

‘Inhabiting a space on the outer edges of religious life’:

The Radical Emergent Christian Community of Ikon

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Abstract:

What has come to be known as the ‘Emerging Church’ (or colloquially as the ‘emergents’) amounts to an innovating, if somewhat controversial contemporary Christian movement that attempts to be spiritually relevant in the contemporary cultural setting to both its adherents and those outside of its loosely demarcated boundaries. In this paper I overview one significant example of the movement’s more radical wing, the Belfast-based Ikon community in Northern Ireland.ⁱ The paper argues that, on the one hand, Ikon exemplifies the means by which a distinctly innovating and even intentionally provocative religious constituency endeavours to forge a juxtaposition within post-modernity. On the other, Ikon self-consciously attempts to avoid conforming to any typology and deliberately escape conceptualization, even underlining its own failures in what it aspires to be. The paper will indicate that the attempt to resist constricting characterizations is embedded in the very nature of the philosophical standpoints and theological leanings (such as they exist) embraced by the community as it seeks a unique but definitive Christian response to the challenges of post-modernity.

Introduction

The Emerging Church movement claims no one leadership formation, centralized authority or organisational structure, nor stipulates a coherent and over-arching aim or objective. For these reasons, and because of its radical and apparently embryonic nature, the ‘movement’ (itself an unsatisfactory designation) seemingly almost defies a succinct definition. This has subsequently led to a great deal of conceptual confusion and sweeping generalisation, even within the movement itself, so that attempts to pin down what it actually amounts to have proved to be rather contradictory or even misleading. Indeed, Scot McKnight, professor of religious studies at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago and self-confessed theologian for the movement, states that the major expressions of the Emerging Church have become the subject of stereotyping to the extent that it is almost befit of an urban legend (McKnight 2007, 1).

McKnight has nevertheless endeavoured to collapse the observable orientations of Emerging churches (the designation ‘churches’ also being problematic) into a single conceptualization and describes them as ‘the global reshaping of how to “do church” in postmodern culture’ (McKnight 2007, 1). In this sense, for McKnight, the Emerging Church renders a ‘fresh expression’ of Christianity; ‘fresh expression’ being yet another popular depiction of the movement.ⁱⁱ Similarly, Gibbs and Bolger, in their sympathetic ‘in-house’ volume on the topic, define the various strands

that constitute it as ‘communities that practice the way of Jesus Christ within postmodern culture’ (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 1). ‘Practicing the way of Christ’ in such a context has engendered not just an attempt to engage and sometimes dialogue with post-modernity, but frequently brought a radical critique of conventional Christianity by way of the faith’s historical theological foundations and organizational formations.

McKnight points out that the Emerging Church is not the only expression of Christianity participating in these principal endeavours, but through it a number of ideas and practices are crystallizing into something more coherent in the form of a broad global movement or as ‘streams flowing into the emerging lake’ (McKnight 2007, 2). This view must however be supplemented by a number of observations. Firstly, while the Emerging Church may be said to be ‘global’, its major articulations have surfaced largely in or are derived from Protestant circles, almost exclusively in predominantly Western or ‘westernized’ societies (Guest and Taylor 2006). Secondly, at first glance, it appears that the emergents are engaging in a complete re-invention or, to use the typical rendering of the movement’s adherents, ‘re-imagining’ of Christianity accompanied by a drastic redefinition of the faith’s conventional teachings, praxis and terminology. Yet the emergents do not constitute a coherent and unified movement. Indeed, the evidence indicates an increasing fragmentation into ‘streams’ or ‘cohorts’ (the preferred in-house terminology) (Kreider 2001). Thus, the notion of an amalgamating emergent ‘movement’ or ‘Church’ with a number of discernible characteristics is something of a misnomer. The fragmentation, global dispersion, and cultural nuances ensures that the Emerging Church’s various expressions and fluidity escapes a typology and for that reason renders it impossible to estimate the number of adherents or even cohorts within the movement.

This complexity is compounded by how emergents subjectively designate themselves and their cause. Participants have alternatively referred to themselves as ‘postmodern’, ‘post-conservative’, ‘post-liberal’, ‘post-evangelical’, and even ‘post-Protestant’ Christians. In whichever way the preface ‘post’ is employed, it nevertheless indicates a sweeping departure from standard and conventional forms of the faith. Nonetheless, while the Emerging Church would seem to be a product as well as a response to the twenty-first century post-modern environment, its roots are perhaps discernible in the late 1980s, if not before, marking the culmination of various discernible trends. There is even some identifiable earlier historical antecedence to the movement that ensures that it is not entirely unique.

The emphasis on a form of Christian response to, and even engagement with post-modernity, and claim to be ‘post’ many previous core expressions of the faith as the primary touchstone for the broad Emerging Church movement, has not prevented tentative attempts to locate variations of all-things ‘emergent’ on one spectrum or another. Typically McKnight (2007, 1) closely identifies the term ‘emergent’ at one end of the spectrum, with the innovating but more structured Emergent Village and the influential writings of its founder, Brian McLaren, a former English professor who is the pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church. Those participants in the movement who assert this distinction believe the Emergent Village to be a part of the Emerging Church movement but prefer to use the term ‘Emerging Church’ to refer to the movement in its entirety, while using the

idiom 'emergent' in a more limited way. Some who assert this distinction and seek to avoid the more structured expressions eschew the centralising impulses of the Emergent Village and similar enterprises such as Dan Kimball's Vintage Church in Santa Cruz, California, and possibly the activities of their UK counterpart Andrew Jones.

Many of those within the Emerging Church movement who do not closely identify with Emergent Village and the like similarly tend to avoid the organization's interest in radical theological reformulation in preference for developing new ways of 'doing church', fresh modes of evangelism, and expressing their spirituality with the more subtle and diverse articulation. This 'stream' of the movement is found in the UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand but not exclusively so. Those who subscribe to this less structured formation are more likely to be discovered attending local independent churches, 'house churches', or loosely-bounded 'meetings' or 'gatherings' that consciously identify with the movement but may or may not attempt radical theological formations or permanent community arrangements.

The complexities of the Emergent movement do not stop there. While the more radical, almost anarchic groupings may plausibly be understood as 'pure' articulation of the movement to be found on the other end of the spectrum, some of their activities and expressions may also be embraced by factions within the mainline Christian denominations. Nonetheless, a distinction may be made here between the former, which constitute the focus of this paper, that display more innovating independent and profoundly different manifestations of 'the Church', while the latter includes evangelising or 'mission'-focused groups within the established denominations. The distinction, however, has long remained an unsatisfactory one since the independent groupings also tend to be mission or evangelically orientated, while denominational representations may innovate and experiment in the cause of evangelism (Larson and Osborn 1970). This distinction is nonetheless enhanced by the more radical independent communities that tend to endorse certain philosophical tendencies and display cultural attributes often reflected in artistic forms that seemingly appeal to a generational revolution disenchanted with what its exponents frequently refer to as the 'traditional church mode' of the mainstream denominations. This is not to say that some emergents are prepared to stay within or co-operate with such structures and in doing so create what they term a 'mixed economy' in the spiritual marketplace. Established congregations that are dedicated wholesale to the ideas and values of the movement are few and far between.

The Emergent movement, by way of its more radical, non-denominational expressions, remains a profoundly fragmented and amorphous one. It might be said that certain orientations, practices and even core doctrines (such as they can be identified) exist within the movement's 'conversation' (to use its prevailing terminology), so that most of the more radical emerging 'cohorts' exhibit certain 'in-group' characteristics. Nonetheless, they tend to resist typologies and, if certain characteristics can be identified, they do not necessarily hold for all cohorts discerned to be within the movement's remit. I will explore below, for the sake of simplicity, what may be considered to be the major overlapping hallmarks of the more radical wing of the Emerging Church. The characteristics identified are derived from a survey of Ikon, a Belfast-based 'gathering', largely through its web-site postings, some precursory discussions with its founderⁱⁱⁱ, and relevant literary sources. Ikon, I would

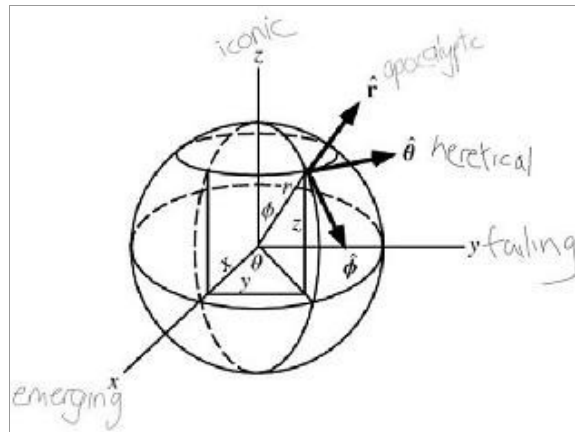
conjecture, appears to be a 'pure' expression of the radical wing of the movement that displays most, if not all of the attributes to be found universally but not exclusively so and, moreover, deliberately and self-consciously attempts to avoid such a typology through fluid structures of activity, a 'negative theology' and certain philosophical tendencies.

A (non) Definition of IKON

There are two academic accounts of Ikon to mention. One is a brief overview to be found in the last chapter, entitled 'The Working Church', of John Caputo's acclaimed volume, at least in Emergent circles, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Caputo 2007). Subtitled *The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church*, it identifies the virtues of the post-modern condition for the broad Christian Church. Moreover, the positive response of Ikon to the challenges of post-modernity is praised. For Caputo, Ikon is a place where '...something important, something paradigmatic, is going on' (Caputo 2007, 117). Caputo's wider context, put succinctly, is to explore deconstructionism, especially the philosophical writings of Jacques Derrida, in relation to the work and words of Christ and his coming kingdom. Or, put equally simply, how Christ throws a deconstructive light on 'the truth' by exposing hypocrisy and hidden sources of malignant power. Ikon, according to Caputo, exemplifies this endeavour through a lived reality:

(Ikon) is an independent avant-garde assembly of young laypeople, intellectuals, church and community activists, including non-Christians, who all meet in a bar... These people are making it up as they go along, not out of the whole cloth, but out of the memory of Jesus and the promise of the kingdom. (Caputo 2007, 129).

Ikon was established in 2002, chiefly under the inspiration of one individual, Peter Rollins, at a time when he was studying for his doctoral thesis at Queens College, Belfast. In an interview Rollins explained to me that Ikon's inception can be attributed to a number of individuals (some of whom remain prominent in Ikon's 'gatherings' and others who have continued their spiritual journeying elsewhere) who sought to advance their over-lapping interests and concerns.^{iv} Many were disenchanted with their established denominations and churches, especially within the Northern Irish historical context that was driven by Protestant-Catholic sectarian strife. Here, the attraction to be post-Protestant and post-Catholic has an obvious attraction. Being 'post' these dominant traditions was in a sense heretical and is plausibly exemplified by Ikon's web-site veiled allusion to its conception whereby 'God' becomes a metaphor for the destructive element of Protestant and Catholic conventions: 'There was once a small town filled with believers....(dis/obeying) God'.^v



A non-definition of Ikon from its web-site page^{vi}

Rollins has produced the second notable piece of work specifically discussing Ikon, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (2006), although the volume is not predominantly related to Ikon and is more concerned with Derridean theory and its relevance for the idea of the post-modern Emergent church. Indeed, the title of the work is derived from the essay by Jacques Derrida on ‘negative theology’ (Derrida 1992). The broader remit of negative theology is characterised by the endeavour to describe and understand God by negation or by what may not be said about God (apophasis), rather than describing what God actually is. The spirit of negative theology is to nurture the individual’s experience of the reality of the divine beyond mundane perceptions and to avoid such perceptions that are mediated through the conventional structures of organised religion or that generated through socialised patterns of religious thought and behaviour. The second half of Rollin’s book, entitled ‘Orthopraxis’, constitutes a form of applied post-modernism for the Emergent collective and the virtues of negative theology for its enterprise.

Ikon’s emphasis on correct living or ‘orthopraxy’ is a notable feature of the Emerging Church. The contention is that how a person directs their life is more imperative than what s/he believes in terms of religious dogma. Thus, those who *believe* the correct things do not necessarily *live* the right way. Ideally one should live by ‘works’ rather than seeking to pass a theological examination. Emergents favour the sharing of experiences and interactions such as testimonies, group recitation, communal meals and social responsibilities are more authentic and sincere over propositional, evangelistic preaching and exegetical bible teaching, since these are based on claims to a non-existence absolute ‘truth’. This emphasis on orthopraxy challenges the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy or, as Rollins explains, ‘.... orthodoxy is no longer (mis)understood as the opposite of heresy but rather is understood as a term that signals a way of being in the world rather than a means of believing things about the world’.^{vii}

For Ikon, orthopraxy is ‘apocalyptic’ in the sense that it is the ‘living out’ of the Kingdom to come. Yet apocalyptic has also other connotations. It refers to the incoming of a singular, unrepeatable event that is absolutely inconceivable, an event that could not have been predicted in advance of its coming and which defies all expectations: the manifestation of Christ in the world. Ikon seeks to

reclaim and celebrate the apocalyptic nature of God, rediscovering the divine who continually escapes all attempts at domestication through theology, images and experience. By recognizing that religious traditions and beliefs are 'idols' it follows that these traditions must embrace the pseudo-concept of God as one who cannot be contained in any concept. There is a conventional tendency in historical Christianity to reduce God to an object like other objects, one which can be grasped by human faculties.

There is a further sense in which Ikon is apocalyptic. Another of the 'streams' flowing into the Emergent Church is prophetic vision. The movement is consciously and deliberately provocative. It is this provocative, prophetic aspect which shapes the Emerging Church's attitude towards politics and political activism. Emergents express concern for what they consider to be the practical manifestation of God's kingdom on earth, by which they mean social justice, a fresh renditioning of the social gospel. This does not necessarily mean the endorsement of abortion or gay sexuality, but the Emergent Church, despite its claim, tends to be leftward leaning in opposition to right-wing conservative politics. Nonetheless, this concern manifests itself in a variety of ways depending on the local community context and in ways that attempts to defy the labels of 'conservative' and 'liberal'. This emphasis on justice is expressed in such practical expressions as feeding the poor, visiting the sick and prisoners, stopping human trafficking and working for environmental causes. It is this prophetic stance which exemplifies the thinking of many cohorts of the Emerging Church and is not without its millenarian overtones.

While negative theology and orthopraxy give more than an indication of what the radical wing of the Emerging Church amounts to neither wholly lend themselves to a definition of what Ikon and similar groupings are all about. Those who access Ikon's web-site in endeavouring to discover what it definitively is or a mission statement that gives some indication will be struck by the message of 'A non-definition of Ikon'^{viii} or, in other words, what might not be said about Ikon. In this sense Ikon typifies the arduous task of identifying the characteristics of the radical element of the Emerging Churches and establishing any form of typology. The collective's post-modern, ever-changing and near-anarchic nature renders this so. Ikon's web-site home page puts things in perspective by stating that:

The problem with attempting to describe what one is boils down to the fact that any such descriptions will inevitably fail....Ikon is still emerging....A (non) definition celebrates the existence of an impenetrable fluidity and elusiveness....we operate with a liquid system that celebrates ambiguity, openness and change.^{ix}

There is a broader frame of reference here. Many emergents see themselves as engaging *with* post-modernity. That is, they live alongside and dialogue with contemporary culture, accepting that post-modernity must be negotiated, while not denying the essential truth of the biblical message. A second more radical category of emergents have opted to work *as* post-moderns. In short, they reject meta-narratives and recognize the collapse as inherited, overarching explanations of life. This includes theological meta-narratives and certainties. Moreover, an absolute 'truth' cannot be known

or, at least, cannot be known absolutely. Typical of this reflection are the writings of LeRon Shults, formerly a professor of theology at Bethel Theological Seminary, who conjectures that the truly infinite God of Christian faith is beyond all linguistic grasping, to capture God in finite human propositional structures is nothing short of linguistic idolatry.^x

Ikon sees itself as situated beyond two extremes.^{xi} Its web-site discusses the term 'idol' (derived from the Greek root *eidos*) meaning to make manifest the very essence of that which is intended toward, revealing its inner workings. Here, idolatry can be understood as the sin of viewing something which renders God's very essence visible to human experience. Such idolatry can be either aesthetic (like the Golden Calf related in the Old Testament story) or conceptual. In the latter form of idolatry God is made intelligible by constructing a doctrinal image which comes to be viewed as a manifestation of God's essence. The opposite of this idolatry is the equally mistaken humanistic view that claims God, if God exists, is utterly unknown and thus irrelevant to human life. For Ikon, to treat something as an 'icon', however, is acceptable in that it draws humans into a deep contemplation of that which cannot be reduced to words, images or experience. No one can look upon the unmediated presence of God and live. God's presence must be veiled. Hence in the icon God is neither made wholly manifest nor utterly concealed but rather remains veiled in the manifestation. God thus remains utterly transcendent amidst divine immanence.

Doctrine and Dogma

Ikon's influences are somewhat wider than merely negative theology. Rollins explained to me that

'(Ikon's) primary influences....are broadly Judeo-Christian and....death-of-God theology and phenomenology. It is made up of liberals and conservative, theist and atheist, Christian and otherwise. Although the space itself (created by Ikon) often questions such distinctions.

Such an eclectic admixture negates doctrine and dogma which are themselves an anathema. 'D-O-C-T-R-I-N-E- is s-u-f-f-o-c-a-t-i-n-g- me...' reads the Ikon web-site.^{xiii} The acceptance of the advent of post-modernity by the radical element of the Emergent Church can also be discerned by its lack of theological structure as a counter-point to its negative theology; a firm theological structure being largely eschewed as a superfluous mega-narrative. The emergents' rather ambivalent theology is underpinned by the influence of post-modern thinkers such as Derrida. Translated for the radical wing of the Emerging Church, the theological enterprise seeks to understand scriptural reference by comprehending and describing its genesis, the process of emergence from an origin or event. Thus emergents have endeavoured to forge a post-foundational theology which rejects certainty in favour of a disposition they describe as more conjectural in which their views are merely just several among many legitimate, non-dogmatic religious voices engaging in dialog. In this sense emergents maintain that it is necessary to deconstruct, reconstruct and reshape Christianity in order to 'go with the flow' post-Christian Western culture in a two-way 'conversation', rather than proclaim a message that is alien to that culture.

Because of its rejection of meta-narratives, the Emerging movement tends to be suspicious of systematic theology, while the diversity of theologies is viewed as divisive. God did not reveal a systematic theology but a narrative, and no language is capable of encapsulating the absolute ‘truth’ that only God is capable of discerning. Emergent spokesperson Tony Jones typifies this disposition when he states ‘We must stop looking for some objective Truth that is available when we delve into the text of the Bible’ (Jones 2004, 201). In this respect, the Emerging movement is radically transforming, even turning its epistemology back on itself by suggesting that its own propositions could be in error. The predominantly young participants in the movement thus prefer narrative presentations drawn from their own experiences and biblical storylines over propositional, scriptural exposition.^{xiii}

For Ikon, religious traditions, including theological constructs, tend to be ‘idols’ for the reasons explored above. By departing from theological frameworks Ikon acknowledges itself as a ‘heretical community’. Each revelation of God requires interpretation and these interpretations are inevitably limited by such obstacles as language, intelligence, cultural context, tradition and psychological makeup. In recognizing this, Ikon endeavours to hold prevailing understandings of God lightly, allowing both the Spirit and other people to challenge what members of its community believes. This self-assigned heretical stance in relation to the wider Christian community is derived from the sense that Ikon has of coming from the same faith tradition but seeks to read it through divergent lenses. It follows that Ikon celebrates the multiplicity of ways in which Christianity can be understood. Ikon critiques more established forms of the faith but, in turn, expects to be challenged. In this regard Ikon claims to be ‘neither a conservative or liberal community for the point is not what you believe but whether you are willing to challenge and critique it’.^{xiv}

This does not suggest the lack of an ecumenical embrace. Indeed, the notion of ‘conversations’ and ‘conversation’ are conducive towards it. The emergents publicly advocate ecumenism though they admit to being intolerant of theological conservatives who view the authority of scripture as having absolute authority for doctrine and practice. Emergents espouse an open, flexible, and subjective view of doctrine in which they advance a continued re-examination of theology which causes them to see faith as a journey rather than a destination. This is a natural consequence of their rejection of unqualified certainty in faith. The movement's participants thus claim they are creating a safe ecumenical environment for those with opinions ordinarily rejected within historic orthodoxy. Ecumenism, of course, is not new. Yet the emergents seem to be taking ecumenism almost to its furthest conclusion through an ‘open’ theology and ‘conversation’. This openness leads many of them to extend an invitation to people of all religions and none to dialog. Ikon holds the Last Supper event which is staged on the first Tuesday evening of every month at the Gaslight coffee shop in a local Belfast community centre. The Last Supper amounts to a ‘gathering’ in which twelve people meet informally over food and wine to question an invited guest about what they believe and why they hold such convictions. Previous guests have included Tony Jones (Emergent Village), Prof. Tony Campolo (sociologist and one time pastoral advisor to President Clinton), Bishop Pat Buckley (rouge Catholic Priest and gay activist), Christopher McKnight (atheistic philosopher), members of the Belfast Anarcho-Syndicist Association, representatives of the Muslim community, and even Cecil Andrews, a fundamentalist and founder of Take Heed Ministries in

Belfast, who headed an attack on Ikon on his web-site criticizing its web-site blog entitled 'God in the hands of angry sinners'. Last Supper, as part of its mission, states the aim '...to foster the understanding of different worldviews...we endeavour to refrain from any form of aggression'.^{xv}, The event, however, does not always bring an acceptance of any particular guest. The Last Supper has been described by the UK's BBC television presenter William Crawley a site 'where the salon meets the sanctuary: a reverie of critical thinking, where old orthodoxies can find themselves honoured guests at one table or unceremoniously bounced from the next' (Crawley 2008).

Post-Evangelical

A particular 'stream' flowing into the Emerging Church is that characterized by the term 'post-evangelical'. The emerging movement is a protest against much of evangelicalism as conventionally practiced and packaged and which itself is often based on theological meganarratives. The Emerging Church is post-evangelical in several ways. Firstly, the movement becomes missional by participating the redemptive work of God in this world by engaging with the wider community typified by the holistic of the ministry of Jesus who befriended prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners. Secondly, post-evangelical orientations also result from disenchantment with the disposition of conventional Evangelical churches with their aim of 'winning' as many souls as possible and the more recent concern with building ever-larger state-of-the-art churches.^{xvi} Thirdly, an acknowledged controversial element of post-evangelicalism is that many in the Emerging movement are sceptical about the 'in versus out' mentality of much of conventional evangelicalism. In short, to separate the 'saved' from the 'unsaved' in a detrimental manner is counter-productive to the cause of evangelism. Some emergents even advance the view that it does not matter whether one belongs to another faith tradition other than Christianity.

The emergents go further in their critique of conventional evangelism. They attempt a pluralistic dialog with the surrounding culture and to break down barriers between believers and non-believers, both being free to express 'uncertainty' as well as certainty regarding the faith. Indeed, 'uncertainty' is regarded as a healthy idiom. In this respect, Ikon attempts to transcend the more dogmatic thinking of the popular Alpha courses that have run for a decade in one in four mainstream churches in the UK and which now has a global outreach. Alpha, a ten week structured programme centring on the basics of the faith, has attempted to create an inform setting with the aim of winning converts and bring them *into* the local church. IKON, runs Omega courses which are an apparent counterpoint to Alpha. The courses are six weeks long and are designed to invite participants to move beyond their current understanding of Christianity through a lively yet serious interrogation, rather than exploration of faith. Anticipating the courses' controversial nature, prospecting guests are advise to 'strongly consider whether it is right for them because it may turn out not to be what they expect or desire'.^{xvii}

The mainstay of Ikon's proselytization is stated to be 'street evangelism'. However, the conventional understanding of the practice is negated. For Ikon such evangelism includes the novelty of inviting others to evangelise those who are evangelising. This is deemed to be part of a learning process that is then integrated into Ikon's 'services' which entail hearing from other faiths

which in the past have included speakers from the Zen Buddhist, Baha'I and Hare Krishna communities. The thinking behind Ikon's 'Evangelism Project' is to 'listen and learn'. This emphasis is derived from the conviction that evangelizing the stranger leads to a tendency to bring conversion in the same cultural image: replacing one cultural and religious image by another, creating a binary of 'consumption' and 'exclusion'.^{xviii} Evangelism consequently means learning from the beliefs and practices of those being evangelized. This philosophy is not one by which all beliefs and practices are all deemed equal. Nor is it 'fundamentalist' in claiming an absolute 'truth'. Those evangelizing cannot 'give God', but only create a space in which God can 'give'. 'Street evangelism' then, according to Peter Rollings in my interview with him, 'is about being evangelized - so the (Evangelism Project) street stuff is about *being evangelized*'.^{xix}

Ambivalence Towards tradition

In responding to the challenges of post-modernity, the emergents seek to be relevant to contemporary culture via the recognition that the Christian Church invariably alters as the wider culture is transformed. To accomplish this emergents attempt to articulate the Christian message in such a way that it is not confined to inherited cultural expressions on the one hand, while attempting to illuminate the original sense of the gospel on the other. Such a posturing informs the emergent cohorts' attitude towards Christian tradition generally. Traditional denominations are often seen as an anathema, traditional forms of worship as archaic, and the architectural of 'traditional mode' church buildings as superfluous. However, this attitude remains rather ambivalent; tradition has its appeal in that the ethos of the Emerging Church is experimental, eclectic and conducive to a certain post-modern playfulness. Yet there is also an appreciation of the positive spiritual insights of the various strands of historical Christianity and the necessity for innovation in appropriating meaningful Christian practice and narrative in the post-modern setting. The Emerging churches thus make use of contemporary music and films, alongside ancient liturgical customs and eclectic expressions of spirituality, with the aim of constructing church gathering genuinely reflective of a local community's tastes through the utilization of informal settings including cafes, bars and the like.

Some strands of the emerging movement embrace more conventional forms of music, while candles and incense (or 'smells and bells') have their attraction alongside 'funky worship' with multi-dimensional sensorial techniques through the attempt to be creative and express experiential aspects of their gatherings. In its more extreme eclectic form, precedence was to be observed during the mid-1980s in the so-called Nine O'Clock Service that was a youth-oriented alternative Christian worship commencing in Sheffield (UK), at St. Thomas' in Crookes. Starting with about 30 people the community known as the 72 group grew to nearly 300 under the tutelage of Chris Brain, a curate at the church. Flashing lights, aspects of the 'rave' culture mixed with 'goth rock', Gregorian chanting and incense all constituted part of the Planetary Mass.

Following through with this pick ‘n mix of genres local and more radical expressions of Emerging churches may create the context of a dark sanctuary filled with votive candles, along with fast-pumped images flashing across video screens, while, at the altar, a DJ with a computer mixes the music to set the ambiance of the meeting. ‘HUSH’, named with a certain amount of mischievous post-modern irony, is Ikon’s electronic-based music night hosted by a local DJ, ‘Sofa Kid’, and takes place after the monthly Ikon ‘gathering’. It features a mixture of live performances from a range of invited DJs and electronic artists. The music involves an eclectic range of ambient ‘scapes’ and ‘busy beats’ with an emphasis on creating a ‘laid back’, ‘late night feel’ that seemingly aims to attract a younger generation.^{xx}

Ikon clearly express other marked contrasting approaches to tradition. A further inspirational force for the Emerging movement is that of the Taizé Community in France which parallels the emergent experience in several ways, but whose novel expressions also turn up in more conventional congregations. Traditional symbols in this community such as candles and crosses have intensified importance in creating a particular ambiance and generating subjective feelings. In this spirit an Ikon ‘gathering’ in November, 2006, at a tiny ancient Chapel above St. George’s Church of Ireland main chamber, centred on a tray of candles shimmering their light around the room. In the words of one participant: ‘Sitting on the floor, we were led on a journey of thoughts centering on our inevitable failure to see the Divine in others, and latterly, the impossibility of being Christ in others’.^{xxi}

Taizé also places emphasis on meditation and the experiences derived from the monastic life than upon scripture. Within the wider Emerging Church there is a growing exploration of a similar kind of monasticism, known as ‘new-monasticism’ and typified by Moot in the UK^{xxii}. While Ikon does not embrace the whole monastic ‘package’, it has periodically ‘bought’ into aspects of it. In 2007-08 Ikon, through their friend ‘Padraig’, led four silent retreats over the based on ‘A Retreat of Anticipation for Advent and the Three Marys’; Mary, Sister of Martha, Mary, the Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Peter Rollins, Ikon’s founder, puts such ventures in this way: ‘Silent retreats etc. fit very well with what Ikon is about....many in Ikon participate (yet it is not officially Ikon)’.^{xxiii}

The Fluidity of the Virtual Communitas

The emphasis on Ikon’s liquidity is paramount to its adherents and this liquidity compounds the question of what Ikon conceptually amounts to. The embrace of non-institutional contexts of meetings and worship (where worship is present) is one of the radical wing of the Emerging Church’s most obvious hallmarks. Traditional expressions of Christianity, from the denominational structure down to the local church congregation meeting on its own premises, are frequently regarded as outmoded, constricting for believers and alienating environments to non-believers alike, and judged as simply no-longer viable in the post-modern context. Thus, contemporary Christianity must be liberated from these institutionalized constrains which are deemed inflexible, bureaucratic and give rise to routinization at the expense of creative spirituality.^{xxiv}

For the emergents one of the greatest challenges is in reaching Generation X and those in their 'teens and early twenties (Generation Y). Thus the Emerging Church seeks new strategies in establishing an appeal for the young, and attempts more than focusing on contemporary worship styles. Moreover, it is deemed conducive to take into account community factors and a leadership ethos that is highly relational. To some extent, then, the emergents are a generation protesting against Church governance that is characterised by a culture of authority and an older generational headship which has shaped the organizational structure of much of conventional Christianity. The Emerging Church's unstructured ecclesiology means that the movement can communicate and interact through fluid and open networks because it is decentralized with little organizational coordination. Participants avoid assumptions about the role and nature of the Christian Church, attempting to gather together in ways specific to their local context. Hence, the preference for informal locations of meetings in order to engage with 'public space'. This allows the flexibility to transform, adapt and be relevant to a fast-changing post-modern culture, whereas traditional 'church mode' tends to ossify and fails to adapt to socio-cultural environments.

The Emerging Church seems to subscribe to the view that there exists a fair degree of 'believing without belonging', or at least potential believing, and that institutional structures are a barrier to participation and evangelism. In this way emergents share with the 'house church' movement of the 1970s a willingness to challenge traditional church structures/organizations, although many of the former also respect the different expressions of traditional Christian denominations and eschew the authoritarian structures associated with the 'house church' movement. For their part, in recent years, many mainstream denominations have identified the need to be 'fluid' in the sense that they recognize secular developments and competing obligation on people's time.

Ikon is 'fluid' in the sense that its varied and constantly changing activities take place at a number of venues that are generally temporary. 'Gatherings' or 'services' have moved from one venue to another. At present they are held in the evening once a month at the 'Black Box', a live music venue, in Belfast's Cathedral quarter. Such gathering are usually in the form of discussions which in the past have ranged across a number of subject areas including The God Delusion, The Second Coming, Fundamentalism, 'Narrative' and 'Queer'. Black Box events are supplemented by Minikron which initially met when no Ikon services took place. Now it constitutes smaller, more intimate 'gatherings' offering 'courses' as frameworks for the discussion of topics that interest the wider community. The Black Box amounts to an informal, 'safe space' where there is a sharing and exploration of the themes raised in Ikon services in greater depth.

Caputo states: '(Ikon) has no buildings, assets, hierarchy, ordained ministers, seminary, or bulletin boards (the latter assertion is not factually correct given the remit of Ikon's web-site) (Caputo 2007, 129). This does mean that there is no attempt at co-ordination or direction at all. Ikon refers to itself as a 'cyndicate'.^{xxv} At the centre of this 'cyndicate' is a nucleus of individuals who appear to be particularly active and provide expertise to help nurture an embryonic collective. It remains, however, the only source of providing guidance for the 'gathering'. Adherents meet quarterly to plan events and discuss the ongoing development of Ikon. Beyond this core are a number of individuals who are involved with aiding, setting up and/or running various events and groups. In one sense 'cyndicate' refers to the word 'syndicate': an amalgamation of diverse individuals

coming together for a common purpose. Thus Ikon views itself as a specific type of collective that shares a united vision while simultaneously acknowledging difference, diversity and disparate interests. Consequently, the playful use of the word 'cyndicate' refers to a dissimilar group of individuals who nonetheless all display the same ethos: to 'question religion precisely because we love religion so much, questioning our understanding of God only because we love God'.^{xxvi} While they have not neglected more traditional means of discussing and disseminating their ideas, the embrace of the new technologies by the emergents is in line with post-modern modes of communication that adds to the fluid nature of the movement. Emerging Church methodology includes frequent use of multimedia channels and the Internet to facilitate global networks and to converse about such subjects as theology, philosophy, culture, politics and social issues. Emergent 'blogs' are numerous and mark not only an effort to be relevant to contemporary culture. Grassroots movements, particularly of a Protestant sectarian nature, made use of media 'underground' methods such as religious tracts and books - often in an atmosphere of intimidation fostered by the Christian establishment throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the light of the controversy surrounding the Emergent Church, supporters similarly use the internet anonymously to globally spread their controversial and even subversive views.^{xxvii}

In the early 1990s, the World Wide Web hardly existed. Its increasing use by a variety of religious constituencies, or as a source of information about religious groups, contributed to the fresh phenomenon of 'religion-in-cyberspace'. Through web-sites the emergents have developed their own 'in-house' jargon where terms such as 'generous', 'missional', 'authentic' and 'narrative' serve as marker by which they are able to speedily recognize each other through the creation of a 'virtual communitas'. These are forms of new religiosity where the physical gatherings are relatively rare and fleeting. In the case of Ikon 'religion-in-cyberspace' constitutes the 'fluid' church taken to its logical conclusion: a means of communication in what is already a virtual community.

Ikon has several opportunities for web-site postings. This includes previously included 'Reflections' - an initiative that involves contributions mostly written by people within the Ikon community for use during its 'services'. Also included are a number of short pieces offered by 'random others' - those who do not attend 'gatherings'. A further initiative, by way of illustration, is 'Witness' which 'hopes to be a place where those connected to Ikon can coordinate actions and collaborate with one another in an attempt to bring positive change to society'.^{xxviii} Witness initially formed as a group of people loosely connected to Ikon who, during the run up to the war in Iraq, endeavoured to wrestle with the implications of the UK's involvement.

Theodrama

Engaging with the post-modern world through various mediums of art with a spiritual message is a further characteristic of Emerging churches. Many of their activities and projects, particularly of an art-based nature, were already underway before Ikon formally came into being. The emphasis on the arts generally remains central to Ikon's activities. In the words of Rollins

[Ikon] filled the gap which I had created....my job was to create a void (a place, time) and then sit back and see it filled. The void particularly appealed to the arts community in Belfast who could use their skills (art, music etc.) which churches didn't seem to value.^{xxix}

Caputo writes: 'Ikon is a concrete, community-based, practical, and paraliturgical undertaking, less interested in theology than in "theo-drama"' (Caputo 2007, 131). Ikon's 'welcome' web-page emphasises a concern with the arts but ranges further in attempting to capture the spirit of its enterprise:

Inhabiting a space on the outer edges of religious life, we are a Belfast-based collective who offer anarchic experiments in transformance arts. Challenging the distinction between theist and atheist, faith and no faith, our main gathering employs a cocktail of live music, visual imagery, soundscapes, theatre, ritual and reflection in an attempt to open up the possibility of a theodramatic event.^{xxx}

Pete Rollins puts the spirit behind Black Box events in this way:

We engage in....'transformance art'.... which seeks to evoke transformation in those present. Transformance art also evokes the notion of performance art, and indeed the various gatherings can take this form.^{xxxi}

Indeed, the second half of Rollins book, dedicated to orthopraxy, describes ten simple 'services' or experimental liturgies in the form of theo-dramas. Caputo singles out that entitled 'Queer' to encapsulate what Ikon exemplifies (Caputo 2007, 133). Set in the 'sacred hour' context of a bar that increasingly fills up, 'Queer' depicts a bare-chested young man is approached by a woman who writes 'gay', 'queer', 'homosexual', 'faggot' and 'sodomite' on his body while rocks are strewn around the two figures. A speaker addresses the gathering explaining that Ikon is neither liberal or conservative because both Christian voices have to do with questions of orthodoxy, holding the 'right' view. Here there is no 'gay issue', only mutual love and support.

As part of its fluid structure Ikon provides opportunities for various artists to contribute in disparate locations in co-operative ventures to forge experiments in transformance art that reflect the values, skills and context of a particular community. In addition, Ikon also partakes of numerous conferences and festivals where its art genres are frequently on display. For instance, almost from

its inception Ikon has contributed to events at the Greenbelt annual national Christian festival where it has gained a high profile, not to mention a certain degree of notoriety. This included, in 2006, a 'service' in the form of a theo-drama on the theme of Fundamentalism that attracted almost 1,000 people.

I asked Peter Rollins, how he reacted to the kinds of criticisms that Ikon attracted from traditional evangelicals and fundamentalists. He retorted, 'I tend only to respond to critique which I feel is genuinely trying to engage with the ideas rather than simply condemning them'. I also quizzed him about the Fundamentalism theo-drama' at the Greenbelt Christian festival where Ikon reports on its web-site that the event was bombarded by fundamentalist protesters decrying Ikon.^{xxxii} Rollins replied:

In terms of the protest - we put that on!!! It was Ikon people doing it as part of the gathering. It was about fundamentalism so what better thing to do than have some protests and protest against ourselves!

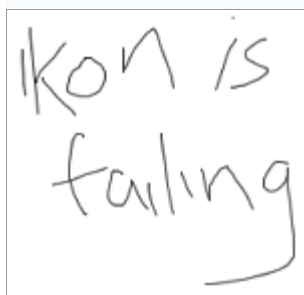
Ikon has a growing reputation through its own contribution to the arts beyond the theo-drama. EIKON is Ikon's project that includes free art exhibitions which take place at Belfast's prominent Waterfront Hall. The enterprise is orientated to aiding local artists and includes a workshop. In addition, ART SPACE amounts to a provision on Ikon's web-site for anyone to provide examples of their art work, generally of a religio-spiritual nature. Thus Ikon embraces many charitable causes with fundraising events that usually take the form of expressive art productions. One such endeavour is in support of the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre through the VaginArt exhibition from a wide range of professional and amateur artists displaying a selection of vagina themed pieces made available for purchase by private sale and auction.

Ikon also holds its own film nights. The content of features shown varies considerably. In the past this has ranged from fairly conventional evangelical films such as *A Thief in the Night* - a post-tribulation, End Times story, to *Palindromes* that follows a young girl's experiences of living with a pro-life fundamentalist family. Also exemplifying Ikon's concern with 'conversation' was the recent showing of *Inherit the Wind* that covered the notorious 1925 Tennessee 'Monkey Trial' over teaching Darwin's theory of evolution in American Schools.

Summary

It remains clear that Ikon, like many emergent ‘gatherings’ of the more radical Emerging churches, has not descended completely unannounced. There have been discernible innovations within the wider Christian community that have also led to the advent of the Emerging Church as a broad religious phenomenon. From this perspective the various ‘cohorts’ that form the Emerging Church movement appear to be calibrating pre-existing trends in numerous conventional churches while cranking certain developments up a gear. However, given the characteristics of the Emerging Church briefly discussed above, and identified in many of Ikon’s statements and activities, the phenomenon must be viewed as radically different and ‘new’ even if discernible trends within the earlier churches, ministries and movements may have anticipated it.

Clearly, ‘gatherings’ like Ikon mark a departure from conventional forms of Christianity, particularly in its more evangelical forms. What they have created is totally innovating and what this amounts to can be tentatively discerned and ‘mapped-out’. Engaging with the post-modern world through various mediums of art with a spiritual message appears to be only one characteristic of the more radical wing of the emerging ‘gatherings’. Other characteristics are also discernible and the major ones are overviewed above: an emphasis on orthopraxy; increasing ecumenism; fresh modes of evangelism; communication and organization; a radical critique of conventional Christianity by way of the faith’s historical theological foundations and organizational formations; divergent theologies ranging from ‘God is dead’ to narrative theology, all of which are negated by an interest in negative theology; the fluid church and new ways of communicating in the post-modern culture. Other characteristics are fuelled with ambiguity typified by views of traditional Christianity. Ikon, as explored above, displays many of these major over-lapping hallmarks and is discernibly as ‘pure’ a type of Emerging church that is likely to be found anywhere.



How Ikon sees itself^{xxxiii}

There is, nonetheless, a very real sense in which the notion of a ‘characteristics’ underpinning a typology is misleading and even a misnomer when applied to the more radical wing of the Emerging Church. They are perhaps more realistically described as ‘tendencies’ that may be observed but which fall short of a coherent typology. This is compounded by the fact that, as a religio-cultural phenomenon generally, the Emerging Church remains a fragmented movement reflecting the diversity of the very post-modernity with which it engages. The Emerging Church

remains, moreover, a marginalised phenomenon ‘inhabiting a space on the outer edges of religious life’. Ikon, like other groupings are currently little more than a fragile and diverse ‘conversation’ being held by individuals over the Internet and at various ‘gatherings’. The elusive and tentative nature of this ‘conversation’ initially makes it difficult to describe what, if anything unites the movement in terms of its characteristic, thus rendering a typology or ‘ideal type’ virtually an impossible task.

The concept of an ideal type is generally attributed, of course, to Max Weber’s distinctive contribution to social theory. According to Weber’s definition, ‘an ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view’ and therefore ‘concrete individual phenomena...are arranged into a unified analytical construct (Gedankenbild)’ (Weber 1904/1949, 90). An ideal type is formed from characteristics and elements of a given phenomenon. However, the ideal type, for Weber, is not intended to correspond to all the characteristics of any phenomenon, only certain elements corresponding to it.

The radical wing of the Emergent Church is perhaps best understood not only in terms of being ‘post’ evangelical, Protestant and post many other things, but what it is not, certainly not some ‘unified concrete construct’. The Emerging Church movement claims no one leadership or inspiration, no authority or organisational structure, no coherent and over-arching aim or objective. Ikon and its ilk are perhaps best comprehended as a counterpoint or negation of something else: the conventional Christian Church. Its *raison d’être* is experimental and eclectic, questioning critiquing itself, seeing itself as ‘uncertain’ and even failing. It is perhaps best understood in terms of what it negates and the non-definition of itself, prepared to deconstruct and critique itself from the inside out, capable of at odds with itself; ‘making it up as it goes along’. Thus it seemingly almost defies a succinct definition.

For Weber, identifying an ideal type includes not only a description of a social phenomenon, but the attempt to understand or interpret it (*Verstehen*) in terms of subjective human behaviour and the motivation behind it as well – a theological contextualisation of an action as part of a means-end nexus (Weber 1904/1949, 10). Those ‘gathering’ such as Ikon self-consciously attempting to avoid conforming to any typology and conceptualization, even underlining its own failures in what they aspire to be in the act of ‘becoming’. These attempts to avoid stereotypes are deemed to be constricting and are derived from the very nature of the philosophical standpoints and theological leanings (such as they exist) embraced by the community as it seeks a unique but definitive Christian response to the challenges of post-modernity. This distinction is nonetheless enhanced by the more radical independent communities that tend to endorse certain philosophical tendencies and display cultural attributes often reflected in artistic forms that seemingly appeal to a generational revolution disenchanted with what its exponents frequently refer to as the ‘traditional church mode’ of the mainstream denominations.

Ikon, like other ‘gatherings’, is beset upon a pilgrimage, uncertain of its destination. This negates any notion of a conscious means-end that is part of any concrete typology. For many emergents it is not the end point that is the priority; it is the journey through post-modernity itself that matters. Ikon sees itself as constituted by pilgrims and sojourners endeavouring to constantly meditate upon the direction of the movement and be open to the divine call that draws down paths not yet traversed. Ikon acknowledges that it is on a continuing journey that is bound to encounter failure:

Ikon does not view itself as having reached some final destination/destiny but rather as being on a journey toward that which forever transcends us. As a result of this we understand ourselves in a continual state of kinetic movement and fluidity. As such we would prefer to call ourselves a community becoming Christian rather than a community of Christians, for if a Christian is someone who selflessly follows Christ and radiates divine love in a broken world then we are profoundly aware that there is much of our being that lies in darkness, still needing to be vangelised. The term ‘emerging’ should not then be thought of as a provisional one that will someday be replaced with the word ‘emerged’, for we embrace the idea that re-reading, critiquing, constructing and deconstructing are all processes which remain vital for our spiritual development.^{xxxiv}

Notes:

- i. This article develops a paper originally presented to the Australian Association Study of Religion conference in 2008 which sought to develop a rudimentary typology of the radical wing of the Emerging Church (Hunt 2008).
- ii. For an overview and discussion of the wide remit of ‘fresh expressions’ inside and outside of the conventional churches see the contributions to Nelstrop and Percy (eds.) *Evaluating Fresh Expressions* (2008).
- iii. A series of e-mail communications
- iv. Interview with Peter Rollins, April 21, 2008.
- v. http://wiki.ikon.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page (accessed January 5, 2008). A possibility that I discussed with Rollins, December 23, 2008.
- vi. <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon>About> (accessed 1/12/08)
- vii. Quoted by McKnight (2007, 1).
- viii. <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon>About> (accessed January 7, 2008).
- ix. <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon>About> (accessed January 7, 2008).
- x. See, for example, Shults (2005).
- xi. <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon>About> (accessed January 5, 2008).
- xii. http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Sins_Of_The_Father (assessed 6/7/08)
- xiii. The post-modern turn taken by the Emerging Church dovetails with related schools of thought, perhaps most obviously that of the narrative theology movement. Narrative theology grew in popularity from the 1980s and advanced the view that the Church's use of scripture should focus on a narrative presentation of the faith, rather than on the exclusive development of a systematic theology. Also frequently referred to as ‘post-liberal’ theology, narrative theology was inspired by a group of theologians at Yale Divinity School, many influenced theologically by such diverse sources as Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas.

- xiv. <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon>About> (accessed January 5, 2008).
- xv. http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Last_Supper (accessed May 10, 2008).
- xvi. Much is exemplified by the well-read book by David Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*. Tomlinson, once a principal leader of the British ‘house church’ movement of the 1970s, claims that post-evangelicals are not impressed by the ‘personality jostling, political manoeuvrings, and empire building’ of ‘bigger’, ‘better’ and more ‘powerful’ churches (Tomlinson 1995, 144-45). Rather, post-evangelical Christians long for fresh expressions of spirituality and an ‘alternative’ church which, in Tomlinson’s case, constitutes Holy Joe’s which meets in a London bar where there are no sermons or hymns and where the assembled gathering decides what is going to be discussed.
- xvii. http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/The_Omega_Course (accessed May 7, 2008).
- xviii. http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon>About#Heretical_(accessed May10, 2008).
- xix. Interview with Peter Rollins, April 25, 2008.
- xx. http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Hush_(accessed January 11, 2008).
- xxi. http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Things_that_happened_in_2006_(accessed January 7, 2008).
- xxii. Based in Westminster, central London, Moot seeks modes of communal living in the urban context and recognizes the heritage left by saints, philosophers and mystics. See <http://www.moot.uk.net/>.
- xxiii. Interview with Peter Rollins, April 21, 2008.
- xxiv. Guest and Taylor (2006, 52) notice the parallel with the New Age movement’s emphasis on “alternative spiritualities”.
- xxv. <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Cyndicate> (accessed January 7, 2008).
- xxvi. <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Cyndicate> (accessed January 7, 2008).
- xxvii. For an overview of the controversies surrounding the Emerging Church, especially the conservative evangelical critique see (Hunt 2009).
- xxviii. <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Witness> (accessed January 5, 2008).
- xxix. Interview with Peter Rollins, April 21, 2008.
- xxx. http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Main_Page (accessed January 5, 2008).
- xxxi. Interview with Pete Rollins (May 14, 2008)
- xxxii. Interview with Peter Rollins, April 23, 2008
- xxxiii. <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon>About#Failing> (assessed 12/12/08)
- xxxiv. http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Image:Ikon_Full.jpg(accessed May 12, 2008).

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