Without going into the details of that, I argued that it was no longer appropriate to view Christianity and indeed other major traditions, as metanarratives or Grand Narratives, but instead to approach them as major narratives.<sup>17</sup> The weakness of an extreme post-modern understanding was that of reducing traditions, or narratives, to a series of local narratives that neither made any great claims for truth, nor had the capacity to relate to other such narratives. The concept of a major narrative prevents such a retreat into relativism or reductionism and leaves open the possibility of relationship between the different narratives through what I called “mediating frameworks”.<sup>18</sup> A similar approach can be found in the work of my colleague from the William Temple Foundation, John Atherton, but he prefers to use the term “operational interconnectivity”.<sup>19</sup> Both of us have in the background the work of John Rawls and his idea of an overlapping consensus from within political philosophy and indeed discussions of that by Habermas.<sup>20</sup> This is not to foreclose this debate which others may wish to pursue, but merely to make clear the assumptions on which I am operating and where those stand in relation to other thinkers in the field.

The other assumption about which I have more misgivings is that which presents the rural as a distinct and discrete category essential for both social and theological analysis. A little thought will reveal that there are different types of rural just as there are different types of urban, plus shades of both in-between. One danger of categorizing in this way is that it overlooks the dominant influences upon how both rural and urban are shaped and that it misunderstands how people in the UK certainly view both and the relative advantages and disadvantages of residing or working within them.<sup>21</sup> For instance, for many who chose to move into the supposedly rural areas, the attractions of doing so are negative rather than positive. It is their perception of how the rural does not share some of the disadvantages of the urban – e.g. lower crime rates, higher levels of well-being generally, escape from the traffic and pollution of the cities and suburbs etc. – that determines why they think the rural is a better place to live. They may be mistaken in this of course, but it is the perceptions that count rather than the reality of rural living. For the sake of this discussion however I will perpetuate the distinction, not least because it continues to dominate both church and government discourse.

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<sup>17</sup> John Reader, *Beyond All Reason: The Limits of Post-Modern Theology*, (Cardiff, Aureus Publishing, 2007), p. 74-78.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p77 and also John Reader, *Local Theology: Church and Community in Dialogue*, (London, SPCK, 1994), p. 12-14.

<sup>19</sup> John Atherton, *Transfiguring Capitalism: An Enquiry into Religion and Global Change*, (London, SCM Press, 2008), p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993) and Habermas *ibid*, 2008, p. 119-126.

<sup>21</sup> John Reader, *ibid* 2008, p. 11-12.

## **Different approaches to the Rural**

In what follows I will suggest that it is possible to identify three different approaches to the rural, two of them from within government discourse and the policies behind government departments, and the third from within rural society itself and ways in which ordinary people respond to current problems and perceived threats. What the Christian tradition has to learn from this is both the way in which these different approaches interact – or fail to interact – and how it has to offer a fourth approach of its own that requires further thought and development. Put simply, the three can be described as the economic model, the community cohesion model, and the demonstration and resistance model. Discussion of the Christian response to these and how it begins to formulate its own distinctive response I will leave until later. Put in the terms described earlier, here we have three different major narratives or frameworks of explanation and spheres of operation, standing side by side and yet not obviously in any form of creative or interactive relationship. To illustrate this we need to examine some contemporary examples of each of these three in operation.

## **The Economic approach to the Rural**

For those working within rural ministry and regularly encountering the full range of rural issues the picture is a familiar and largely negative one. The way in which decisions are currently made on the basis of economic considerations leads inevitably to the further reduction of services in the countryside. This is of course true both within secular and church circles. There is a danger that church leaders readily criticize government decisions which lead to service cuts while failing to acknowledge that exactly the same process is happening with the reduction of front-line staff in rural parishes. An obvious list of issues would include; threats to post offices and village shops; closures or mergers of village schools; a poor supply of affordable housing which might enable younger people to move into or remain within their home communities; farmers unable to remain within the agricultural industry because of poor returns and spiralling costs; an influx of migrant workers in certain parts of the country as a source of cheap labour; pockets of rural deprivation and isolation alongside increasing affluence; all of these leading to an undermining of the sort of social or community life which many associate – rightly or wrongly – with rural life. The evidence for these appears regularly in a number of different sources, not least the reports from the Rural Advocate, Revd Dr Stuart Burgess and his team at the Commission for Rural Communities, whose task it is to keep the government informed on the impact of its policies and other factors on rural life and then to make recommendations for change.<sup>22</sup>

As Dr Burgess himself will admit, it is crucial to present hard evidence in these reports, backed up by statistics as well as by anecdote, in order that the government will be able to make judgements based on economic criteria. It often seems as if nobody is prepared to listen and take note unless the arguments can be presented in terms of numbers leading to clearly quantifiable conclusions and easily measurable targets. Having been a Board Member in a Rural Housing Association for

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<sup>22</sup> The Commission for Rural Communities, *The State of the Countryside 2007*, (London CRC 2007) or available on-line at [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk) The 2008 version has also now been published.

a number of years I am all too familiar with the language of Key Performance Indicators and of course the scepticism and cynicism that this breeds amongst those actually trying to do the work. This is, in itself, a reflection of the way in which economic determinants and the discourse that goes with it have swept into areas of human life that used to be understood in non-financial terms. Bottom-line accounting now appears to have spread into the churches as well, even if there is occasional lip service paid to the “triple bottom-line” which claims to include social and environmental criteria. The reality is that these other criteria become luxuries that the organisation cannot afford once finances become tight and the economic realities kick in.

It is important to give a taste of what is to be found within the State of the Countryside reports before going on to examine some instances in greater detail. Amongst other things the 2007 Report presents evidence to the effect that; in 2007 there were over 928,000 households living below the official poverty line of £16,492 – in other words the equivalent of a city the size of Birmingham; the rural population is an ageing one, over the last 20 years the proportion of 15-24 year olds has fallen from 21% to 15%, this places increasing pressure on rural services of course; the average house price in rural areas was 8.1 times median income compared with 6.8 in urban areas; the economies of rural England provide at least 5.4 million jobs with an annual turnover of £304 billion by rural firms – a subsequent report from the CRC argues that this could be substantially increased with better access to financial and business advice services; damage caused by the floods of 2007 is estimated at over £3 billion and there are fears that rural areas will not receive adequate funding compared to towns and cities; rural poverty is often concealed beneath the evident affluence and thus problems of isolation and disadvantage continue to go unaddressed; the influx of migrant workers – rural areas have experienced over 200% growth in them between 2003 and 2007 – is over 3 times the rate in urban areas; farming continues to decline in some sectors, notably livestock and hill farming with the threat of disease and poor returns a major factor. Since the 2007 Report was published of course there have been further exacerbating factors such as the rise in fuel and energy prices and the slump in the housing market. It does not take much to work out which sections of rural society will be hardest hit by these. So the general picture is one of continued deterioration.

### **Mainstreaming and the City Regions Agenda**

We turn now to some specific instances of the economic agenda being the determining factor behind recent government policy on rural areas. In part this emerges from research carried out by the William Temple Foundation in 2007-8 on behalf of a group of parishes in North Northumberland,<sup>23</sup> but also from my own work as Rural Officer for the Diocese of Chester and other research carried out in the North West region. What rapidly became clear as the Northumberland research began was that government policy in relation to the rural had undergone a significant revision. The reports on this were initially anecdotal but have been made explicit. In the aftermath of the Foot and Mouth outbreak of 2001 (FMD), the then government department dealing with rural matters (MAFF – Ministry of Agriculture, Farms and Fisheries, soon to become DEFRA Department of the Environment, Farming and

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<sup>23</sup> William Temple Foundation, *Glendale Alive: Report for the Rural Mission and Ministry Initiative*, (WTF Manchester, 2008) available on line at [www.wtf.org.uk](http://www.wtf.org.uk)

Rural Affairs, itself a telling re-branding), was told that rural was to become a “special case”. In other words it was to receive a higher priority than previously in terms of public funding and external support. This was clearly in response to the problems being faced by the countryside, with both tourism and agriculture deeply affected by the impact of FMD. In the Comprehensive Spending Review of November 2007 however, a rather different approach was taken. It became clear that rural is no longer to be considered a “special case” but must take its chances alongside all the other government spending priorities. The term that is now used to describe this approach is “mainstreaming” and this crops up regularly in government documents and speeches. It also coincides with a redefined and more circumscribed role for DEFRA itself in relation to the countryside.

For this I now draw on a research document produced by the North West Rural Community Councils in 2008.<sup>24</sup> In their description of the strategic context, they make it clear that this process began back in 2003 with Lord Haskins review on Modernising Rural Delivery. As its recommendations are implemented the result is that the Countryside Agency has been split up, and part has been incorporated into the new agency responsible for natural resources, Natural England. Responsibility for rural evidence and advocacy has been transferred to the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC and the work of Dr Stuart Burgess referred to earlier). Along with this has gone a substantial reduction in DEFRA’s funding of community development work, with headline responsibility for the funding of socio-economic interventions in rural areas passed to the 8 Regional Development Agencies. In summary:

Government’s position on rural issues continues to move. Within the last 12 months it has become clear that rurality per se can no longer be considered as a driver of public policy. As a result there will be much less focus on funding programmes targeted specifically at rural areas, the Rural Development Programme for England apart. Government’s current approach, clearly enacted in the Comprehensive Spending Review, is to mainstream rural issues across all service departments.<sup>25</sup>

The result of this is that rural has to fight its case and compete for scarce resources against the more heavily populated areas of the country where the scale of social problems and possibly the greater political pressures are to be found. In a straightforward numbers game it would seem that “mainstreaming the rural” is most likely to manifest itself in a marginalizing of rural issues. As the RCC document points out, of the 30 Public Service Agreements (PSAs) introduced by the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review, none relate specifically to rural England. Although DEFRA has a role in some of these PSAs, it is not clear how they will influence the way delivery of rural services happens, nor what impact on rural people, places and businesses this change of ownership within government will have. DEFRA’s own 3 year strategic objectives have been set out and these include taking the lead on responses to Climate Change and the government’s responsibility for Sustainable Development. It would seem that government policies on rural areas will be redirected through routes such as Local Authorities and service providers such as Primary Care Trusts, Police and Ambulance services. One of the emerging policies is indeed through the Place Shaping agenda introduced in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007), which includes the following statement:

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<sup>24</sup> North West Rural Community Councils, *Pathways of Influence: Community Led Planning – Why it matters*, (North West RCCs, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

Future approaches to rural proofing and ‘mainstreaming’ should take account of the place shaping agenda. Good mainstreaming takes into account local issues and delivery with locally empowered people. Local solutions to local issues are right at the heart of place shaping and mainstreaming.<sup>26</sup>

There is a statement worthy of considerable examination I would suggest and one which goes right to the heart of this debate about how different approaches relate to each other both in theory and in practice. What the rest of this RCC document goes on to evidence is that there is a significant gap between the rhetoric on public empowerment and involvement in such things as community led planning and the reality of how this is taken into account at local government level. Part of the problem I would suggest is that the community empowerment ideas emerge from the community cohesion model being advocated by government but that the drivers behind local government and other rural service provision are essentially economic and that the two models are either in direct conflict or else never encounter each other at all. As the RCC research says “there appeared to be very limited evidence of any real link between the outcomes of community led planning activity and strategic decision-making or service planning”<sup>27</sup>. Here therefore is a stark example of where engagement with rural issues highlights a problematic area for real encounter.

None of this is to say that the objectives now set out for DEFRA are not of great importance, nor to suggest that there is any deliberate objective of government to marginalise rural areas, but it does begin to illustrate how difficult it is, in practice, to hold together different models of operation when the principles and values that lie behind them are so disparate. A further example of this also emerged from the WTF research in North Northumberland, and this is the government’s policy on City Regions. Once again the research needed to identify exactly how policies for the remote rural areas of this county fitted into a wider, regional and national context. A key to this was the document published in 2004 *Moving Forward: The Northern Way*, ([www.thenorthernway.co.uk](http://www.thenorthernway.co.uk)) which presented the then government approach to regional development. In addition to the North East, this also covered the other main northern regions, so the territories of Yorkshire Forward and the North West Regional Development Agency, and thus the City Regions of Liverpool/Merseyside, Central Lancashire, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Hull and the Humber ports

This is mainstreaming on a regional scale and again suggests that the requirements of the rural areas, seen largely as hinterlands to the major conurbations, are likely to come a poor second when it comes to resource and funding allocation. As one academic has described it (Joe Painter, University of Durham, 2007) “mainstream formulations of the city-regions concept typically figure the rural in subordinate and peripheral terms as a residuum, a resource, a restraint, a refuge, a re-creator, or a reserve”. In other words, the rural does not exist in its own right as a distinctive category with its own problems and dynamics, but simply as that which is on the edge of the urban centres and services them in certain ways as well as being the preferred location for those who can afford the properties there. If this is the reality of government policy towards the rural then it suggests that the economic model is always going to be the determining one despite the community cohesion agenda that is preached from some government departments.

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p.13.

The City Regions agenda has been playing itself out in the County of Cheshire in a very particular manner and has now led to the proposed formation of two unitary authorities for the area which will come into operation in 2009. The fact that none of the bodies within the county wanted this and have continued to lobby against it but without success, does point to the possibility that deeper forces are at work. One of the suspicions is that the real agenda is to further embed the City Regions policy with West Cheshire effectively being seen as part of the Liverpool/Merseyside region and East Cheshire part of the Greater Manchester region. Interestingly exactly this configuration is already to be found in the 2004 report mentioned earlier and indeed subsequent official documents. So, for instance, the Greater Manchester City Region is defined as including the local authority districts of High Peak, Congleton, Macclesfield and Warrington, this being based on the travel-to-work area of the core city.<sup>28</sup> Various social and economic evidence is documented in order to support the argument that the rural parts of East Cheshire are strongly and directly linked to Manchester, for instance trips from Cheshire through Manchester airport are almost as frequent as those from Greater Manchester – hardly surprising given the levels of affluence in this area and the presence of significant industries such as Astra Zeneca and Siemens. The housing market is also determined by people moving out of the conurbation and into the surrounding villages but with ready access to transport facilities such as the motorways and the airport.

In many ways all of this makes considerable sense. The reality of an area so close to the major cities of Manchester and Liverpool is that who lives there depends very largely on the income earning capacity from within the conurbations. The rural – farming apart perhaps – is very much an adjunct to and hinterland for the cities and therefore, in terms of economic regional planning and development, it would be simply foolish not to count it in with the whole of the City Region. The problems come over the issue of resource allocation and service provision if it is acknowledged that not everybody living in the hinterland has access to high levels of affluence. The major benefit for those who choose to move into the rural parts of Cheshire is that it is so easy to get out of in order to pursue both work and leisure activities. For those have no choice but to live in this area their experience is more likely to be that of being left behind or stuck, dependent upon poorer local services and facilities. A purely economic model of regional development stands less chance of taking their circumstances into account or of supporting the subsidised services that they probably require. Once again therefore one can see how one particular model may well conflict with or fail to encounter other areas of government policy, particularly that which encourages local participation and community empowerment.

### **The Community Cohesion approach to the Rural**

References to this different model of operating have already been made in the previous section, particularly as it occurs in the current debate about community led planning. As the RCC research document has pointed out the stated objectives of this approach are to engage local people in the processes of determining their own futures and that of their particular localities. A major plank of this has been the initiation of Parish Plans, often supported by Rural Community Councils, and a means of getting a range of local people involved in thinking about how they would like their villages

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<sup>28</sup> A Framework for City Regions: Working Paper 1 – Mapping City Regions. Chapter 4.

and communities improved. Parish councils inevitably end up taking the lead on this process in many cases although it is made clear that this is NOT to be another parish council initiative dominated by councillors, but to genuinely include those who are less inclined to participate in local matters or whose voices are not normally heard. The role of parish councils has itself come under scrutiny in recent years with a move by central government to devolve more powers onto them under certain circumstances. All of this comes under the general heading of community empowerment. The cynical question is that of what real commitment is going into all this and how much is about being seen to espouse certain policies which are designed to tackle problems of social order that are more likely to arise in the urban areas where different cultures and religions attempt a peaceful co-existence.

A major area which forms part of this debate however is government policy on sustainability as this has become the overarching concept which encompasses social, economic and environmental factors. The question is that of how this tranche of policies relates in practice to other potential determining issues. Once again I will draw on research and responses from the North West region in order to illustrate this.<sup>29</sup> The North West Regional Rural Affairs Forum (NWRAF) is made up of the region's rural stakeholders and aims to represent the views and concerns of those affected by policies and services in the rural areas. This particular response is to the government's proposals for economic development and regeneration in the region "Prosperous Places". Its main criticism is that the latter's absolute focus on delivering economic growth is at odds with the government's own stated policy on sustainable development, which claims that the objective of this is to "achieve strong, just and healthy communities that live within environmental limits" and that this will be done by means of a sustainable economy, sound science and good governance. In other words, a prosperous economy is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The NWRAF response highlights two particular dangers which arise from this over-emphasis upon economic growth for its own sake. The first is that disproportionate resources and investment will be focussed on development "hotspots", areas which are already economically successful which will both draw resources away from the areas most in need of investment and development, and lead to a deterioration of environmental quality in and around the "hotspots" themselves. The second is that disproportionate resources will be focussed on urban areas to the detriment of rural ones, and this will lead to the further decline of rural service provision, employment opportunities and affordable housing. Rural communities increasingly become unsustainable commuter dormitories and retirement villages rather than functioning and vibrant communities. This is consistent with the earlier comments on mainstreaming and the City Regions agenda and reinforces the conclusion that an economically-driven policy on the rural will simply accelerate the decline of rural life. So the question is that of how serious is the intent to create sustainable communities when resources and funding are almost bound to be directed to the currently dominant economic "hotspots". The response concludes that:

The regional strategies should be explicitly required to highlight particular rural issues. While rural issues should be mainstreamed throughout the strategy, specific rural issues should be identified, an overall framework for development in rural areas established, and specific reference to responding to

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<sup>29</sup> North West Rural Affairs Forum (NWRAF) response to Prosperous Places: taking forward the Review of Sub National Economic Development and Regeneration.

rural needs and opportunities included in individual policies where relevant. The direct and indirect benefits of the rural economy to the health and prosperity of the region must not be underestimated<sup>30</sup>

It is important of course to see such comments in context and to beware of the extent to which the rural lobby is bound to fight its corner in a way that can sound very negative and hostile towards any government policies, given the political persuasions of the current administration and its contrasts with the more conservative political tendencies of many rural areas. One might also argue that quite a lot of this sounds like “shutting the gate after the horse has bolted” in terms of many villages which have already become commuter dormitories or retirement ghettos. Irrespective of this however, one is forced to return to the question of how the economic relates to certain social and environmental agendas and how such different values and policies are to be reconciled or brought into some sort of creative tension. At its most fundamental level, is the objective of economic growth consistent with the notion of sustainability at all? There are many who would argue that sustainability presupposes economic growth of course, but is such a balancing act achievable or even desirable? Theoretical those these questions might sound they play themselves out through the conflicts over the future of the rural in the most practical of ways as we have seen. As we move to examine the third model that is in operation in this sphere it is exactly these conflicts which come to the fore.

### **The Demonstration/Resistance Model and the Rural**

The third model which illustrates what one encounters in rural activity is that of demonstration or resistance. Although there are very obvious local and individual examples of this across the country, for instance, campaigns to keep small school open or to retain other local facilities, and indeed the work of organisations such as the Womens Institute, I will focus upon two larger scale operations which I think are of great interest to faith communities as they seek to work out how and where to engage with rural issues. These are the Countryside Alliance and the Transition Towns movement (Low Carbon Community Network). What one encounters in these is the potential contrast between what is essentially a defensive position – trying to hold onto what is or what has been in the recent past – and a more offensive position which is explicitly attempting to create a new and different future, albeit in response to perceived current threats.

Before I go into these in greater detail I must acknowledge the source of this model which is, in fact, the text by Badiou referred to earlier.<sup>31</sup> Badiou argues that the Twentieth Century was, amongst other things, the century of the demonstration, this being the prevalent form of collective organisation of political and social resistance. What does he mean by this?

It is the name of a collective body that uses the public space (the street, the square) to display its power. The demonstration is the collective subject, the we-subject, endowed with a body. A demonstration is a visible fraternity. The gathering of bodies into a single, moving material form is intended to say ‘we’ are here, and ‘they’ (the powerful, the others, those who do not enter into the composition of the ‘we’) should be afraid and take our existence into consideration.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Badiou ibid., pp 106-7.

So the demonstration is a display of power in an attempt to be heard in the political process and also a means of bringing about change. The phrase “a visible fraternity” is I think an excellent description of this type of collective action and suggests that something is created by the fact of people being prepared to work and act together in some sort of common cause. One wonders how often one could legitimately describe faith communities in this way though. What is it that converts a gathering of individuals who share a common interest into a “visible fraternity”?

It does not take much of a leap of the imagination to see how the Countryside Alliance fits into this category. For those not familiar with this, it was formed back in 1997 in response to various policies emerging from the then New Labour government which would affect the countryside ( or some of its inhabitants at least) and were deemed to be unsympathetic and even downright hostile towards rural life and culture. In essence therefore it was conservative both in its political sympathies and its general tenor. Probably its most visible manifestation was the march in London in the early 2000s which was heralded as the largest peace time mass protest in this country. Some rural churches actually closed down that Sunday as congregations migrated en masse to the capital. I was in post in Worcestershire at the time and significant numbers from my four congregations went on coaches down to London, although we decided to retain our normal pattern of services.

The catalyst for this movement was undoubtedly the proposed bill to bring an end to hunting, although one could argue that this became the focus for a whole raft of objections and concerns from within rural circles that the new administration just did not understand and was not prepared to listen to rural voices and issues. So the Countryside Alliance became something of an “umbrella body” hosting a range of other organisations and issues and has now in fact become a major lobby group on rural issues more generally. Thus if one visits their website one will discover that their manifesto covers what is now familiar and wide-ranging territory<sup>32</sup>

In what is described as a jigsaw one will find the following 10 pieces for a better countryside:

- Housing for local people seeking local jobs, but development must be sensitive to community and environmental needs
- The countryside must be celebrated for its business innovation and new enterprises encouraged
- It should take the lead in creating a sustainable environment, with communities acting at local level to help manage the impact of climate change
- The network of vital rural services should be protected because of its enormous social and economic value
- The countryside is enriched by country pursuits whose participants should be free from prejudice and discrimination
- It is the nation’s larder, which means that British farmers and producers should be championed
- It owes its great beauty and wildlife to the private and public land managers who should be encouraged as they shape the land for future generations

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<sup>32</sup> [www.countryside-alliance.org](http://www.countryside-alliance.org)

- Crime is hidden beneath a picturesque landscape so tackling it should be a priority equal to urban areas
- There should be real progress but the government should respect local democracy and empower rural communities
- The countryside is for everyone, so education should bridge the gap between urban and rural communities to enable mutual understanding to flourish

I think this is a fascinating and revealing mixture of agendas which one could spend much time unravelling and analysing. Is it about “pulling up the drawbridge” and protecting the interests and values of those who are already in occupation in the countryside? Is it genuinely progressive and espousing the latest thinking on environmental protection, climate change, sustainability and community empowerment? Both can be read out of the clever wording of this statement, although it is easy to be cynical about which agenda is really dominant. So, for instance, there needs to be local housing for local people (what is “local” of course is not defined as ever), but only if it is sensitive to community and environmental needs. In other words, it is to be strictly controlled and contained within parameters decided by those already living in the countryside. It is also very interesting to see climate change high on the list when there are those of an older conservative generation who do not agree that there is any such thing and believe it is simply left-wing politicians jumping on the latest bandwagon looking for an excuse for further social engineering and the restricting of business and enterprise. Rural services are vital because of their social and economic value – but to what extent would a different administration be prepared to subsidise these services when there is a clear conflict with economic priorities? Country pursuits and farming are to be protected and championed, so that priority is clear at least. One might also suspect that “empowering rural communities” actually means giving an even more powerful voice to the existing countryside lobby groups rather than necessarily articulating the needs of those lower in the social order. But perhaps this is to read too much into each of these statements.

However one interprets such a document, it does show very clearly that the demonstration/resistance model is a powerful one within the rural context. A major question for Christian rural engagement is to what extent one should sign up to or support the Countryside Alliance agenda. Parts of it one might easily agree with, but there are other aspects where a critical perspective is required. It is quite difficult **not** to get drawn in simply because so many members of rural congregations are also members of or sympathetic with the aims of the Alliance. The problem is that it could easily be or become a matter of defending the financial and social interests of a certain section of the rural populace, potentially sustaining exclusive rather than inclusive communities. So is there a meeting place or encounter between Christian values and principles and those of this particularly powerful rural lobby?

The second example is equally interesting and raises similar questions if for different reasons. The Transition Towns movement is a recent phenomenon which I heard of for the first time at a conference organised by the Churches Rural Group (2008 at Swanwick) in a presentation by Prof Tim Gorringer from Exeter University. Basically it is comprised of community groups working out together how to respond at a local level to the dual threat of peak oil and climate change.

I don't intend to go into the details of the actual arguments about either of these in this context as what concerns me here is the nature of the movement as a whole and the question of possible linkages with faith agendas. I would have to "nail my colours to the mast" though and admit that I have greater personal commitment to this set of concerns than to some of the implicit ones of the Countryside Alliance. If one accepts that peak oil and climate change are a reality – and many of course do not or are not even aware of the arguments about peak oil in the first place – then what sort of future are we creating for ourselves? We appear to have constructed an economic and cultural system that is totally dependent upon access to cheap oil and cheap energy. Our vulnerability to rising energy costs in the UK is becoming clear in the middle of 2008 and leading to significant inflationary pressures and fears of a looming economic recession. Whether this is simply part of the normal cycle and represents an adjustment in terms of things like house prices and food prices which will eventually even themselves out, and the economy return to some sort of normality, is a highly contested question. Those who sign up to the peak oil arguments are more inclined to see current developments as a sign of things to come and the beginning of what needs to be a post-carbon age. Their opponents are wary of such interpretations on the basis that doomsday scenarios are the province of a politically disenfranchised middle class and have proved to be mistaken in the past. Time will tell who is right.

In the meantime, the Transition Towns movement needs to be studied and taken seriously as another manifestation of the demonstration/resistance model in operation in rural matters as it gathers momentum and support. A good resource for information is to google Transition Towns and gain access to the various websites, but there is a recently published handbook which is an excellent introduction to the whole debate.<sup>33</sup> At some point I intend to analyse this text more closely and examine how it parallels what some theologians call Implicit Religion, but that is for another occasion. In this context I simply want to show how its fits the third model.

The concept of resilience is at the heart of the approach advocated by the movement – this is in contrast to the notion of sustainability which is now part of the established discourse on environmental issues. Resilience is the capacity to respond and adapt to significant shocks and changes to the existing system and to develop appropriate alternatives.

In the context of communities and settlements, it refers to their ability to not collapse at first sight of oil or food shortages, and to their ability to respond with adaptability to disturbance. The UK truck drivers' dispute of 2000 offers a valuable lesson here. Within the space of 3 days the UK economy was brought to the brink, as it became clear that the country was about a day away from food rationing and civil unrest<sup>34</sup>.

Although this might sound a slight exaggeration the point is clear, we are more vulnerable than we care to acknowledge. Ecosystems are deemed to be resilient when they are characterised by diversity, modularity and the tightness of feedbacks, according to the arguments presented here. What all of this suggests is that we shift our dependency away from national and global networks which rely heavily on cheap energy and become more locally self-sufficient in terms of as many of our

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<sup>33</sup> Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience*, (Dartington, Green Books, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* p. 54.

requirements as possible. The extent to which this can now be achieved is a real issue and one of my concerns is that too much of the infrastructure required to make a return to the local viable has already been destroyed, but the Transition Towns movement focuses on what can now be done to encourage and facilitate a more locally-based economy and society.

The Handbook is a lengthy and sophisticated text that does not limit itself to the actual arguments for and against climate change and peak oil, but uses interesting contemporary psychological ideas to describe how people can be motivated to engage these issues without being overwhelmed or depressed by the doomsday scenarios. Our attachment to oil in particular is portrayed as an addiction and has to be treated as such, so simply presenting people with the facts will not be enough to transform our behaviour. We have to be able to see that a better future post-carbon is actually a positive and exciting prospect and groups are encouraged to carry out “visioning exercises” in which they project their communities into the future and produce newspaper articles describing the good things that are happening 10 or 20 years on in this “brave new world”. This in itself is very interesting and one wonders how faith groups who are currently pessimistic about their future survival might learn from such a process – that their old men might see visions and their young men dream dreams etc! The problem being that the churches are rather full of “old men” while the “young men” sign up to environmental movements.

Anyway, there has as yet, been only limited contact or encounter between the Transition Towns movement and faith communities, despite the fact that there are well-established faith groups operating in the general environmental area<sup>35</sup>. It will be interesting to see if and how such encounters develop and of course if the movement itself continues to gain momentum or fades if the perceived problems are tackled in other ways. One of my concerns with this approach, as I have already suggested, is whether the return to the local is either possible or desirable. Having addressed the latter issue in an earlier WTF Occasional Paper<sup>36</sup> I do not intend to repeat those arguments here. In some ways though the position has moved on since 2005 and the focus has shifted slightly from developing government agendas on New Localism and the potential involvement of faith groups, towards movements within civil society more generally, and therefore if and how those of faith might wish to engage with the Low Carbon networks and Transition Towns. Do we share their interpretations of peak oil and climate change, or indeed their proposals for resilience and a return to the local? Are there things to be learnt from what is a sophisticated and complex lobby which does not appear to be concerned to protect its own personal and financial interests, but has a new vision for how the rural might contribute to a better society? Is it yet another middle class trendy movement that will burn itself out if and when the practical problems are addressed by technological or political means? It is not easy to see answers to these as yet, but it is certainly another area where the rural has much to teach theology about the nature of relatedness and developing visions of the human.

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<sup>35</sup> Martin J. Hodson and Margot R. Hodson, *Cherishing the Earth: How to care for God's creation*, (UK Monarch Books, 2008); Nick Spencer & Robert White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, (London, SPCK, 2007). Both these books give good references to such engagement.

<sup>36</sup> John Reader, *Apocalyptic Localism or sustainable communities? An emerging role for faith-based (religious) capital*, (Manchester, William Temple Foundation, 2005, Occasional Paper No 33).

## Identifying Conditions for Encounter

To recap the central theme for a moment, the task I have set myself is to examine in greater detail occasions where effective encounters and relationships do not readily occur, either because of contingent factors that can be identified or perhaps because there are deeper reasons why they might not be possible. The aim of this investigation is to see if it is possible to identify some of the conditions which make such encounters more or less possible. Engagement with a number of issues arising from a rural context has assisted the process so far, but it is time to move beyond that zone and to discover what can be learnt from other spheres of interaction and indeed from a number of disciplines. The first objective is to make it clear that I am not alone in this task and that others are currently asking similar questions. The initial stage is to review a process happening at the moment and being initiated by the UK government with the aim of facilitating relationships and contacts between themselves and faith communities.

### Face to Face and Side by Side<sup>37</sup>

To provide a little background to this document, it emerges from a series of consultations and related research as part of an overall agenda to strengthen relationships between the government and faith groups through practical activity. It is fairly obvious that there is a national security concern at work here but also an attempt to see if and how faith communities can be drawn more deeply into the role of service providers. Whether or not one agrees with these aims is another issue that has been addressed elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> At this point I am more interested in what is suggested as enabling closer working relationships.

Three core principles underpin the framework for partnership, those being partnership itself, defined as valuing the contribution made by partners and working together to increase their impact; empowering both people and government to work together to make life better, and offering choice to local communities to decide for themselves what works best for them. The framework is built around four building blocks:

- Developing the confidence and skills to “bridge” and “link”
- Shared spaces for interaction
- Structures and processes which support dialogue and social action
- Opportunities for learning which build understanding<sup>39</sup>

As one might expect these operate at a high degree of generalisation and are subsequently investigated in greater detail throughout the document. Why should such a process be so important though? It is because in the 2001 census, over three-quarters of respondents - more than 44 million people – identified themselves as having a religious faith and just over 15% - more than 8.5 million people – stated that they had no religion. More than seven out of ten people said that they were Christian. Hence

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<sup>37</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government, *Face to Face and Side by Side: A framework for Partnership in our multi faith society*, (London, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> E.g. Reader, *ibid.*, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government *ibid.*, p. 9.

the relationships between those of different faiths, let alone those between those of faith and those of no faith, are going to be significant components in civil society. The phrase that they use in the title is taken from comments by the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, and is seen by government as a helpful way of describing these relationships as and when they are working well. Particular locations or spheres of interaction are, supposedly, schools, the workplace, sports, leisure and culture facilities and then shared public spaces and residential areas – a fairly comprehensive list one would have thought!

Much of what appears in the document is fairly obvious material that there is no need to repeat here, but I will just highlight a number of factors that I believe will help to progress our specific concerns. On the issue of bridging and linking (social capital), the consultation process identified some consistent messages that seem to me important when it comes to relationships more generally, especially when one is dealing with or relating to the “other” in some shape or form. These are:

- Nervousness about offending others
- Gender issues – how men and women relate to one another in public in particular
- Anxieties about a single faith dominating
- Poor local access to skilled facilitation and capacity building
- Engaging worshipping communities in other activities when the main focus of limited time and energy may be seen as worship itself
- A sense that a few people only carry a lot of the responsibility for current inter-faith activity and it can be difficult to recruit others into the process
- Challenges of working with the media who tend to focus on negative stories rather than examples of good practice.<sup>40</sup>

We can see here some of the potential inhibiting factors when it comes to establishing and sustaining relationships more generally. In particular one can recognise the fears that some form of imperialism or dominating force will determine the nature of the relationships and inhibit real dialogue and interaction. It also seems clear that these types of relationships do not just “happen” but often require some preparatory thought and structures if they are to be effective. Then there is the issue of why people should want to or see it as good to engage with others when their lives might continue quite happily without this extra effort – is it “worth the hassle” in the first place? There is also often a potentially hostile public dimension to such relationships in that the media are keen to alight upon occasions where things go wrong and this is a disincentive to even go down the path of relating. I would suggest that these factors are relevant beyond the sphere of inter-faith relationships and impinge upon the wider encounters that are of interest to us. To what extent, for instance, could one argue that similar problems occur in relationships between different government departments, let alone between church groups within a denomination as well as between those of different faiths? It seems to me that a number of them apply to relationships more generally and so are important to be aware of and to have identified.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

There are further barriers to relationship that are more particular to the encounters between faith communities and public authorities, those being a lack of “religious literacy”, anxiety about the use of public money to promote religion, and concerns about equality issues when it comes to using public money. These may not appear to be of wider significance, but I do think that the “literacy” question is of interest. To what extent do we understand enough about other cultures – and subcultures – to be able to engage effectively? This is an issue that will recur later in this section. Who for instance should take the lead and responsibility in “educating” the other about one’s own particular faith or even non-faith beliefs and background?

Without going more deeply into this particular document I think there is another section that highlights some helpful issues under the heading of shared spaces for interaction and social action. I mention in passing that the importance of “spaces” is something that a number of us drew attention to in the early 1990s so it is encouraging to see that this is now being taken on board.<sup>41</sup> The DCLG document makes it clear that spaces have to be safe if people are to be encouraged to engage effectively and this is as much to do with the attitudes of the people involved as with the nature of the space itself. Hence it requires that people are honest yet respectful, comfortable but not complacent, constructive in recognising differences, open to sharing concerns and values, and then are prepared to “move out of their comfort zones” as and when they are ready to do so. Such factors are of wider relevance when it comes to relationships as will be seen again later in this section. Perhaps the crucial thing is an awareness of the importance of these factors before one enters the relationships so that possible barriers and inhibitors can be recognised and dealt with in advance of the encounters. None of this is to suggest that such a process is either easy or undemanding. It will become clear shortly that similar issues arise from the consideration of relatedness in other spheres of activity. The major challenge may be to achieve some sort of balance between spontaneity and structure, to enable a relationship that happens because both parties want it and yet in such a way that an awareness of possible issues facilitates rather than inhibits the process.

### **The World of Intercultural Communicative Competence**

Before I begin to delve into this more deeply I want to register how and why this came into view for me. Until a few weeks ago I was not aware that this work existed and it was only a “chance encounter” with the current director of policy and research at the National Centre for Languages (Anne Davidson Lund) which brought it to my attention. I was leading a session on Rural Ministry at the Diocesan Foundations for Ministry course in which Anne is a participant and that is where the initial connection was made. One might also suggest that there could be another rural dimension to this to the extent that rural dwellers claim that they belong to a distinct culture or subculture of which the present administration has little knowledge or understanding. Beyond that of course it would appear obvious that concerns for inter-faith activity within both the faith communities and the government themselves should have an interest in this developing area of activity. Up until now however the research carried out in this field of intercultural communicative competence appears to have been limited to the sphere of language education and to its possible application in

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<sup>41</sup> Margaret Goodall and John Reader, *Creating Spaces*, Chap 7 in eds. Ian Ball, Margaret Goodall, Clare Palmer and John Reader, *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*, (London, SPCK, 1992).

employment and training, given globalization and greater contact between the UK and the EU in particular. I would suggest that the work going on in this area is of immediate relevance and concern to faith-related activity and that this encounter needs to be developed and fostered.

Once again I can only offer hints as to why this should be so by referring to some of the documentation from within the field of intercultural competence studies and for this I draw upon a report which appears on the website of the National Centre for Languages (CiLT) under its current research section relating to employment <sup>42</sup>. My starting point is the INCA project which was commissioned by CiLT itself with funding from the Leonardo da Vinci 11 (EU grant) and which has developed a framework for assessing intercultural competence – this was initially tested out within the engineering sector where the need for interculturally competent managers was seen as most acute. The aim was to link the work of Dr Mike Byram of Durham University to the needs of industry – for further information go to: [www.incaproject.org.index.htm](http://www.incaproject.org.index.htm). The section of this that I found immediately interesting is that which identifies some of the key factors for intercultural competence, those being:

- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Behavioural flexibility
- Communicative awareness
- Knowledge discovery
- Respect for otherness
- Empathy

Now if those do not connect with the issues of relatedness more generally let alone the questions of inter-faith relationships then I don't know what do! Although the INCA list is only one out of a range that has been produced by various scholars and researchers across the world, it does appear to identify most of the areas that are in need of further research and development. It would make an excellent starting point for work on parallels between this secular research and possible faith-based activity. At the risk of reproducing a series of lists however I will quickly refer to a few other frameworks which might add to this general process and throw more light on areas for further exploration.

An earlier attempt to identify the conditions for effective intercultural communication suggests that the three vital components are knowledge, skill and motivation. These three seem to appear in one form or another throughout the literature and may be basic requirements therefore. Knowledge of course involves information about the people one is communicating with, the communication rules, context and normative expectations governing the interaction with the member of the other culture. I would immediately link this with the question of religious literacy noted in the previous section and it is one of the key areas of complaint from faith groups in their dealings with government agencies – i.e. secular-based agencies do NOT possess the requisite knowledge for relating effectively to faith groups! Skill is about the actual performance of the relationship and the capacities required to carry

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<sup>42</sup> Donna Humphrey, *Intercultural Communication Competence :The State of Knowledge*, Report prepared for CiLT 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2007.

this out effectively. Presumably this has direct implications for training and education in this field. The motivation is the desire to communicate in effective and appropriate ways and a consideration of what is actually driving the process. One might question perhaps the real motivation on occasion for contact between government and faith groups, for instance. Is it really out of a desire to know more about or merely because it is of potential instrumental value to a particular government agenda – e.g. the cheaper delivery of welfare? So one can immediately begin to see how and where the theories of intercultural communicative competence are of value to the wider debate.

A further development of these ideas is to be found in the work of Ruben who defined communication competence as “the ability to function in a manner that is perceived to be relatively consistent with the needs, capacities, goals and expectations of the individuals in one’s environment while satisfying one’s own needs, capacities, goals and expectations”<sup>43</sup>. He goes on to identify seven elements of the process:

- Display of respect – valuing the worth of the other person(s)
- Interaction posture – the ability to respond to others in a non-judgemental manner
- Orientation to knowledge – the ability to view one’s own knowledge and perceptions as personal and not universally valid
- Empathy – putting oneself in the other person’s shoes
- Role behaviour – knowing how to function in a group setting
- Interaction management – handling oneself appropriately in this context
- Tolerance for ambiguity – being able to respond to unexpected or ambiguous situations without excessive discomfort.

Some very interesting and challenging ideas arise from this I would suggest. For instance, the ability to see one’s own knowledge as not being universally valid sounds a bit like Williams’ interactive pluralism and my own idea of major narratives replacing metanarratives. The notion of empathy occurs across disciplines as we shall see shortly, and then the tolerance for ambiguity which also crops up in the INCA framework seems to me a very important and theologically underdeveloped component of the process. There may be much that can be learnt here for inter-faith relationships.

This can be further developed by examining potential inhibiting factors in intercultural communication and I mention these briefly also<sup>44</sup>. Denial might mean an unwillingness to complicate one’s life by acknowledging the cultural differences which one is encountering, or by maintaining a distance from those who are different – one encounters plenty of that at the most local level even within rural communities! Defence is a strong commitment to one’s own thoughts and feelings but with a negative attitude towards that which is different or other – once again a very familiar response within rural parishes interestingly enough. Minimization is the response which says that other cultures are very similar to our own really and so may not require a huge amount of adaptation although there is an acknowledgement of some difference. This could then move into acceptance, which is the awareness that other cultures are as complex as one’s own and represent other ways of experiencing and

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Humphrey *ibid* p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid* p. 24-5.

responding to the world that are worth knowing more about. Adaptation involves recognising that it is of value to have more than one cultural perspective available and that it is worth putting oneself in another's shoes or even changing one's behaviour. Finally comes the stage of integration where one internalizes aspects from different cultures and/or moves comfortably between them. So the first three stages are essentially "ethnocentric" or focussed upon one's own culture, while the final three are more "ethnorelative" in that one's culture is seen as an equal amongst many cultures.

There is no doubt that this takes us into deep waters and raises questions about the exact definition of culture and how exclusive and demanding those therefore might be. How far down this road of adaptation and integration might those of faith communities believe it appropriate to travel before they feel they have compromised or abandoned their own integrity? This is the constant question for every "blurred encounters" approach. Yet it remains a real issue for inter-faith and intercultural relationships. Whether or not one agrees with the detail of these frameworks for intercultural communicative competence I think it is clear that this is a field that deals with the conditions of encounter and relationship and is worthy of further development and investigation from a theological perspective.

### **Person Centered Counselling**

It is becoming clear by now that the requirements for effective relatedness that are emerging from within different disciplines are both highly demanding and will be met only rarely. Part of the point of investigating these possibilities is to show what difficulties will have to be faced by going down this route and just how unlikely it is that such conditions will ever be fully met. I want to refer to person centered counselling only briefly as this is perhaps the most demanding framework of the lot and sets a series of ideal conditions that might appear beyond the scope of most "normal" relationships. This is not to say that they are impossible but simply to point out the hurdles there are to achieving them. The most commonly quoted conditions from within this field are; unconditional positive regard; empathy; congruence and positive listening. It will be seen that there is some overlap with the previous framework, particularly in terms of empathy and the capacity to attend fully to the other person.

A fuller exposition of these conditions is to be found in the writings of Carl Rogers himself and gives a real sense of what this approach involves<sup>45</sup>. So, for instance, the therapist needs to ask him or herself a series of questions about the nature and quality of the relationship which include the following:

- Can I *be* in some way which will be perceived by the other person as trustworthy and dependable in some deep sense?
- Can I be expressive enough as a person that what I am will be communicated unambiguously?
- Can I let myself experience positive attitudes towards this other person – e.g. attitudes of warmth, caring, interest?
- Can I be strong enough as a person to be separate from the other?

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<sup>45</sup> Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's view of Psychotherapy*, (London, Constable and Co Ltd, 1972), pp 51-5.

- Can I let myself enter freely into the world of his/her feelings and personal meanings and see these as he/she does?
- Can I act with sufficient sensitivity in the relationship that my behaviour will not be perceived as a threat?
- Can I meet this other individual as a person who is in process of *becoming* or will I be bound by his/her past and by my past?

Personally I think these are really telling and profound questions and present an ideal model of relatedness that are a touchstone for what I have elsewhere termed post-autonomy<sup>46</sup>. I also want to register that a friend and colleague, Revd Jeff Leonardi, Advisor in Pastoral Care and Counselling for the Diocese of Lichfield, is working on his Ph.D with Brian Thorne at the University of East Anglia on the connections between person centered counselling and spirituality and that this will yield some fascinating challenges and questions. Yet there is a sense in which they reveal just how high the standards and demands are going to be even if something apparently as simple as empathy is going to be achieved in relationship. Perhaps the earlier frameworks do not claim to be quite as ambitious as person centered counselling but they do have clear parallels and need to be understood accordingly. Above all they require a degree of reflexivity and self-awareness that cannot be reached easily or comfortably. This is my concern now with an overly sanguine approach to blurred encounters – that it can easily slip into becoming a form of “cheap grace” – very easily claimed but very difficult to achieve in practice.

### **Habermas and Communicative Competence**

My final example refers back to one of my earlier conversation partners in this whole process and I do not intend to repeat what I have written elsewhere but only to register that his work continues to develop along these lines.<sup>47</sup> Habermas’ focus is less upon the quality of individual relationship and more upon the requirements for effective and open communication in the public sphere. He attempts to identify the unavoidable pragmatic presuppositions that participants in argumentation must implicitly accept once they engage in a cooperative search for truth – in other words, what would constitute the requirements for presenting the best argument possible? In his latest work he suggests the following:

- Inclusivity: no one who could make a relevant contribution may be prevented from participating
- Equal distribution of communicative freedoms; everyone has an equal opportunity to make a contribution
- Truthfulness: the participants must mean what they say; and
- Absence of contingent external constraints or constraints inherent to the structure of communication.<sup>48</sup>

As with the work of Carl Rogers, this appears to establish a set of ideal conditions that are only rarely, if ever, achieved in practice. They provide a set of criteria against which to evaluate what does happen in particular circumstances, but they also reveal

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<sup>46</sup> Reader, *ibid* 2005, pp 131-4.

<sup>47</sup> Reader, *ibid* 2005, pp 27-32.

<sup>48</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008), p. 82

just how difficult it will be to reach these heights of open and effective communication. It is because I am aware of the problems associated with Habermas' framework that I am bound to express some scepticism about the earlier ones for inter-faith and intercultural communicative competence, both of which trade off some of the apparently less demanding features identified by Rogers and Habermas but without acknowledging the depth of demands that really underpin them. Just to emphasize those. Everybody must have an equal opportunity to participate; there must be truthfulness and there should be no external or internal constraints on the communication. Each person must be present to both themselves and to the other in such a way that there is real contact on the deepest level and complete empathy in the process. One's obvious response might be "nice idea, but when does this ever happen?" But then, what hope is there for the relatedness and encounters that we agree are so essential for social and political life let alone individual relationships?

### **Mapping the Impossible**

It is time now to draw these reflections to a conclusion by pointing to areas for further investigation and development and I am aware that all I can do at this stage is to open up some questions that require deeper engagement. If we return to the original typology for relatedness at the beginning of the paper, I suggest that the terrain the discussion has moved into is that around the possibility of relationships that are structured and bounded in some way (blurred encounters), alongside the possibility of open-ended and unpredictable encounters, but in the light of the impossibilities that appear once one begins to dig beneath the surface. So, for instance, encounters with the rural reveal that particular vested interests, often of those already holding power in the countryside, invariably shape and determine the debates about the allocation of resources and potential withdrawal of services. Habermas' ideal that all involved should have an equal voice in the process of debate seems a long way from the reality of what happens in practice. There never is a "level playing field" in that sense, and the suggestion that there is, or might one day be such, might appear ideological in the extreme, simply masking the existing power relationships. The threat that relationships in inter-faith and intercultural dialogue can slip too readily into forms of imperialism where one party dictates terms to the other is ever-present, and what seems to drive these processes in the current climate are either government concerns about national security or cheaper welfare provision, or the demands of employers to better equip their employees to operate more effectively across language and culture boundaries in the global economy. These are hardly neutral conditions – but then, could there ever be any such thing? One might argue that the ideals of relatedness only have some real life purchase when particular vested interests have good reasons to promote them.

What follows from this is a need to examine in greater depth the arguments which centre around the final category of relatedness, that which proposes that it is the impossibilities which actually set the agenda and need to be brought to the surface if only to reveal the instances when disparities in power determine what happens. One means of doing this, I would suggest, is to study the recent work of Žižek – and to a lesser extent Badiou – as registered at the start of the paper. Both share a broadly Marxist heritage although have moved on beyond that in significant respects. One of the key ideas that one can trace back to this is that the social, economic and political structures that we encounter contain internal contradictions and that these cannot be

countered or removed by any means available. So rather than saying that relationships according to the ideals set out above are inherently impossible, it might be more accurate to describe them as internally riven and fragmented. There is a split in the nature of reality itself and that must be recognised and acknowledged before one can even begin to engage with others or indeed establish any concept of reflexivity.

To offer what is the telling example of this emerging from this particular work: it has been suggested that the form of relatedness which needs to be promoted is that of blurred encounters or a structured and mediated set of relationships building upon the conditions for effective communication. An interactive pluralism or operational interconnectivity underlies the prospects for communication across faith, cultural and organisational-political boundaries. The idea that some form of open-ended and unpredictable relationships are likely to yield the political and social structures required to deal with current problems just seems too anarchic and random to be given serious consideration. And yet, it is probably exactly those sorts of encounters and relationships, characterised by spontaneity and a response to immediate and contingent circumstances that create the very possibility of cooperation and communication. Chance encounters, or the discovery of shared concerns or threats invariably establish the very projects which are then claimed to be good examples of cross-boundary working. They are not contrived nor set up by an external group which then imposes this upon a local community. The true blurring of blurred encounters is that between individual relationships which develop by chance rather than by design and the more structured opportunities which sometimes arise as a result of that initial encounter. But such random encounters cannot be legislated for nor created by external authorities. So what happens once possibilities are spotted or identified by external authorities is that structures and limits are imposed which are an attempt to shape the possibilities and to steer them in a particular direction according to other agendas. This is the classic problem for faith groups who become involved in working with government agencies. One cannot successfully impose from outside structures which will enable the encounters and effective communication and one risks destroying the spontaneity and the motivation for good local initiatives when they do arise by drawing them into more formalised structures. On the other hand, neither can the external authorities simply sit back and wait and hope that such initiatives will occur, or fail to draw upon their examples and experiences when they do. The blurred encounter is riven by internal contradictions.

I am aware that I have not yet supported this by reference to the thinkers mentioned, but I think that is the spur for another piece of work which is rather more theoretical than this has set out to be. I will however offer a taste of what might be to come without further explication. In a recent book on Zizek and theology, the author examines the understanding of “the Real” which is to be found in this work<sup>49</sup>. The argument is that it is impossible to base our society on reality and the obstacle to this is inherent to reality itself. So one moves from a first step where it is still assumed that one can base society on reality, but that it just hasn’t happened yet because of some obstacle that will one day be removed, to a second where one acknowledges that this is impossible and that this is a shame, to a third step where one acknowledges that it is reality itself that is preventing this happening. (One could parallel this with the different possibilities for relatedness at the start of this paper).

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<sup>49</sup> Adam Kotsko, *Zizek and Theology*, (London, T & T Clark, 2008), pp 32-3.

This final step amounts to a shift from the concept of 'reality' to the concept of the Real. The frame of the first two positions, within which basing society on reality seems to be possible in principle, is ultimately the idea of reality as a smooth, harmonious, internally consistent thing. The third step reveals that this 'naïve' or commonsense understanding of 'reality' must be discarded in favour of the Lacanian notion of the Real. As Žižek will say again and again, the Real is as far as possible from an underlying harmony – it is fundamental antagonism, a deadlock, a contradiction, an unbearable tension.

That must be the starting point for a deeper and more philosophical exploration, but it does throw down a legitimate challenge to any theological approach which espouses too easy a reconciliation between the different factions and interest groups whose power determines the types of relationships we have been examining, from rural to inter-faith and intercultural. There can be no "cheap grace", no encounters which are not costly and potentially demanding and disruptive, no relationships which can claim to have achieved the ideals of post-autonomy – or can there at least be glimpses and hints of what might be to come?

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