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Political Discourse and Praxis in the Glasgow Church

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Introduction

Recent research by Birdwell and Littler (2012) has suggested that any UK government that would wish to promote a 'progressive' agenda would be foolish not to engage with religious groups. Their research posits that people with a religious affiliation are more likely to attend a lawful demonstration and more likely to be involved in volunteering. This data harmonises with Bartley's (2006) suggestion that adherents of Christianity have undergone a 'radicalisation' of late, becoming more civically engaged and more ready to publicise their political will – motivated, presumably, by their faith. However, Bartley also notices that this 'radicalisation' does not predetermine the tenor of Christian political expression as necessarily 'progressive'. He observes that people of faith can be environmentalists, fight for tax justice and support asylum seekers. Alternatively, they can be anti-gay, fiercely nationalist and support the death penalty. Nonetheless, Birdwell and Littler (2012) argue that faith groups create a sense of expectation and social pressure that affirm the impulse to engage politically or civically and that "fervency of individual belief, or particular theological interpretations" (p.26) have little to do with a more politicised religious subject.

That faith groups create the conditions for a community of action is verified by Birdwell and Littler's (2012) data, but is it credible to assert that the discursive elements of religious groups do not significantly shape their praxis? A surge of interest in the theological from political philosophers would suggest that Christianity has important discursive roots with relation to praxis (see Badiou, 1997; Eagleton, 2009a; Žižek, 2000). Indeed, on the 'religious' side of the debate, many theologians have authored a wealth of political theology seeking to determine the Church's attitude, contribution and relevance to politics, drawing on scripture, political philosophy and social critique (see Bretherton, 2010; Christoyannopolous, 2011; Hauerwas, 1988; Ward, 2009). From within and pertaining to Christianity, there is a struggle to work out the Church's political role and character, or if it has one at all. Despite the importance of theology, political philosophy and policy reports, many people of faith are still on the ground working out how it looks to enact their convictions in the public sphere. What factors mould Christian political expression?

Using original data from discussions with leaders and congregants in Glasgow Churches, this paper will examine how various factors influence the political practices of different congregations across Glasgow, and how the variations of these factors across space make a distinct contribution to the geography of progressive politics in the city. These factors include theological discourses as to what it is to be 'the Church', and how this shapes the use of space by these congregations, and their engagements with the city. In addition, I will be highlighting the power relations that exist within congregations, the theological tropes that these are based on, and the results these have on political praxis. This will provide a theologically-inflected, geographical rationale for some of the particular activities these congregations participate in. Responding to Pabst (2011), I intend this to be a study of religious groups that reinserts a fuller understanding of theology in order to more clearly perceive how these groups respond to and create particular geographies, contributing to progressive politics in the city.

Different frequencies in the resonance machine

This paper draws some of its concern for the political identity of Christian communities from the work of William Connolly (2008), who, upon examining the North American intersection between religion and politics, imagines a cultural mechanism called "The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine" (p.39). Retreating from a model of basic causality (i.e. evangelicals and capitalists are bound together by their economic interests and so put aside their credal differences to enhance neoliberal solidarity), Connolly suggests that within and between these groups,

> "[s]piritual sensibilities, economic presumptions, and state priorities slide and blend into one another, though each also retains a modicum of independence from the others. Causation as resonance between elements... become fused to a considerable degree... forging a qualitative assemblage resistant to classical models of explanation." (pp.39 - 40)

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Notice that there is no reference to how the independent parties of the machine were resonating *before* the machine got going; only *now* are they resonating together. Connolly (2008) does not suggest that they were *a priori* parts of the machine but that, as certain vibrations overlapped, they found themselves in concert. Many who contemplate the intersection of politics and religion in the USA assume that Christian doctrine is deterministically at ease with social conservatism and its mutually reinforcing partner, neoliberal economics (what Hackworth (2012) calls "religious neoliberalism"). But, as Connolly (2008) notes, although the resonance machine seems to be able to recruit Christians from a range of denominations, there is considerable scriptural, scholarly and embodied opposition to such a conjuncture. There may be resonance between The Republican Party, the capitalist class and large swathes of the white Evangelical movement,[1] but the Christian movement as a whole often presents within itself significant opposition to such alliances. For instance, Connolly (2008) remembers how George W. Bush garnered Evangelical votes by promoting a pro-military, macho image of himself, but he also underlines an established tradition of Christian pacifism (Camara, 1971; Ellul, 1978). In contrast therefore to the supposed resonance machine, there are significant dissonances in this religio-political conjuncture and Connolly argues that these must be nurtured so as to develop a counter-resonance machine. Jim Wallis (2005) claims that "only a minority of American religious people would say that the famous right-wing television preachers... speak for them," (p.xv). This is due to what Wallis perceives to be widespread disagreement in Christian communities with right-wing policy on the poor, the environment and foreign affairs. Indeed, networks of protest and resistance to these policies such as Shane Claiborne's (2006) "Simple Way" movement, which has executed protests outside Wall St. to demand the redistribution of wealth, have sprung up across America. Institutionalised Churches such as the Presbyterian Church USA have taken anti-war measures, such as divestment from Israel.[2] These dissonant frequencies are important to consider in order to understand how Christianity finds a politics. Why is it that, from similar theological roots, totally different types of political expression come about?

When examining the UK's political/religious conjuncture it is clear that no evangelical-capitalist machine yet exists, but there are some signs of nascent development. Conservative politicians such as Baroness Warsi are beginning to appeal to the Church (Barrow, 2013; Kington, 2012) to inject 'Christian values' back into society whilst emphasising the importance of faith groups if the 'Big Society' policy is going to be a success (Williams, 2012). The current wave of religion-friendly discourse from the coalition government has the potential to draw Christian bodies into the government's broader anti-state, pro-localism agenda (Featherstone, Ince, Mackinnon, Strauss, & Cumbers, 2012), following Blond's (2009) schema that purports to achieve financial plenty and political enfranchisement via a less monopolised version of capitalism, "restoring capital to labour" (Blond, 2009) and bringing community cohesion through more widespread entrepreneurship.

However, the latent thrust of these policies is to devolve governmental responsibility for the disadvantaged, creating a discourse of expectation premised on the notion that marginalised people who have not overcome their impoverished estate have only themselves to blame (Jones, 2012). Williams (2012) posits that this expectation is made manifest in the accompanying workfare schemes and their punitive element which emphasises an uncompromising discourse of 'work as duty', a vulgar formation of the Protestant work ethic (see Norris & Inglehart, 2004). This impulse is veiled behind the shallow definition of localism heralded in these policies that covers over the contestations for resources and between interests within localities (Featherstone et al., 2012). Understanding the marginalisation of groups such as the working poor in these contestations could engender an empathy towards said groups. Production would begin on a similar evangelical-capitalist machine if churches were co-opted to resonate with the neoliberal configuration of the Protestant work ethic that mobilises a disciplinary approach towards those out of and short of work. An assessment of how these conditions are affecting Christian political identity is the necessary complement to Birdwell and Littler's (2012) report.

However, some Christians are resisting these conservative discourses by analysing and deconstructing the structures and policies they legitimise. A recent example of Christian-backed political action in Britain has been the campaign for tax justice driven by Church Action on Poverty.[3] This campaign highlights the ability of the Church to see through the communitarian facade of current neoliberal policy that fosters inequity and demand structural changes that would improve opportunities for the vulnerable in Britain. How these groups organise and understand themselves as both religious and political must be examined before the nature or advisability of Birdwell and Littler's (2012) suggested alliance between a 'progressive government' and religious groups can be discerned.

What must be paid close attention to, then, is the different ways in which the Church is expressed spatially, and how that affects its political expression, acknowledging that there are different types of Christian political praxis apart from the Church. Accordingly, this study scrutinises particularly the way individual Church spaces (as opposed to, say, Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) or Christian campaign groups) are managed so as to influence the political activity of those who attend them. In addition, attention will be paid to the role that certain theologies play in deciding upon this spatial practice as well as guiding individual congregants in their political praxis, aiming in particular to identify anti-neoliberal and progressive expressions of Christian politics.

Postmateriality, prophecy and radical transformation

In the following section, three concepts will be explored that help to explain some of the theological reasons for the more progressive politics observed in the Glasgow Churches discussed below. These theologies need to be explored as they were identified as influencing Church leaders' decisions on how to manage the Church space and how this affects congregants' understandings of what it is to be a Church, as well as guiding collective congregational practices of political engagement with the city around them. The concepts of postmaterialism, prophecy and radical transformation will illustrate the potential of Christians to take a progressive political stand, and used as alternatives for some of the other political theologies usually labelled as progressive. Between them, they offer a specific address to the city (contributing to the current postsecular debates focussed largely on this geographical phenomenon (Baker & Beaumont, 2011; Cloke & Beaumont, 2012)), and more general principles which can apply to Christian resistance to neoliberalism in geographically variegated settings, whilst avoiding some of the more prescriptive approaches associated with other supposedly progressive theologies. They eschew the directive of Christian Anarchism to build a discrete political community apart from society (Oakley, 2007) and they avoid Liberation Theology's propensity to reduce Christianity to moral directives regarding the treatment of the poor (Boff, 1985). The above approaches of postmaterialism, prophecy and radical transformation entreat a political transformation of scale by demanding a nuanced and geographically sensitive assessment of the city, an examination of relationships within the city and how the self is positioned within these relations and judgements. These concepts aim to expound the