

Implications of a(n Intentional) Theology of Christian Re-Incarnation

What are the economic and political factors and implications of incarnational mission?

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Definitions:

- **Christians:** Western, Protestant, Evangelical.
- **The Poor:** Not an exclusively economic term; the last, lost and least; those marginalized; the oppressed; those excluded.
- **Urban:** Not an exclusively geographic term as in “inner city”; a community characterized by a mixture of socio-economic factors; poverty, crime, lack of opportunities etc.

All Scripture references are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated

Defining Incarnational Mission

“The task of the Gospel is to bring humanity back into community.”¹

The terms “incarnation” and “incarnational ministry” or “mission” came into vogue in evangelical, urban ministry circles some years ago and have been bandied about so much, that like many words or concepts they have suffered from overexposure. The sharp edges of definition have been dulled and emptied of much of their meaning. The terms have been reduced to a primarily geographical definition, a matter of location and relocation, with urbanists telling suburbanists to “get their theology and their geography in sync”.²

While geography is undoubtedly an aspect of incarnational mission, this is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg and not the true conceptual centre. If we settle for an exclusively geographical understanding, this could mean for example, that any of my peer officers, who have planted churches in upper-middle-class, suburban neighbourhoods, can be considered equally as “incarnational” as my ministry in the inner city. They live where their people live, their kids all attend the same schools, they shop in the same stores, take their relaxation and leisure in the same manner and at the same places. So, “incarnational mission” has to mean more than this, if those of us committed to urban communities really wish to lay claim to it.

¹ Ray Aldred speaking at the North American Urban Forum, Atlanta, Georgia, January 2007.

² Bob Lupton speaking at the North American Urban Forum, Atlanta, Georgia, January 2007.

The primary text cited for incarnational mission is usually from John 1: “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us”³ or, as Eugene Peterson rendered it in *The Message*: “The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood”.⁴ I would suggest however, that Philippians 2:5-11 gives us a fuller understanding:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.⁵

This passage speaks about the “kenosis”, as Roman Catholic theologians would explain, the emptying of the Christ’s Godhead and the understanding that Jesus divested himself of much of the power and privilege of God, in order to become fully human and walk amongst us.

In their book *Political Holiness: A Spirituality of Liberation*, Pedro Casaldaliga and Jose-Maria Vigil, make the following case for an alternative view of the mission of the church:

“In Jesus, God emptied himself in kenosis. God did not become generically human, but specifically poor, ‘taking the form of a slave.’ (Philippians 2:7). He ‘lived among us’ (John 1:14), among the poor. He did not come into the world in general - which would itself have been an ‘emptying’ - but into the world of outcasts. He chose that social level: on the margins, among the oppressed, with the poor. The kenosis of the ‘in-carnation’ did not consist simply in taking on ‘flesh’...but also in taking on ‘poverty’, the poverty of humankind.

The church, as a whole, if it wished to be increasingly evangelical and more effectively evangelizing, will have to go through this exodus and into this emptying process. It will have to insert itself - with its human and material resources and all its institutional weight - into the social situation of the poor majorities, among the greatest needs of the poor, on the periphery of this human

³ John 1:14

⁴ John 1:14 *The Message*

⁵ Philippians 2:5-11

world divided into rich and poor. The mystical body of Christ has to be where the historical body of Christ was.”⁶

To me, this speaks profoundly about the freedom that God has given to humanity because it is mainly a passage about choices. To make a choice, to choose to do one thing over something else, a degree of freedom is required and often the greater the freedom, then the greater number of choices available. As a theological minimalist (an open theist if you like), I am quite comfortable with this, however if you are weighted more toward the sovereignty-of-God side, then you might have some challenges with my thinking.

I understand it in this way. Limiting his power and privileges and emptying himself of vital aspects of these, Jesus entered our world on the margins, as a slave (*doulos*), restricting himself to a historical, linear, time-space construct and to the limits of a human body and human existence. He made these choices in order to create choices for us who had none, most particularly the choice ultimate choice between life and death. Indeed, Christ’s humanity is an important to us as his deity.⁷

To me this is the essence of incarnation. Namely, the manner in which those of us with certain choices, choose to use these choices, primarily either for ourselves or for others. Further, if “our attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus”⁸, then it stands to reason that as Jesus worked the margins, so should we, and that our choices are to be primary exercised among those with the least choices of all. “The least of these my brothers and sisters”⁹, is how he referred to them.

Jesus’ incarnational intent was quite clear from the beginning of his public ministry. His first recorded sermon was essentially his mission statement, if we can think of it in those terms. Quoting the prophet Isaiah he proclaimed:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹⁰

Later on, when John the Baptist sent his disciples to check out Jesus’ credentials as Messiah, he replied by referring them to the signs of his coming Kingdom:

⁶ Pedro Casaldaliga and Jose Maria Virgil, *Political Holiness: A Spirituality of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1996), 36.

⁷ Ray Aldred speaking at the North American Urban Forum, Atlanta, Georgia, January 2007.

⁸ Philippians 2:5

⁹ Matthew 25:40

¹⁰ Luke 4:18,19

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."¹¹

Possibly the most radical statement of identity with the poor that Jesus made, is found in Matthew 25: 31-46. This can be read as a profoundly disturbing passage in which Jesus makes the victims of society - those with the least choices - the judges of those of us with all of the choices. They judge the Church, in fact. He appears to say that our relationship with the poor (what sort of relationship we have, if we even have a relationship) is a determining factor in our relationship with God. Even going so far as to suggest that it will be a primary consideration in how we are judged and therefore where we will spend eternity. As John Wesley wrote in his journal:

"I preached at Haddington, in Provost D'Yard, to a very eloquent congregation, but I expect little good will be done here, for we begin at the wrong end: religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men."¹²

While living in Russia I necessarily came into close contact with the Eastern Orthodox tradition of Christianity. I came to understand that one of the fundamental differences between Western Christianity (Protestant, evangelical) and Eastern Christianity is in the approach to Easter, the defining moment of the incarnation. The Ortho-Catholics are all about Good Friday – the passion of Christ (as we saw in Mel Gibson's film). Therefore, for example, their crosses and crucifixes still all have Jesus hanging on them. Western evangelicals are conversely all about Easter Sunday morning. We are a resurrection people, with empty crosses, chocolate bunnies and egg hunts. These seemingly superficial differences are not so much cultural as they are theological and reflect differing approaches to questions of suffering, injustice and, to my understanding, incarnational mission.

Now, if the man who fears God is to avoid all extremes,¹³ then an undue emphasis on either one of these two "extremes", is to miss the point. The balance is neatly summed up by Paul again in his letter to the Philippians:

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."¹⁴

I would like to suggest that it is in reading between the lines of the Easter event, that an important truth about incarnational mission can be understood. What happened between Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning? Where did Jesus go? What did he do? Scripture and church tradition tell us that he descended to hell.

¹¹ Matthew 11:4,5

¹² John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody Press), 56.

¹³ Ecclesiastes 7:18

¹⁴ Philippians 3:10, 11

We know that Christ was not killed through the physical punishment of the crucifixion. When the Roman soldiers came to break his legs in order to hasten his death, they were surprised that he had already expired.¹⁵ He died because every sin ever committed, both sin as a state of humankind and the sins we commit, from the beginning of time and the murder of Abel, through every lie, act of abuse, theft, every single possible transgression of God's will both small and monumental, until the close of history... all of it was (metaphorically speaking) compressed together and slammed into his heart and his soul. This was, of course, more than any man could bear and so the man - Jesus - died.

Jesus was the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.¹⁶ He was the one who, though himself without sin, became sin for us¹⁷ and was consequently "crushed for our iniquities".¹⁸ He chose to permit our sin, and consequently our sins, to wound, injure, cripple, crush and kill him. Then he took them away¹⁹ to hell, which is where sin belongs, and he left them there. And that is the kicker in the resurrection of Jesus, as far as I am concerned. If it was simply a dead man being raised to live again, well, it had been done before (the widow of Zarephath's son²⁰, the Shunammite's son²¹, the widow of Nain's son²², Lazarus²³). What was unique about this resurrection was that Jesus died full of our sin (and sins) and he rose empty of them. Only then, are we ready for Easter Sunday.

If we are to truly be followers of Jesus, to "have the same attitude"²⁴, then how closely and how far, do we follow him? Right up to Good Friday and then skip over to Sunday morning or do we stick close to him through those vital, intervening days, to hell and back?

Jesus promised Philip that anyone who has faith in him will do even greater things than the things he did²⁵. If this is true and if we are called to follow Jesus, to be Christians (literally, "little Christ's") and to emulate and imitate him, then we are actually being called to re-incarnate his life in our own time and place. As a man, Jesus could only be in one place at one time, but through his followers - through us - he can be in hundreds, thousands, and millions of places and touch that many more lives. True biblical Christianity therefore involves an active belief in re-incarnation, in that we are to be re-incarnations of Jesus and of the life he lived...and the death he died.

I was in a major American city a few years ago and spent some time with the white Salvation Army officers who lead a corps in a tough, primarily African-American inner-

¹⁵ John 19:31,33

¹⁶ John 1:29

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹⁸ Isaiah 53:5

¹⁹ John 1:29

²⁰ 1 Kings 17:7-24

²¹ 2 Kings 4:8-37

²² Luke 7:11-17

²³ John 11:38-44

²⁴ Philippians 2:5

²⁵ John 14:12

city neighbourhood. As we were discussing how to connect their church more intentionally and effectively with the community, I inquired as to why they lived where they did, in a leafy, middle-class suburb about 45-minutes drive away from the inner city church neighbourhood. They told me that The Salvation Army had made a policy decision several years earlier to move all of its officers out of the actual city and now they all lived in this same area, regardless of their appointment. I asked the reason for this and he replied that the school system in their city was apparently so bad, that it cost the Army too much to send all the officer's children to private schools. The solution was to move them all out to the suburbs where they could attend publicly funded schools of an acceptable standard. It sounded quite reasonable, I guess, unless you apply the understanding of incarnational mission that I have just outlined.

What would Jesus do (finally a context in which this question can be applied with some intelligence)? While I didn't take the conversation to this point with that officer, here is the logical end place of a choice-driven, re-incarnational theology. The parishioners of his corps have few actual choices in their lives. They *have* to send their children to dangerous, sub-standard schools where their potential remains unrealized, their hopes dashed and dreams die. The future of their children is sacrificed, generation after generation, by the systemic sins of a system that simply does not care about them, for a variety of reasons. The officer himself had three young children. But he also had choices. He could choose to protect his children's future or choose to stand in solidarity with his people, accepting upon himself and his family the "iniquities" of his parishioners. He could stand up in his pulpit each Sunday and tell his people that God cared for them, would look after them, and that he indeed came to "dwell among them"²⁶. However, in all honesty, he would then have to go on and say that because he worked for a religious institution that cared specifically for him, and maybe because he was white, and definitely because he had the choice, God was going to take care of him and his, in a different way. In fact, in a better way.

He is a good man and deeply sincere, honest, faithful, full of faith and in all likelihood a far better man than myself. However, simply nothing in his training as a Salvation Army officer or his culturally-conditioned reading of the bible had prepared him to grasp the underlying implications of his situation. To extend the metaphor, he lived and ministered as if each day were Easter Sunday morning, all the while longingly and desperately trying to reach out to his people as they floundered in hell, their own sins and the sins of the system wearing them out, keeping them down and keeping them there. The conversation ended rather inconclusively and reminded me of the closing lines of T. S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*:

I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation...²⁷

²⁶ John 1:14

²⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 98.

My theology, as one who gives great latitude to human freewill and less to an interventionist God (than some might prefer), holds that God cannot – or will not – present himself in a neighbourhood or a community or amongst a people, unless his people, The Church, are themselves physically present and fully sharing life with the community.

In my city of Toronto, it is estimated that between the end of World War II and the year 2000, approximately 400 church congregations moved out of the broadly defined downtown core and repositioned themselves in outer suburbs. When people subsequently lamented the decay of our inner city, and shook their collective heads at the crime and poverty in numerous downtown communities, in point of fact they were really asking where the goodness had gone and therefore where God had gone... the only conclusion was to ask another question about where God's people had gone?

So, how far do we go down this road of incarnational mission? What are the practicalities versus the impracticalities of such a course of action? Is it advisable? Is it desirable? Is this really what we signed up for when we accepted Jesus into our hearts and decided to follow him? What are the full implications? John Stott wrote: "All authentic mission is incarnational. It demands identification without loss of identity. It means entering other people's worlds, as he entered ours, though without compromising our Christian convictions, values or standards."²⁸ So the battle, as it were, centers around definitions of identity, of authentic Christian values versus simply cultural values, convictions and standards. These are the issues and questions that we are all probably wrestling with in some form or other. And, course, we all draw our own lines in the sand.

The given topic of my paper is: "What are the economic and political factors and implications of incarnational mission?" So, with the above definition of incarnational mission, I would now like to briefly apply this understanding specifically to the political arena and area of economics.

Political Implications

"Politics is who gets what, when and how."²⁹

"Politics is important in determining whether a people will be at war or in peace. It is fundamental in the distribution of economic goods, including the definition of property rights. Politics is basic to the definition of crime and the determination of how it will be punished. It affects the degree to which people will be free to speak, to write, to worship. It defines who will be accepted as members of the community, and who will be placed at the margins. It seriously influences the rearing of children by determining the circumstances of family life and establishing much of the subject matter of their education. It enters into the self-

²⁸ <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20070722/28528.htm>

²⁹ Harold Lasswell, 1939

awareness of a people, their self-identity, and it projects in large measure their sense of historic destiny and accomplishment.”³⁰

“When Christians seek to exclude politics from their thinking they are bound to distort their theologies, for politics is an inescapable aspect of human existence, with direct relevance to the divine/human encounter.”³¹

Even the word, let alone the reality, of politics is toxic to many Christians, nevertheless it is unavoidable. The word *idiot* comes from *idiotus*, a term coined by the Greeks for a person who refused to involve themselves in public affairs. The Church, therefore, contains many idiots - those who believe that political involvement, indeed that participation in politics in any shape or form, is to compromise faith and that it is invariably detrimental to the church and its mission.

On the other hand, there are those who consider politics and faith to be virtually one and the same thing. Many of my evangelical cousins in the United States live in this strange-to-me paradigm in which faith, politics and economics are all intertwined and interdependent and mixed together with a resulting “Irish stew” that is quite unique in post-Christendom. Lest we become overly judgmental, however, it bears remembering that thanks to globalization, we are *all* culturally Americans and so, to greater and lesser degrees, are all wittingly and unwittingly complicit in this regard.

Again, we have here two extremes, but this time with regard to the issue of politics. Though most of us will lean toward one or other of these two poles, is there a middle-path, a third way? And further, how does an understanding of incarnational mission, as I have here defined it, mediate between these two, if indeed at all?

A bottom line for me is that politics impact the poor, usually negatively. I would also contend that it does so more sharply and directly, than with other sectors of society, and that this is especially apparent in urban communities. Taxes, welfare-subsidies, essential services such as transport, and utilities, policing, financial investment, social assistance in all its forms, zoning and by-laws, all these things and more fall under the purview of the political structures and they all play a defining role in regulating the life of people in our communities.

Now, these things all affect each of us, the difference is that the poor generally have no involvement or investment in the established political power structures that regulate such things. They have no voice and consequently no “say”. They are not participants in this process, merely recipients. Like children, decisions are made for them, that impact them, most often without their best interests in mind and they live with the consequences regardless.

³⁰ J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Perspectives on Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 136

³¹ *Ibid*

An example of this occurred last year in our community. The Toronto Police Services and the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (the government “landlord” for everyone who lives in Regent Park) decided that they would clean up the graffiti marking the outside of many of the buildings in our community. This would make the neighbourhood look better, they reasoned, and so would be a good thing to do. They certainly would not want a lot of slogans spray-painted on the structures in the neighbourhoods where they lived, so it made sense to them.

The conversation, however, was one-sided, as the residents of Regent Park, the people who lived in the buildings marked by the graffiti, were not participants in the process. They were powerless in any case, because the TCHC owned the buildings and the police enforced the laws, so they could do what they wanted. The reasoning behind this decision expressed the essentially middle-class values that the landlords and the police shared and considered important. The plan to paint over the graffiti was a projection of their desires and of how they felt the world in this particular corner of the city should be ordered.

However, most of the graffiti in our neighbourhood are what we refer to as “RIPs” – they are symbols and initials marking the mostly young men from the community who have been gunned down in drug and gang-related violence. These constitute markers and memorials, functioning as totems and sacred places for the family and friends of these young men. They make the statement that these people once existed and are missed and that their lives had some value. But that message was not voiced in the corridors of power because the conversation never took place. Less than a week after the buildings were whitewashed by the police and the housing authority, the graffiti was back up three times as intense. The residents of Regent Park responded in a manner outside the parameters of the law, in reaction to an imposition of power upon them and their community. Overall it was bad politics and misuse of power, by everyone concerned.

The question of who speaks for the poor, therefore, is a very important one when we talk about politics. If, this indeed lies at the heart of the *Missio Dei*, namely that the good news is preached to the poor, that the widows and orphans are to be looked after, that the least of these, the “friends of Jesus”³², are to be listened to and their voice worthy of being heard in the corridors of power, then an avoidance of all political engagement is actually a dereliction of Christian duty. Possibly any form of Christian mission that does not include at least elements of these imperatives might be rightly considered “unauthorized ministries”, in the words of Walter Brueggemann.³³

The problem for many Christians, however, is that Jesus is understood as having been apolitical when on earth. I personally have argued that power was one of the (few) things that Jesus was categorical in rejecting. Beginning with his rejection of Satan’s offer of power over all the kingdoms of the world³⁴ and ending with his statement to Pilate that: “My kingdom is not of this world.”³⁵

³² Matthew 11:19

³³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 12.

³⁴ Luke 4:5-8

³⁵ John 18:36

“(Jesus) ministry was clearly defined, and the alternations to the illusion and temptation of the desert were spelled out. A choice was made – life abundant, full and free for all. Make no mistake about it, that day the choice was made, Jesus became suspect. That day in the Temple he sealed the fate already prepared for him. How was the world to understand one who rejected an offer of power and control?”³⁶

However, any discussion of politics is necessarily a discussion of power. As members of Jesus’ upside-down kingdom, where powerlessness is considered true power, the weak are actually the strong, the poor are the rich etc...how can we reconcile the reality with the rhetoric? I believe that as followers of Jesus we have various options at our disposal in regard to power but I also believe that the one option we do not have open to us, is to ignore it.

I understand power to be essentially neutral. The “rub” is in how it is used and how it is applied. It exists in our world and is wielded primarily through political means, structures and mechanisms (I understand that military power is also fundamentally political). So the questions then become: Who wields the power? How is it applied? Who are the participants, the beneficiaries, the recipients, the victims? In whose interest and to whose detriment is power being wielded?

“We are so used to thinking of spirituality as withdrawal from the world and human affairs that it is hard to think of it as political. Spirituality is personal and private, we assume while politics is public. But such a dichotomy drastically diminishes spirituality construing it as a relationship to God without implications for one’s relationship to the surrounding world. The God of Christian faith created the world and is deeply engaged in the affairs of the world. The notion that we can be related to God and not to the world—that we can practice a spirituality that is not political—is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God.”³⁷

As something of a pragmatist, I contend that though power is an essentially neutral commodity, it needs to be accessed on behalf of the powerless, lest the powerful misuse it for their own ends and against the poor. The desire on our part should never be to accrue power, but to direct and/or redirect it as needed. To apply it so that desired change can be accomplished. “Social change is the product of power applied effectively in the public arena.”³⁸ The problem is that power is always a Faustian bargain and, like money, seems to be inherently corrosive.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seat and exalted the humble and meek” (Magnificat) whereupon, of course, the humble and meek become mighty in their

³⁶ Joan Campbell, “Seduced by Power,” *Sojourners*, November-December 1999, 36.

³⁷ Glen Tinder, “Can We Be Good Without God?,” *Atlantic*, December 1989, 26.

³⁸ Dennis Jacobson

turn and have to be put down...people achieve power, exercise power, abuse power, are booted out of power, and then it all begins again.”³⁹

To return to my earlier point, historically Christians have generally dealt with the political question in one of two ways, which I have characterized as either full engagement or varying degrees of separation and withdrawal.

Full engagement was most fully evident during the centuries of Christendom when the church was a state power and the Pope had his own armies, up through the days of the British Empire (we’ve all heard the quip about the Anglican Church being the Conservative Party at prayer) and now during the age of the American empire. The creation of the Moral Majority in the 1980’s in the U.S. as an intentional strategy to engage, influence (overwhelm, some would say) the political and legislative structures, continues in various forms today. I recently read an article about a school set up in Georgetown, outside Washington, which took Christian students to train them for political office. All of the students were Republicans and over 80% had been home-schooled (a hallmark of conservative, evangelicalism in many parts of the States).

Such over identification with one particular party is problematic in a number of ways that we don’t have the time or the mandate to explore in this paper. However, one of the inherent contradictions in this approach is that the political doctrine of secularism, that the state must use its power to limit the role of religion in the public sphere, originated among dissenting religious believers (Protestants, mostly) who suffered persecution by the established churches (Roman Catholics, mostly).⁴⁰ In any case, corporate identification inevitably becomes corporate endorsement which in turn becomes corporate complicity and the church becomes co-opted and muzzled.

The withdrawal and disengagement camps are a little more creative and offer a number of varying approaches to the political question. These run the spectrum from the full disengagement that I referred to earlier (think Amish, think those who refuse to vote at all) to pressure/advocacy groups (think right-to-lifers, think those who wish to bring prayer back into the schools).

What Christians of this persuasion are really good at is the creation of parallel universes that journey alongside the dominant political culture and seek to influence it from the outside. Often referring to themselves as “prophetic” and their intent to “speak prophetically into culture”, such movements are actually inheritors of the counter-culturalism of the 1960’s and take much of their inspiration from the Civil Rights movement (“...the historic role of African-American churches – which constituted a community independent from the State – as a base for the civil rights movement).⁴¹

³⁹ Malcolm Muggeridge, “The Great Liberal Death Wish”:
<http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles/MuggeridgeLiberal.shtml>

⁴⁰ John Gray, “Faith in Reason. Secular fantasies of a godless age,” *Harpers*, January 2008, 85.

⁴¹ David A. Hollinger, “Among the Believers, The politics of sin and secularism,” *Harpers*, November 2004, 96.

Such alternate systems create a kind of “happy place” for believers, but are pretty much ignored by mainstream culture and the traditional political structures. They simply do not care about the causes we advocate (and we are *always* cause-focused) because these systems are immune to pressure of this type. They respond better to lobbying which means spreading money around to influence legislation, but Christians tend not to engage in this overly much, for a variety of ethical and practical reasons.

Examples of this type of approach to politics are Jim Wallis’ book *God’s Politics* (“Why the right is wrong and the left just doesn’t get it”) and his *Call to Renewal* movement on behalf of the poor; Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw’s *Jesus for President* book and tour across the States this coming summer timed to coincide with the US presidential campaign (“A different kind of campaign, a different kind of party, a different kind of Commander in Chief”). Both of these I would argue are clever and creative examples of political disengagement. They are alternative cultures, parallel universes, essentially revolutionary movements that exist outside the pale of the dominant culture. Wallis in fact, started out in his college days involving himself with the civil rights movement and as anyone who has ever met Shane can confirm he is definitely a 1960’s type of hippy.

“Social work bodies, voluntary agencies, settlements and the institutional church need constantly to be reformed so that they actually serve people, rather than simply maintain their life. Such reform needs the vision of those who have perhaps seen the system’s failures most clearly because they have stepped outside it. Some will find they can serve within such institutions; others can bring pressure to bear upon them. What they cannot afford to do, if they really want the well being of the city, is to write off the institutions, or to believe that a revolution which destroys the whole system will by magic produce a better life. Revolution is only another sort of withdrawal because it refuses to attempt the hard grind of working out, persuading and sustaining, that real polices which help real people entail.”⁴²

I suggest that an incarnational approach might look something like more active involvement with traditional, existing, political parties and structures, reforming from within and bringing the focus and resources and, yes, power of these institutions, to bear on the needs and problems and life of the communities that we serve.

“We take it for granted that political parties are vital to modern political life. They have shaped representative democracies since the late 19th century. Yet, their prospects are not bright in today’s large democracies. In fact, these powerful political machines may soon disappear.

The ground is already shifting underneath their feet. Political parties have based their platforms on ideological and class divides that are becoming less important, especially in more advanced societies. Although class consciousness still matters, ethnic, religious, and sexual identities now trump class, and these affiliations cut

⁴² David Sheppard, *Built As A City: God and the Urban World Today* (London: Hodder Stoughton, 1974), 146.

across traditional political party lines. Today, the labels left and right have less and less meaning. Citizens have developed multiple interests, diverse senses of belonging, and overlapping identities. Some political parties have managed to adapt. Think of the British Labour Party, under Prime Minister Tony Blair, or Brazil's Workers' Party, whose economic policy has very little to do with its trade union origins.

Others won't be so lucky. Political dislocation exists alongside a growing fatigue with traditional forms of political representation. People no longer trust the political establishment. They want a greater say in public matters and usually prefer to voice their interests directly or through interest groups and nongovernmental organizations. The debate on genetically modified food in Europe, for example, can hardly be understood without reference to organizations allegedly representing consumer interests, such as Greenpeace. And thanks to modern communication, citizens' groups can bypass political parties in shaping public policy. Political parties no longer have a lock on legitimacy.⁴³

Now while this may be the case in the future and each of us can see that Cardoso may be onto something, at the present time however, political parties continue to exist and regulate life in our neighbourhoods. Something of note from Cardoso's thesis, however, is that it might actually make little difference with whom we choose to align ourselves. Parties rise to power and fall from power in cyclical patterns and when they are in power, their influences on the policies and laws that impact "our people" are neither consistently good nor consistently bad, regardless of political stripe. To associate one party in particular with the concerns and needs of the poor, be it Labour (UK), Democrats (US), Liberals (Canada), or with religious rights: Conservatives (UK), Republicans (US), Conservatives (Canada) or any other consistent approach to those things that matter most to us, is a misguided course of action, based on an erroneous assumption.

Therefore, I would suggest that the following strategies bear consideration, All are "incarnational" in the sense of Christians entering into established "worlds" in order to bring justice and transformation.

1) Formal, traditional political party involvement at provincial/state and national/federal levels. Pick a party and join it. Get involved with the local expression of your chosen party (in Canada it would be called a Riding Association). Work on a campaign team. Run for office.

2) Municipal political involvement. In Canada, municipal - city - politics are non-partisan and therefore not officially run along party lines. If indeed, "All politics is local"⁴⁴, then municipal politics offer an unparalleled opportunity to politically influence institutions which may most directly impact our urban communities. In Canada, running for school board trusteeship is a good example of an elected political position that is non-

⁴³ Fernando Henrique Cardoso, "Political Parties," *Foreign Policy*, September-October 2005, 26

⁴⁴ Thomas "Tip" O'Neill

partisan in nature and that carries tremendous influence with the children and youth of our neighbourhoods.

3) Street politics. This is a term I use to refer to those informal, often grass-roots, networks and localized institutions that nevertheless play a significant role in the life of urban communities. At 614 Regent Park we have made it an intentional strategy to place people from the church on pretty much every board, association, and group that exists in our neighbourhood and to work in partnership with any and all agencies active in the community. These include the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) of various elementary schools; the CPLC (Community Police Liaison Committee), SCAARP (School Community Action Alliance Regent Park); various resident's associations; the boards of different non-profits; participation in various sports teams; membership in service clubs; participation and involvement in community festivals and events; inter-agency strategy and case meetings.

Economic Implications

“Economics, as channeled by its popular avatars in media and politics, is the cosmology and theodicy of our contemporary culture. More than religion itself, more than literature, more than cable television, it is economics that offers the dominant creation narrative of our society, depicting the relationship of each of us to the universe we inhabit, the relation of human beings to God. And the story it tells is a marvelous one. In it an enormous multitude of strangers, all individuals, all striving alone, are nevertheless all bound together in a beautiful and natural pattern of existence: the market. This understanding of markets – not as artifacts of human civilization but as phenomena of nature – now serves as the unquestioned foundation of nearly all political and social debate.”⁴⁵

Money and power tend to go hand in hand, and so the preceding political discussion invariably carries with it economic implications. In fact, the two intersect in so many ways and in so many places that it is often virtually the same conversation.

In my opinion, the core economic issue when thinking in the context of incarnational mission is that of lifestyle choices. Specifically those choices made by Christians who are seeking to live missionally and incarnationally, and how they converge and clash with the choices of the residents of our neighbourhoods and communities.

This is also fundamentally a political issue as well. In the context of an examination of environmental consciousness, Madeleine Bunting wrote a brilliant piece last December in *The Guardian*. Permit me to quote it at some length.

“Is it enough to have halved family meat consumption, have foregone flights for several sun-starved years and arranged a life in which habits of cycling to work and walking to school are routine? No, it's just scratching at the surface. If the developed world is to implement the 80% cuts in carbon emissions the UN

⁴⁵ Gordon Bigelow, “Let There Be Markets: The evangelical roots of economics,” *Harpers*, May 2005, 33.

demands as part of the talks beginning in Bali today, the lives of our children will have to be dramatically different from everything we are currently bringing them up to expect.

The much more controversial issue is whether that means consuming less or just consuming differently. In other words, does sustainability require an entire recasting of the good life, or can we continue on our way, our aspirations to comfortable homes, nice cars and fancy holidays unchecked, delivered by green techno-wizardry?

Government environmental policy is entirely built around the latter. But the problem is that there is no evidence that techno-wizardry can deliver the cuts in carbon emissions needed. In the past increased energy efficiency has only driven up aspirations: "If my fridge is more energy efficient and thus cheaper to run, perhaps I'll now buy that air conditioning unit for these new hot summers." Technological innovation is an important part of the solution, but it won't be enough. Wizardry it is rightly nicknamed: there is an irrational faith at the heart of government thinking.

But the alternative of lower consumption is something no politician is prepared to consider. In one policy discussion on the subject, Treasury officials responded with contempt, and referred to it as tantamount to "going back to living in caves". We have a political system built on economic growth as measured by gross domestic product, and that is driven by ever-rising consumer spending. Economic growth is needed to service public debt and pay for the welfare state. If people stopped shopping, the economy would ultimately collapse. No wonder, then, that one of the politicians' tasks after a terrorist outrage is to reassure the public and urge them to keep shopping (as both George Bush and Ken Livingstone did). Advertising and marketing, huge sectors of the economy, are entirely devoted to ensuring that we keep shopping and that our children follow in our footsteps.

...hyper-consumerism is a response to insecurity, a maladaptive type of coping mechanism. Over the past few decades, the sources of insecurity have multiplied: in addition to the manipulation long practised by advertising, there are new sources of insecurity in highly competitive market economies, ranging from identity (who am I and where do I belong?) to basics (who will look after me in my old age?). This relationship between materialism and insecurity helps explain why countries as diverse as the US and China are deeply materialistic; they are places of endemic insecurity.

The brilliance of this economic system built on insecurity is that it is self-reinforcing. The more insecure you are, the more materialistic; the more materialistic, the more insecure. As Kasser has shown, materialistic values (which are on the increase among teenagers on both sides of the Atlantic) make you more anxious, more vulnerable to depression and less cooperative. Studies show that people know what the real sources of lasting human fulfilment are - good

relationships, self-acceptance, community feeling - but they face a formidable alliance of political and economic interests that have a vested interest in distracting them from that insight to ensure they work longer hours and spend more money.”⁴⁶

As each of us seeks to live out a truly incarnational mission in our particular urban communities, we have to do so in the context of a political-economic system predicated on consumerism and materialism and on specifically promoted desirable lifestyles and, sadly, no one buys into this culture more than the typical urban, inner-city, ghetto dweller.

The answers, and there needs to be more than one, are far more complicated than simply berating ourselves for not living green enough or simply enough or justice-minded enough. I’m not sure I have much by way of an intelligent or cohesive strategy in light of this reality. Here are a few ideas, however, all of them closely inter-related.

1) Living smartly versus living simply. This is a tricky one. Life in the West in the 21st century is extremely complicated and increasingly complex. To live simply actually requires a huge amount of effort – the intentionality of it is time consuming and labour intensive. Further, most of the benefits of living more simply and “justly”, whether it be drinking only fair trade products or recycling waste, are primarily directed internationally, to causes and issues in the developing world. There is no real direct impact in our local community.

Further, it is my experience that urban residents are often the most consumer-driven and materialistic of people. They tend to be marketing victims who buy wholesale into the values of the market. Consequently the Christian “voice” of exemplifying a simple lifestyle might possibly and probably be drowned out by the louder voices of the neighborhood culture. It truly is a battle of competing values.

Living smartly versus living simply might be one answer. By this I mean examining ways that make sense to the members of your community, that are achievable for them and that positively impact them directly...and can be seen to do so. For example, take someone to the local grocery store with you on your weekly shopping trip, which would present them with an alternative other than running each day to the corner variety store and paying double the prices for basics such as bread and milk. This sort of thing.

2) Where do you “invest” your money? By invest, I’m not talking stocks and bonds as much as I am asking you decide to shop and spend your money: locally or outside of the community? Do you shop at a local grocery store or drive outside of the neighbourhood to shop? In our community the local grocery store is called *No Frills* and is two blocks north of Regent Park, easily within walking distant. The next closest *No Frills* is ten blocks to the west of Regent Park and necessitates either public transport or a vehicle in order to access it. The selection of foodstuffs is greater at the second store and the

⁴⁶ Madeleine Bunting, “Eat, drink and be miserable: the true cost of our addiction to shopping,” *The Guardian*, 3 December 2007, comment.

produce fresher. I have the option, because I have a car, to choose to drive to the second *No Frills* in order to get better, fresher produce for my family. However, this is not an option for the majority of the residents of Regent Park. Therefore, I am confronted with a choice. Do I shop locally and invest my money back into the local community or use the choices available to me to achieve something better for myself and my loved ones? It makes a difference.

3) Utilizations of the local underground economy. In 2006, Harvard University Press published a book by Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh entitled: *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*.⁴⁷ The book is a result of Venkatesh's decade-long study of a 10-block neighbourhood on Chicago's South Side and details the "ghetto capitalism" of the underground economies that are endemic in most urban neighbourhoods. Now, such infrastructures border from the almost illicit to the definitely illegal, yet they are powerful entities that bind urban communities together more deeply than most of us can imagine. The question each of us needs to answer with regard to our acknowledgement and participation in these economies is whether or not unethical is the same as immoral?

At 614 Regent Park we often give cash loans to people. This is against stated Salvation Army policy, yet it is simply the way things work in our neighbourhood. We feel that as the church, one of the services that we should be able to offer our people is support when they hit a bad patch, as we understand that their options to obtain loans from either friends or recognized financial institutions are quite limited.

The past Christmas during our annual kettle appeal for the first time in the history of 614 we decided to pay some of our volunteers. The people we paid were all local community members, all of whom are on some form of welfare stipend or disability allowance. If we paid them a proper salary and ran it "through the books", then it would have jeopardized their government subsidies. However, these allowances are not nearly adequate enough in order for them to live at anything other than subsistence level. We decided that for a one-month period leading up Christmas, we would be able to give them some extra money in their pockets and gain some more reliable volunteers for our church fundraising effort. So, we paid them cash out of our kettles, "under the table", so to speak. Unethical? Possibly. Immoral? We don't think so.

4) Attracting money - investment - into your community. There are two ways to do this. One is by accessing the old- school, service provision mechanisms such as government grants, private foundations, service clubs. I joined the downtown Kiwanis Club, an old and established presence on Bay Street, Canada's financial district. Through my involvement as a member, 614 Regent Park has received numerous grants enabling us to buy a house for our youth worker interns to live in, a 12-seat van for our kids and youth programs and numerous other projects.

The second way is through the newer dynamics of social entrepreneurship, which takes a somewhat different approach from the philanthropic foundation which dispenses ofunds to service providers in order for them to deliver a service. It empowers the people who

⁴⁷ <http://www.tcf.org/list.asp?type=NC&pubid=1459>

need the help, creating opportunities for them to help themselves such as job creation programs, apprenticeships with local businesses, start-up capital for small business ventures. For example, at 614 Regent Park we run a pre-employment training program funded by the City of Toronto that we call “Dreaming in Colour.”

5) Strategies to attract established economic structures (and therefore necessarily the political structures) to invest in your community. Funding for schools and extra-educational programs; recreational programs: community centres, sports teams, businesses and employment opportunities and provision of services such as banking facilities.

There are three used clothing stores (Thrift stores, we call them in Canada) in the Regent Park neighbourhood. The Salvation Army opened one of them a couple of years ago. I offered my opinion that this was an unwise decision, both as a financial move and in the area of service provision. From the Army’s, middle-class perspective they considered it a good plan, however. Offering, second-hand clothing cheaply to the poor would help the poor out and make money for the Army. The problem is, that poor people generally don’t buy “poor-people clothing”. They buy upscale, brand-name labels in keeping with their values that are materialistic and driven exclusively by concerns of the present and of image. They don’t generally budget or accumulate savings. No one in my community has a Registered Retirement Savings Plan. No one will really shop there and the Army would do better in making money and providing a service, if they opened their store in a more upscale, neighbourhood where all the university kids would undoubtedly shop at it.

In our neighbourhood it would make more sense to open a McDonalds. Everybody will eat there (and I mean *everybody*) so that it will definitely generate revenue and it will provide job training and employment opportunities if they stick to a local hire policy. No one, however - not McDonalds Canada or The Salvation Army (and I asked both) - are willing to invest the required million dollars in order to establish a franchise. Not in our neighbourhood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to truly engage in incarnational mission we need to be willing to take upon ourselves the personal, structural, systemic sins of the people we have come to redeem, accepting the myriad of deaths, small and large, that this will entail, as a reincarnation of the Jesus we follow. Nothing less will bring redemption into the lives and of our urban communities.

After all, Jesus did say that in order to find our true lives, we need to be willing to give them up.⁴⁸

Most especially we need to live these ideas out, to incarnate them, in the political playgrounds and economic realms of our age. Neither withdrawing, disengaging, nor

⁴⁸ Matthew 10:39

fully embracing, but with eyes wide open and shrewd as snakes⁴⁹ bending circumstances and structures to the divine will and for the sake of the “friends”⁵⁰ of Jesus.

“Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage-heap; at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew, Latin and Greek; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about, that is where the church should be and that is what the church should be about.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Matthew 10:16

⁵⁰ Matthew 11:19

⁵¹ George MacDonald

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