

From Creeds to Burgers: religious control, spiritual search, and the future of the world

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No matter how you look at it, the Christian church has played a central part in creating Western society as we know it, and in understanding the predicament in which the West now finds itself some understanding of Christian thought and history is indispensable. The somewhat pretentious inclusion of ‘the future of the world’ in my title is an indication that I believe the future will to a large extent be determined by our ability to learn the lessons of the past, and that inevitably means that the church and all its many works will be of some importance. Whether the church itself will be part of that future (at least in the West) is a matter of opinion, as its position within the emerging post-modern culture now looks increasingly insecure, certainly in its present institutionalized manifestations, especially in Britain (Brown 2001; Bruce 2002) and, though the situation is somewhat different, also in the USA (Woolever & Bruce 2002; Wuthnow 1993; Wuthnow 1997). But before the church is written off altogether, its plight needs to be put in context: all traditional institutions are having a hard time, and when a scholar as eminent as Sir Martin Rees believes that ‘the odds are no better than fifty-fifty that our present civilization on Earth will survive to the end of the present century’ (Rees 2003:8) it would be a brave person indeed who would make anything like a firm prediction. In the case of Western Christianity, we should also take account of the fact that, running in parallel with the decline in religious organizations, there are signs that ‘spirituality’, as distinct from ‘religion’, is becoming ever more significant to a generation for whom the world looks increasingly dangerous and unpredictable (Berger 1999; Coupland 1994; Hay & Hunt 2000; Heelas 2002; King 2001; Lynch 2002; Roof 1999). Alongside these trends, new ways of being church and of doing Christian theology are emerging that, while somewhat disparate in their articulation, nevertheless appear to share a common conviction that, if the church does have a future in the West, it will be characterized by more flexible attitudes than has traditionally been the case in the past, and that in some way these more open understandings will be taking the church back to its roots in the New Testament period (Banks 1998; Beaudoin 1998; Detweiler & Taylor 2004; Drane 2000a; Gibbs 2000; Riddell 1998; Tomlinson 1995; Ward 2002; Webber 2002).

Before coming to the main point of this chapter, a brief personal word is in order. My own discipline of ‘practical theology’ is not - as might at first be imagined - driven by a desire to identify practical applications for the abstract ideas proposed by systematic theologians, but is a different way of doing theology, prioritizing human experience and then using that as a lens through which to examine inherited traditions of belief and behavior, and in the process formulating new questions that might make sense of the church’s place in the world (Anderson 2001; Ballard & Pritchard 1996; Browning 1991). Whereas traditional theological disciplines tend to operate in a somewhat rarefied atmosphere of their own creation, interaction with the wider world is an intrinsic part of practical theology, especially with other researchers who are also reflecting on the place of people in their various cultural circumstances. There is a distinctiveness, of course, for the practical theologian will also want to ask how

Christian belief might meaningfully be expressed and, if necessary, reimagined in the light of cultural change. And lurking in the background will always be questions about God, for practical theology - at least as I define it (Drane 2000b:129-153) - is also unashamedly confessional.

When I first read George Ritzer's pioneering work *The McDonaldization of Society* (Ritzer 1993), I was - like many others - struck by the way in which his iconic notion of 'McDonaldization' captures so poignantly the sense of anxiety and futurelessness felt by people who struggle with life in an increasingly rationalized world, and it seemed an obvious step to speculate as to whether his insights could also add to our understanding of the predicament of the church in post-modern society. It soon became evident that McDonaldization, with its fourfold foundation of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, did indeed describe the way that many people experience the church, even if they are not values that all church leaders would self-consciously espouse as their guiding principles (Budde & Brimlow 2002; Drane 2000a). Ritzer's description of the dehumanizing effects of McDonaldization expressed what many people who abandon the church - and not a few who remain in it - complain about: 'Human beings, equipped with a wide array of skills and abilities, are asked to perform a limited number of highly simplified tasks over and over ... forced to deny their humanity and act in a robot-like manner.' (Ritzer 1993:26)

More recently, Alan Jamieson's study of people who leave the church has provided empirical confirmation of what for me was originally no more than an informed guess (Jamieson 2002). He reports countless conversations with leavers for whom the McDonaldized nature of church had been a significant catalyst - if not the major underlying reason - in their decision to abandon the institution, many of them claiming that this was a necessary part of their spiritual growth and development because, just as the fast food industry had apparently devalued the experience of eating, so the church had become an unhelpful distraction in their desire to live out the Christian faith with integrity. One of Jamieson's interviewees (a former church minister) expressed this sense of spiritual frustration in terms that are almost a textbook summary of Ritzer's analysis of the angst felt by so many in relation to society at large:

The person last night was essentially saying that their spirituality had dried up, and they wanted to get out of the church. They were saying they go through this rote every week. They come to church twice on Sundays, sing the songs and listen to the messages but their spirituality has dried up. They want to get out and get to something, not just another church, but something that brings their spirituality alive again. That really means something to them, with a deep conviction. It is not just a routine you go through ... (Jamieson 2002:34)

I was not taken aback by this, because I had already argued that Ritzer's four marks of McDonaldization were present in the structures and attitudes of most churches (Drane 2000a:34-54). What did surprise me, however, was Ritzer's own surprise when he included my analysis in his definitive *McDonaldization: the Reader* and posed the rhetorical question, 'Who would ever have thought that the church ... could have been thought of as McDonaldized?' (Ritzer 2002:ix). Though my original study highlighted the detail of everyday life in the average church - things like the conduct of worship, the collection of statistics, marketing strategies, the presentation of

beliefs, and so on - there are many other aspects of contemporary church life that connect very directly with both the philosophical concepts behind McDonaldization and also the pragmatism of the fast-food industry which provided the source of the model. I shall suggest below that the cultural strands which together constitute the fabric of a McDonaldized society are in fact much older and more deeply rooted in western civilization than has generally been acknowledged, while recognizing that some of the most striking examples of the McDonaldization of the church have developed in parallel with ostensibly 'secular' trends, specifically that entrepreneurial mindset which has characterized the can-do culture of southern California since the 1950s and 1960s. The growth of the fast-food industry during that period has a number of uncanny parallels with the history of the church in the same time frame, including some overtly religious overtones to the way in which fast food has been packaged and promoted, as well as the adoption of McDonaldized marketing strategies by some churches (Budde & Brimlow 2002).

One of the most noticeable developments in church life over the past fifty years has been the emergence of large churches with thousands of members and attenders (the so-called 'mega-church'). It is largely an American phenomenon, though one that is increasingly admired, if not copied, by churches in other parts of the world. The period of rapid growth of such churches during the 1990s matches the development of the fast food industry, which is unlikely to be a coincidence as they both tend to develop following the same formulaic pattern: entrepreneurial mavericks step outside the box of cultural conformity to imagine new ways of doing things, which then become rationalized in such a thoroughgoing way that the organization actually inhibits the kind of free thinking that led to its emergence in the first place. According to Charisma News Service (www.charisma.com) in 1970 there were only ten such mega-churches in the US, rising to 250 by 1990, and not far short of 800 by 2004 - with many more aspiring to such status. The early promotion of the McDonald's restaurant chain incorporated so many echoes of both the language and underlying ideology of the church, particularly in its American free-market version, that it is hard to think that founder Ray Kroc was not consciously modeling his business on the religious attitudes which were familiar from the cultural matrix in which he operated. Like the founder of a new faith, he often insisted that franchisees sever ties with other business enterprises, and offered them a restaurant well away from their homes so as to encourage them to leave behind other commitments and be single-minded in their devotion. In his memoirs, Kroc invokes overtly religious language to describe the processes of food preparation, so that cooking fries becomes 'a ritual to be followed religiously' (Kroc 1987:10). Even the golden arches apparently convey a quasi-spiritual nurturing message as a portrayal of 'mother McDonald's breasts' (Schlosser 2002:98), while a cartoon character on the McDonald's website in 1998 told children that Ronald McDonald, like God, was 'the ultimate authority in everything' (Schlosser 2002:45). It was therefore almost inevitable that sooner or later church and McDonald's would come together, the only surprise being that it took until 2001 before what was hailed as the world's first McDonald's franchise to be situated within a church complex opened at Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston, Texas - itself a mega-church.

The irony of such a development has not passed unnoticed. James L Evans is a Baptist leader whose vision of Christian faith is clearly somewhat different from that offered at Brentwood:

It's a development rich in irony. Christianity began as a home-based religious movement. Now the faith boasts of mega-churches that actually draw people out of their homes and into buildings called "family life centers," or in Brentwood's case, "community life centers". Christianity began as a movement of hope symbolized by the sharing of a simple fellowship meal of wine and bread. Now the faith has become a complex corporate-like affair, with such heavy demands on members that fast food must be provided so everyone can get to their meetings. (Evans 2002)

Moreover, he proposes that there is something intrinsically incompatible between this and what he regards as authentic Christian values: 'If we are where we eat, we are alone, watching without touching other diners as we all hurry off to our next meeting. It's sad if we think about it. The meal used to be the meeting.' In other words, McDonaldization and church do not mix: to embrace the one, the other is forced to deny its core values.

This is the same criticism that is increasingly now leveled at the fast food industry itself. While the advertising images depict happy families spending quality time together, there is a growing recognition that the reality for many is uncontrollable obesity and declining health, if not an early death - something that even the food companies are now taking seriously, with a switch to menus offering 'healthier' portions and even vegetarian options. But the application of an ideology based on efficiency, calculability, predictability and control is by no means restricted to fast food. On the contrary, it is virtually ubiquitous throughout Western culture (Ritzer 2002), and the more it spreads the more dangerous the world becomes. This is not the time or place for it, but in due course it will be interesting to apply this thesis to the events surrounding the toppling of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq in 2003, or for that matter to the concerns about asylum-seekers that have dominated the domestic British headlines throughout the early years of this century. Difference and diversity are no longer regarded as a cause for celebration - nor even for natural curiosity about other people's ways of being - but traits to be ironed out and replaced by the bland canvas of homogeneity. Schlosser puts into words what many intuitively feel when he comments that 'An economic system promising freedom has too often become a means of denying it, as the narrow dictates of the market gain precedence over more important democratic values' (Schlosser 2002:261).

If we were to substitute 'religious' for 'economic', 'institution' for 'market', and 'gospel' for 'democratic', we would have a statement which for many people encapsulates the predicament in which the church now finds itself. For those who prefer to be 'spiritual' rather than 'religious', the church - like much in contemporary Western culture - appears to have denied its own core values, and has ended up processing people rather than liberating them, even imprisoning God in prescriptive propositional formulas rather than recognizing that, whoever or whatever 'God' might be, it is certainly a contradiction in terms to conceive of him or her in terms of anything that is remotely connected to the four marks of McDonaldization. Like the prevailing culture, the church is still to a remarkable degree in a state of denial about this reality. Contemporary hymn books are full of songs declaring that Christians are 'taking ground' and 'claiming the land' and happy-clappy worshipers sing them with gusto - while their churches are dying on their feet! This is the same kind of self-delusion as restaurant owners who manage to ignore the true cost of their practices by

refusing to contemplate the environmental and human cost of the farming and employment methods that they have encouraged over recent decades. Even a sympathetic observer like Peter Brierley, commenting on the declining level of church involvement in England, paints a bleak picture: 'I am a statistician, not a theologian. The numbers in this book show a haemorrhage akin to a burst artery. The country is littered with people who used to go to church but no longer do. We could well bleed to death. The tide is running out. At the present rate of change we are one generation from extinction.' (Brierley 2000:236).

The ease with which what are increasingly perceived as dehumanizing trends in the marketplace can be paralleled within the churches is a major challenge for those Christians who believe they have a contribution to make to the future well-being of the planet and its people. To put it simply, if the church merely offers more of the same McDonaldized way of being, then why would any reasonable person want to connect with it? Not all Christians think about these questions, of course, but among some who do there is a tendency to imagine that the problems now being encountered have come about as a result of what they like to label the 'secularization' of the church, by which they generally mean its adoption of values and attitudes that in some way are intrinsically 'unChristian', usually identified with 'the Enlightenment' (Ellul 1986; Riddell 1998). Not only is 'the Enlightenment' itself a disputed category, but we also need to take seriously the insights of Weber and the likelihood that the tendency toward rationalization (of which McDonaldization is just a particular, exaggerated form) derives, at least in part, from the legacy of the Protestant Reformation, particularly in its Calvinist manifestation (Weber 1930). That being the case, if the church is to escape the effects of McDonaldization, it will require to engage in a more far-reaching self-examination. For if, in some measure, the church has contributed to the store of raw materials out of which the iron cage has been constructed, it was probably inevitable that sooner or later it would come to be regarded not as part of the solution, but as part of the problem.

Because of the neat fit between McDonaldization and cultural trends since the 1960s, it is often assumed that these tendencies emerged only in the second half of the 20th century or, at most, were the natural outcome of the assembly line mentality associated with Fordism a few decades earlier (Ritzer 1993:18-34). Benjamin J Barber certainly had a fair point when he noted that the export of the values, tastes, and industrial practices of the American fast food industry constituted a major catalyst in the creation of that homogenized international culture which he poignantly labeled 'McWorld' (Barber 1996). But this is not the first time that such an enterprise has been undertaken. The missionary movement of the nineteenth century routinely regarded Christian faith as just one more marketable commodity that could be exported to the rest of the world along with western science and technology, and other gifts of 'civilization'. By 1910 (a significant date in missionary history, when a worldwide missions conference was held in Edinburgh), some church leaders were openly connecting industrialization with mission, celebrating the fact that 'steam and electricity' were uniting the disparate cultures of the British empire and creating a circumstance in which the church 'has well within her control the power, the wealth, and the learning of the world.' (MacDonald 1910:231). The meaning of 'control' in this religious setting is well illustrated by a series of sepia photographs hanging in the St Mungo Museum of Religion in Glasgow, Scotland. Under the caption, 'The Church comes to Africa', they depict a pith-helmeted white missionary leading a

group of Africans who are carrying wooden crates on their heads - crates which turn out to contain a portable church building, to be unpacked and reconstructed at every possible opportunity, even in what is clearly inhospitable terrain. Once the portable church is in place, African people are then marched through, going in as unbelievers at one end and emerging as Christians at the other. This desire not only for control, but also for predictability, was not unique to Christian missions in Africa. Churches in India were built to be replicas of churches in Britain. As early as the 1820s, complete church buildings, replete with stone walls, slate roofs, organs, pews and pulpits, were being shipped from Scotland to the Caribbean, to ensure that whenever Christianity took root in other cultures it did so in forms that would be instantly recognizable throughout the world - in much the same way as McDonaldized organizations today advertise the fact that every branch around the world is the same as every other. (Drane 1997:132)

This approach to mission was not restricted to minority fringe groups, but was actively embraced by mainline Christian denominations, inspired by a theology that predicted the world would experience a time of unparalleled peace and harmony that would be ushered in by the worldwide acceptance of Christian faith - an age when, in the words of Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), 'religion and true Christianity shall in every respect be uppermost in the world ... one holy city, one heavenly family, men of all nations together' (Edwards 1834:297-298). Is it mere coincidence that similar sentiments have been used more recently to promote the harmonizing benefits of drinking Coca-Cola? The value of setting such ideas to music was certainly not lost on a previous generation, and this theologically motivated program of globalization found popular expression through the hymns of the likes of Charles Wesley (1707-1788) and Isaac Watts (1674-1748), as well as other lesser luminaries such as Addington Symonds (1840-93), who by the final quarter of the nineteenth century appears to have believed that just one final push might bring it to fruition:

These things shall be! A loftier race
Than e'er the world hath known, shall rise
With flame of freedom in their souls
And light of science in their eyes.

They shall be gentle, brave, and strong,
To spill no drop of blood, but dare
All that may plant man's lordship firm
On earth and fire and sea and air.

There was just one problem with all this: the reality on the ground was rather different. At this point, we need to introduce the independent faith missions and others who were inspired by a different kind of religious future in which the end of the world would not be ushered in by a time of global prosperity, but by the breakdown of society, initiated by the 'rapture' or removal of Christians to heaven, which might occur at any moment - a viewpoint which is by no means dead, as evidenced by the remarkable popularity of the 'Left Behind' novels and movies, and not only among religiously committed people as they have regularly featured in the *New York Times* bestseller lists. Motivated by that kind of end-time prophecy, world evangelization became somewhat more urgent, and called for strategies to ensure that the task of spreading the message would be accomplished as efficiently as possible.

And where were these strategies to be found? Missions scholar David Bosch has no hesitation in claiming that ‘The values the revivalists espoused ... were those of middle-class American culture: materialism, capitalism, patriotism, respectability ... nobody saw any incongruence in preaching withdrawal from the world while at the same time managing the church as if it were a secular corporation.’ Significantly - in connection with our search for precursors to McDonaldization - he goes on to observe that ‘Everybody worshiped at the shrine of the cult of efficiency ...’ (Bosch 1991:318-319). This mindset has continued to inform many Christian missionary organizations, and there was a noticeable increase in such activity throughout the 1990s with groups such as AD 2000 and DAWN (‘Disciple a Whole Nation’) convinced that their patented methodologies would ensure the evangelization of the whole world by the start of the 21st century. In the context of a mission theology for which numbers and speed of operation are crucial, McDonaldization finds fertile ground, with its promise of delivering the maximum results in minimum time, using the most efficient methods of operation.

It is tempting to regard these attitudes as an aberration in Christian history, perhaps motivated by the financial prospects offered by the expansion of the British empire, or maybe just opportunism. It is also certainly the case that the missionary movement was not overall as bad a thing as it can be made to look (Sanneh 1993; Stanley 1990; Stanley 2001): the so-called ‘father’ of the enterprise, William Carey (1761-1834), adopted a completely different approach to non-western cultures, with his Baptist press at Serampore producing some of the first printed editions of classic Indian religious texts. But he was a dissenter, and an ordinary working man (a shoemaker before he went to India). The subsequent involvement of educated aristocrats, who were not only fired with a vision of empire building but had also been brought up on the theories of social Darwinism, inevitably led to an identification of Christianity with the push for westernization. In 1898, G C Lorrimer encouraged the Baptist Missionary Society (founded by Carey!) to believe that the combined effects of British and American cultural exports could change the world for the better, exhorting them: ‘As the flags of the two living nations blend together, let us bathe them in the splendour of the cross of Christ; and as they move together about the globe, let us see to it that between them and over them ever gleams the cross.’ (Lorrimer 1925:182) Substitute ‘golden arches’ for ‘cross’, and the message has changed little in the intervening years.

It would however be wrong to lay all the blame at the feet of just this one generation. For the signs of McDonaldization are not hard to find more or less throughout the history of the church. The ideology of the British empire owed a good deal to the memory of Christendom, which in turn had been modeled on the Roman empire and from which it took its philosophical and technological inspiration. When viewed within this frame of reference, enterprises such as the Crusades can be understood as a manifestation of the same organizational tendencies so neatly encapsulated in Ritzer’s emphasis on efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. Even further back, one might use the same perspective to understand the many internal ecclesiastical battles that took place between the second and the fourth centuries, leading to the definition of a clear canon of sacred scripture, centralization of power in the hands of bishops, and eventually the formalized statements of Christian belief known as the creeds - all of which put together had the effect of creating a monolithic, McDonaldized institution with clear definitions of who could do what, and how and

when. Though Ritzer is surely correct in proposing that in its present form McDonaldization would not have emerged without the development of scientific technology, in terms of the impact that an imposed rationalization has on the human spirit, it might plausibly be argued that these episodes in the life of the church promoted a McDonaldized spirituality in a more extreme form than anything we have witnessed in recent decades. In more ancient times, all roads led to Rome, which also means they led from Rome and facilitated the dissemination of such a one-world ideology. McDonald's Hamburger University in Oak Brook, Illinois is only a pale reflection of the educational powerhouse of ancient Rome.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the same kind of tensions can be traced right back to the earliest years of the Christian faith. One of the major debates among the immediate successors of Jesus concerned what in theological terms was the difference between 'proselytism' and 'conversion' (Walls 1999), but which could just as accurately be described as a conflict between McDonaldized values and human/divine values. Should Christians everywhere look and sound the same (in this case, through the imposition of traditional Jewish practices), or were they to be encouraged to work out the social and personal consequences of their new faith in relation to the different local circumstances in which they found themselves? Should the church in a cosmopolitan Greek city like Corinth, for example, be a carbon copy of the church in Jerusalem? On the one hand were the conformists led by James of Jerusalem, brother of Jesus, opposed by Paul and with the indecisive Peter somewhere in the middle. Ray Kroc may have known nothing about the arguments surrounding 'Judaizers' (traditionalists) in the early church, but he articulated their ideas well enough: 'We cannot trust some people who are nonconformists ... We will make conformists out of them in a hurry ... The organization cannot trust the individual; the individual must trust the organization.' (Love 1995:144). It is one of history's unfathomable mysteries that Paul should have come to be regarded as the very epitome of this kind of ecclesiastical McDonaldization when the historical reality was quite the opposite. It is worth pointing out that he would never have written the majority of his letters had his converts not been asking about the most appropriate ways to contextualize their new faith in the circumstances of their own local situations - and the only reason that such questions arose at all was because he had left them with so much freedom to work things out for themselves. Theologically, these tensions reflect two quite different understandings of the relationship between Christian faith and culture. The one seeks to impose a particular culture as part of the faith package, believing that to be a Christian requires the complete rejection of all inherited beliefs and practices (a clear parallel to McDonaldization, with its insistence on brand loyalties), while the other invites a creative response to cultures of many different kinds, both affirming and challenging their values by reference to the core values of the Gospel. And behind these differences, of course, are two divergent understandings of human nature. One ('proselytism') is fuelled by a negative view of humankind which regards people as so incorrigibly corrupted that the only way to remedy things is through the imposition of control mechanisms that will restrict these inbuilt sinful tendencies - something that then requires systems of efficiency, calculability and predictability if it is to have even the appearance of being workable. On the other is a positive view of human nature, seeing people as 'made in God's image' (Genesis 1:26-27), and therefore having the inbuilt potential to be something more than they now are in an ongoing process of change ('conversion') as the message of Jesus is taken seriously and acculturated in relation to different social circumstances. The one requires

Christians to be like peas in a pod (McDonaldized), the other offers freedom and celebrates diversity ('incarnational spirituality' in theological jargon).

What is the point of all this? Several things emerge from this somewhat discursive discussion. On the one hand is a set of questions relating to the notion of McDonaldization, which in essence now seems to me to be nothing like as recent a phenomenon as we have generally supposed. It may well be that we should continue to reserve the actual term 'McDonaldization' for that over-rationalized way of being which Ritzer so eloquently described, and which in its detailed manifestations undoubtedly required the rapid technological progress of the last fifty years or so. But the underlying tendencies can be traced much further back, and may well be embedded not just in philosophical systems but in what seems to be a natural inclination of people to want to be in control of others. If that is the case, those of us who might wish to change things have a much tougher challenge on our hands than we thought: transforming the hearts and minds of people is a lot harder than winning an argument in a university classroom. It is in the broadest sense of the word a spiritual process, which can only be addressed through a spiritual path that itself values people, and recognizes that there are no experts here: to be human is to be on a spiritual journey, a journey that in Christian terms includes learning more of God as well as of oneself, one that takes seriously Jesus' reminder that 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27) - an anti-McDonaldization protest if ever there was one!

In the process of unpacking all this, I hope also to have demonstrated some ways in which the discipline of practical theology can interact creatively with the social sciences in such a way that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Social scientists have a habit of writing somewhat loosely about the historical influence of Christianity on the development of Western culture, and traditional theologians often dismiss their ideas because they regard them as insufficiently grounded in the facts. Practical theology - based on a method embracing reflection on praxis - can critique the Christian tradition in the light of historical, social and human realities while also using further insights into the tradition to add to our understanding of those realities. Quite often, as I have tried to show here, the use of a critical praxis/reflection way of doing theology can lead to the formulation of even more radical questions than those we are already wrestling with, questions which themselves invite more reflection and ultimately, if the church is to survive, call for a redefinition of what Christians mean by 'conversion', together with a creative reimagining of much else within the inherited tradition.

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