

EMERGING FAITH BOUNDARIES: BRIDGE-BUILDING, INCLUSION, AND THE  
EMERGING CHURCH MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

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EMERGING CHURCH MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
Chapter	
1. STATEMENT OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEM.....	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	22
3. METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK.....	56
4. ORGANIZING EMERGENCE .....	88
5. MAPPING BOUNDARIES AND BORDERLANDS .....	132
6. THE SWEET PROBLEM OF INCLUSION .....	184
7. BRIDGE-BUILDING .....	250
8. CONSTRUCTING THE POSTMODERN .....	338
9. FINDING ELUSIVE TOGETHERNESS .....	413
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	440
VITA .....	454

## ABSTRACT

This is a study of a nascent Christian movement called the Emerging Church Movement in America. The movement seeks to build relational bridges with other faiths, and to be inclusive of people marginalized along lines of race, class, gender and sexuality. Through observing meetings and conferences, conducting in-depth interviews, and through examining published and online data, I analyze how the movement accomplishes their goals. I examine the cognitive “maps” they use to think about their relationships with diverse others and how they reconceptualize “us versus them” boundaries. Next, I look critically at how the movement fosters inclusiveness through a set of customs and practices. I also highlight the implicit lines of exclusion that belie their ideals. Then, I explore how the Emerging Church builds relational bridges with diverse others to foster relationships across difference. I examine their strategies for bridge-building with Jewish and Muslim groups, and even their critics. I outline how they manage perplexing interactions, and evaluate their efforts to build relational bridges in order to socially spiral outwards. Drawing theoretical resources from the sociology of religion, the sociology of culture, social cognition and boundaries theories, this project seeks to contribute to a generalized understanding of how social groups can work together across differences.

## **Chapter 1 Statement of the sociological problem: difference + closeness**

*In this introductory chapter, I highlight the core sociological problematic. I argue that sociology has been good at showing us, 1) how people do “sameness” by forming homogenous and exclusive close-knit groups, and also 2) how people also do “differentness” by establishing safe distances from outsiders they view as dissimilar and dangerous. What sociology has not explained so well is how people do a kind of togetherness that emphasizes and preserves differentness instead of sameness. This is an important issue facing religion in America, with many institutions seeking to engage skillfully with diverse others in a pluralistic and heterogeneous world. I identify the Emerging Church Movement as a site where this relational dynamic is a goal of the ideal, and is hence worth studying. The core concepts of my study are boundaries, inclusion, bridge-building and postmodernism.*

### **“You are us, you are not us”**

This dynamic plays out in our world everywhere and all the time. The human tendency to create boundaries of separation from others seems fundamental to our social nature. We claim uniqueness by defining ourselves against others. We are socially attuned to the contours of people who are like us, and people who are not like us. Yet, the shape of those in-group out-group contours constantly evolves.

Sociologists have long been interested in the twin processes of inclusion and exclusion. We are at once interested in the Durkheimian orientation toward social solidarity: how societies, groups and dyads establish a corporate identity and come to a functional consensus of what “togetherness” is. Yet, we are also interested in the logic of distinction, categorization and hierarchy in the social

world as per Marx. How and why do groups come to see others as different and inferior, hence justifiably subjugated or excluded?

I am fundamentally interested in how groups can “do difference together”: acknowledging social divides, respecting them, but still establishing a basis for coming together and being together. This type of coming together seems to acknowledge boundaries, while simultaneously respecting and transcending them at the same time. What do we have in social theory that conceptualizes and theorizes this kind of coming together across social divides?

*Doing differentness... together*

In social theory, *sameness* and *closeness* have been well theorized. The intersection of sameness and closeness shows how individuals and groups forge a sense of sameness to build solidarity through common association. Similarly, *difference* and *farness* has also been adequately theorized. We see this in processes of “othering” that distinguish people as different, inferior, or sometimes even less human. We see this in how the studies of gender, sexuality and race have in some manner theorized on these twin processes of in-group solidarity and out-group othering to better grasp how our social world works.

Herein lays the sociological problem: what do we have in social theory that illuminates a particular combination of *difference* and *closeness*? What understanding do we have about how categorical others distinguish each other mutually as different, but forge togetherness instead of distancing themselves from each other?



I contend that the discipline in general *has been biased in its focus on the consonance between sameness and closeness, and difference and distance.*

This question is not just “academic” in the pejorative sense. Our world has very real problems, where in-group extremists have caused much harm to those they categorize as others. That diverse religions could possibly “coexist” (as the bumper sticker goes) seems ideal, but how exactly is this accomplished? Where can we see this particular combination of difference and closeness? What can we learn from these interactions? My chosen site for exploring this problematic is religion.

Religion has become a more prominent focal point for boundary issues, and rightly so. In fact, the 2008 Association for the Sociology of Religion annual meeting was titled, “Religion Crossing Boundaries”, where papers presented dealt with a variety of boundary issues: religion crossing transnational boundaries, religions crossing virtual boundaries, religions crossing inter and intra-religious boundaries, and more. It does not take an expert to know that religious conflicts the world over are often governed by the basic axiom of ideologically vested differences. Many religious groups see themselves as unique, as “saved”, or as the “chosen-ones” while perceiving others as excluded from these unique statuses. Where then can we find sites, locations and particular religious groups who are forging togetherness with diverse others? What can we learn from peoples’ efforts to build relational bridges across lines of difference, while still acknowledging and respecting those differences?

## **The Emerging Church**

I see the theoretical potential for gaining an understanding of this combination of *difference + closeness* in studying the Emerging Church. Religion theorists like Penny Edgell (1998, 2006) and Paul Lichterman (2005) have made various attempts to shed light on this undeveloped theoretical area, through their research on religious groups that build bridges to, and attempt inclusion of, categorical others. My interest in this question has also been sparked by my observation of interreligious dialogue (between Muslims, Christians and Jews), in which the Emerging Church has taken an interest.

My research on the Emerging Church explores how religious groups negotiate boundaries of difference to find new ways of thinking, being, relating and expressing faith.

### *The not-so-church church*

What is the Emerging Church and why is it worth studying? The Emerging Church is an enigma to many. There really is no easy way to describe the movement. It has been said that trying to describe the Emerging Church is like “nailing Jell-O to the wall”. It is not quite a religious institution; it is also not a denomination and does not claim to be one. The Emerging Church can be best understood as a faith movement reacting to the postmodern condition and adopting postmodern forms of knowledge to rethinking the Christian faith. The Emerging Church is not primarily a brick and mortar church, but it refers to a collective movement of like-minded Christians from different denominational backgrounds.

The Emerging Church is a loose association of individuals who interact primarily over the internet through blogs, websites and podcasts, and includes a number of congregations that self-identify as “Emergent” or “Emerging”. There is now a wealth of books *from* and *on* the Emerging Church movement. As small and as embryonic as the movement is, it has become progressively prominent on the Christian scene in America. Mainline Christians and evangelicals are becoming increasingly engaged with the Emerging Church. Some have even self-identified with the label “Emergent”, while continuing their participation in their own religious traditions. Some have left denomination-based institutional Christianity altogether to form organic communities of faith that they identify as “Emergent”.

Biblically conservative, Evangelical critics think the movement has gone too far in questioning absolute truth and scriptural authority. And indeed, the Emerging Church does take a deconstructionist stance to both these things. Some observers see the Emerging Church as merely the latest Christian fad that will come and go. Yet, the movement has increasingly been making its mark on the terrain of Christianity in America. Much reaction has been negative and cautionary. At the same time, many denominations have shown the willingness to engage positively with the movement. Various groups from across the spectrum of Christian denominations identify as Emergent or see value in the movement’s ideas.

The Emerging Church is “larger than life” in terms of its discursive presence. Emerging Church leader Brian McLaren was named by *Time*

magazine in 2005 as one of the 25 most influential Evangelical Christians in America. His books on Christianity and the Emerging Church are both widely read and criticized. The Emerging Church has been identified by conservatives like Charles Colson (*Christianity Today*, 2006) and D.A. Carson (2005) as a harbinger of dangerous ideas that question theological staples like atonement, salvation and the nature of hell. Yet Emergents lean into the tension by openly identifying with the negative labels associated with the movement. Titles from the movement demonstrate this: books like *The Heretic's Guide to Eternity* (Burke, 2006), *The Fidelity of Betrayal* (2008) argue that one needs to be a faithful heretic of the reified, institutional Christian faith in order to be true to its essence.

Postmodernism features very explicitly in the movement. They take for granted that the postmodern context is the reality of the present. The Emerging Church Movement approaches the postmodern as an *epistemological condition* and an *epochal context*, as well as a technological and cultural one. The movement actively seeks to rethink what it means to be a Christian in postmodern times, while seeking to be reflexive about the influence of modernism on Christianity. Influential leaders of the movement like Brian McLaren and Tony Jones have written books like *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Jones, 2001) and the award winning *A New Kind of Christian* (McLaren, 2001). They ask: how must we rethink the Christian faith in accordance with the changing times? Intellectually, they engage postmodern philosophy through the likes of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, and their more contemporary interpreters like John D. Caputo and Richard Kearney.

The Emerging Church is a fertile yet developing site to research boundary issues around religion and relationality. Although recent years have seen a small number of academic articles on the Emerging Church (Bielo 2009, Harrold 2006), the significance of the movement has yet to be comprehensively addressed, perhaps because it is still embryonic, and its impact on Christianity is still yet to be determined. My intention is to spur both interest in the movement, and to pave the way for more research on the Emerging Church. I analyze the Emerging Church because I see it as a template for examining religion being reflexive about its place in the world among categorical others, seeking new modes of relating and new modes of togetherness that bridge across differences.

### **Conceptualizations and definition of terms**

#### *What is a church?*

The enigmatic status of the Emerging Church means that conceptual definitions become necessary. What will concepts like “church” and “movement” mean in my dissertation? The concept “church” does not refer to physical buildings, which are sometimes synonymously associated with congregations. But neither does it exclude actual congregational churches. Indeed, there are Emerging Churches that operate as typical church congregations. Yet, there are others that do not. The notion of “church” also does not refer to a specific established denomination, like ‘the Anglican church’. Nor does it refer to a tightly bounded and distinct religious identity like ‘the Catholic church’ that we associate with institutional religion.

As per Durkheim's definition, the notion of church is defined very much by a "moral community" which can take many different forms, and can be organized in many different ways (1995, c1915). *My conceptualization of church leans toward more flexible forms of church that are embedded in relationships and social networks rather than particular geographically designated sacred spaces or structures.*

The notion of "church" I am utilizing also refers to a loose association of individuals who adopt or self-identify with an identity label. Yet the boundaries around the identity remain ostensibly open and ambiguous. The Emerging Church consists of likeminded Christians who regardless of denominational backgrounds or affiliations, are converging on a common way of thinking about faith in a postmodern context. People who identify as part of the Emerging Church may have mainline, evangelical or institutional affiliations, none at all, or somewhere in between. My conceptualization of church refers not to hierarchical institutional or physical structures, but instead it refers to the coordinated activity of people who regard themselves as connected and likeminded. This definition of church emphasizes the perception of likemindedness and mutual identification, of a sense of common "faith-thinking" despite differing geographical and even institutional locations.

*What kind of movement?*

Next it is also necessary to clearly conceptualize the term 'movement' in my project. Social movement literature typically engages questions of how

people come to mobilize and engage against political or economic status quos. Social movement literature also assumes organizations to be theoretical starting points for social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Literature in the field has particularly been applied to issues of power, economic resources and status in society.

On the one hand, The Emerging Church has features of classic social movements, particularly if seen through the criteria of resource mobilization and coordinated activity. Social movement literature points to groups employing resources to achieve well defined goals (Edwards and McCarthy, 2004). Social movements have varying degrees of hierarchy and organization. Some theorists argue that more formal and hierarchical organizations have a greater capacity and resources to achieve movement objectives. The Emerging Church movement however, consists of not just formal organizations, but also individuals and loosely defined groups. It is hence a movement that has a mixture of formal and informal organization.

Social movements typically have clearly spelt out goals and objectives that they mobilize to achieve. This is not necessarily characteristic of the Emerging Church Movement. It seeks primarily to create interaction and promote relationships across different types of religious and social boundaries. It seeks to build bridges across lines of difference. It seeks to “generate conversation” about faith issues and the movement consistently projects and defines itself as “one big conversation”. If there is an overarching goal of the movement, it is an attempt to understand what it means to be a Christian in changing ‘postmodern’ times.

Although there is no central governing body in the movement, the Emerging Church is made of what social movement literature describe as Social Movement Organizations (SMO). SMOs play coordinating roles without actually formally directing or employing most of the participants (Zald and McCarthy 1987). There are features of SMOs with the Emerging Church. For instance, *Emergent Village*<sup>1</sup> is a website where many Emerging Church articles are published, and Emerging Church events are broadcast. Yet Emergent Village is not a central governing body, but it calls itself “a node in the web of the emerging church”. Many of the Emerging Church SMOs are web-based. Websites like Emergent Village play this coordinating role in bringing Emergents together in dialogue as well as in actual conferences.

The theoretical outlook of the literature accounts for the idea of a social movement as synonymous with highly organized, highly goal driven activity that seeks to uproot political and/or economic status quos. However, another sense of the word ‘movement’ can refer to people and groups more organically and independently moving toward a way of thinking and practicing faith, which occurs less by specific organizations and institutions that dictate this movement. A softer conceptualization of ‘movement’ de-emphasizes both these elements, and is one that I operationalize in my use of the term “movement” here. This softer conceptualization of movement has been articulated by New Social Movement theorists as ‘cultural movements’ (Touraine 1985; Offe 1985; Melucci 1985 in Neitz 1994:128). Cultural movements in religion are loosely organized, and rely

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<sup>1</sup> [www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com)



on varying networks, and lack the structure of conventional religions and religious movement organizations (Neitz 1994:128). Instead of organizational forms, the focus on cultural movements is oriented more toward practices and the transmission or diffusion of “new” ideas. So the Emerging Church as a “cultural movement” would best voice my use of the term movement.

### **Conceptualizing religion**

Religion can be highly problematic to define and operationalize. Yet, it is necessary to arrive at a workable conceptualization of religion before attempting to forward a meaningful discussion. This is because initial conceptual building blocks always shape subsequent theories.

Much of classical sociology assumes concepts like “society”, “culture” and “religion” to be durable and coherent. Religion has often been conceptualized as “just another domain” of society that can be picked out and talked about. According to Wuthnow, this conceptualization approach makes the classical domain assumption of a Cartesian “fundamental division in the nature of reality” (Wuthnow 2005:23). To add to the problem, Beckford notes that in academic circles, religion has been taken “as a relatively unproblematic unitary and homogenous phenomenon that can be analyzed and compared across time and space” (Beckford 2003:15). Talal Asad also notes the disciplinary tendency to reduce religion to “transhistorical essence” (1993:29), where we speak of “religion” as if it were essentially the same thing irrespective of context. The result is a form of theory that tries to get at the essential properties of religion.

### *Religion as sacred*

The seminal works of Otto (1923) and Eliade (1959) try to get at what this “core” of religion looks like. Hence they conceptualize religion as the property of “Holy” or “Sacred”; the “sacred” being an entirely separate and distinct domain from the “secular”. Humans demarcate a separation between sacred and profane realms, which translated to drawing out these distinctions in time (confession, prayer time) and physical space (Mosques, home altars). This conceptualization of religion took root in classical Sociology. Durkheim saw religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things... set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim, 1995, c1915). However, *religion as sacred* is too broad a conceptualization because it is evident that the sacred is not exclusive to religion per se. Societies function on sacred and profane, of things that must be preserved and interdicted from things that are dangerous (Douglas 1966). No surprise then that Durkheim would theorize religion as society worshipping itself.

### *Organized religion*

Other social scientists have taken their cue from Durkheim to look at the “beliefs and practices” of religion as a way of getting to its essential properties. This has led much research on religion to scrutinize the specifics of doctrines and practices of religious groups. What is essential to this definition of religion are embedded in its litany of beliefs, whether in Gods or in particular sacred doctrines. The assumed “thing-like” quality of religion, coupled with focus on beliefs and practices, has led many researchers to operationalize religion as a

function of distinct groups in space delimited locations of believing and practicing. Researchers ask: what is your religious affiliation? And by implication, this equates religious institutional affiliation as an indicator of a “practicing” religionist. In this conceptualization, religion becomes synonymous with its institutional manifestations. And sociologists have productively milked this conceptualization, with “congregations” theorized as the purveyors of religious meanings and social services (Ammerman 2005), and of music and the arts (Chaves 2004). The much developed study of organized religion is the product of such a conceptualization. Yet this way of defining religion has also been unsettled and rendered inadequate because it misses an important aspect of what constitutes religion.

### *Experience and spirituality*

What of how people experience religion? What of activities that individuals regard as spiritual, but are not codified institutional practices? How do we make sense of the deeply personal “spiritual” experiences people have through religious meanings they make out of the content of everyday life? These perplexing questions have led to the advent of a different way of conceptualizing religion, away from institutions and centered on personal experience, spirituality and individual practices. Robert Bellah offered a hint of this through Sheila-ism: a woman’s self-named religion (1985), which to Bellah was a degraded form of religion that was individual-centered. Sociologists Robert Wuthnow observed a “reordering” of how Americans were shifting from traditional spirituality to a “new spirituality of seeking” (Wuthnow 1998: 3) or faith “questing” since the 1950s. Wade Clarke Roof makes similar assertions with baby boomers, self-described

as “spiritual but not religious” (Fuller 2001) and distancing themselves from organized religion (Roof 1999).

This focus on spirituality also parallels another development in the sociology of religion, with the “lived religion” or “everyday religion” theoretical approach. Meredith McGuire notes that with the advent of “lived religion” in religious research, actual experiences of religious persons are separated from institutionally prescribed beliefs and practices (McGuire 2008: 12). In this definition of religion, however, institutions and beliefs do not drop out of the picture. Rather, as Robert Orsi expresses, religion has to be understood as a form of “cultural work... which directs attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas – all as media of making and unmaking worlds” (2003: 172). Robert Orsi goes on to note that,

The Interpretive challenge of the study of lived religion is to develop the practice of disciplined attention to people’s signs and practices as they describe, understand, and use them, in the circumstances of their experiences, and to the structures and conditions within which these signs and practices emerge. (Orsi, 2003: 172)

Such a definition of religion pays attention to local and particular definitions and expressions of religion. It avoids casting religion as something universal. Much of religion that goes “under the radar” of religious researchers who locate religion in institutions of believing and belonging, is picked up by this “lived religion” perspective. Because of its attentiveness to what people are actually doing to concretize their religious worlds, culture becomes indispensable to a definition of religion.

### *A cultural conceptualization of religion*

The appeal of this definition of religion lies in its emphasis on the cultural aspects of religion that both structure and are structured. While I do concur that religion has a beliefs component (which should not be discounted), but more than that, it is a cultural system (Geertz 1973). It is a system of signs, symbols, meanings, discourses, and shared understandings, forms of practice, communication and interaction. What has been de-emphasized in previous definitions of religion is that it is constituted by a body of cultural practices that may at times have their significance independent of specific doctrines or beliefs.

In my view, a cultural conceptualization of religion is constituted by three important components: i) language, ii) practices and iii) relations. I would like to explicate on what researchers are trying to get at with each conceptualization, and how these taken together forward a conceptualization of religion useful for my analytical purposes.

#### *Language*

Sociologists like Robert Wuthnow (1987) and Mary Jo Neitz (2004) have followed the larger linguistic and cultural turn in the social sciences by focusing on religious language as the object of investigation (Bonnell and Hunt 1999). The point of focusing on religious language is to understand how individuals produce religious meanings for themselves out of their own cultural resources at hand.

Instead of taking religious vocabularies for granted, and as relatively static, an attention to language focuses on the creative component of how people

narratively constitute their religious lives. What meanings do individuals attribute to their daily activities that “make” them religiously meaningful? What are the religious vocabularies that people develop to narrate their personal histories through an accompanying religious framework of perceiving “God’s will” or “God’s guidance” in their lives? The focus on language and narrative makes us pay attention to both the creative agency of people in how they construct and narrate their stories, but also to the “culture structures” from which people tap on to provide accounts of their lives as religious.

In other instances, sociologists have focused on how people use religious language, vocabularies and stories to inspire people to action for “resource mobilization”. For instance, Lichterman discusses how people use religious language to construct civic identities and relationships, and define insiders and outsiders, as well as to legitimate goals (Lichterman 2008:85). The focus then is on the rhetorical power of language in “meaning-deployment”.

The focus on religious language asks: how do people actively construct and create their religious worlds through language? How do people make meanings out of the cultural resource at hand? People narratively construct their religious worlds in ways that implicate the religious in making their lives meaningful. Language is central to the cultural conceptualization of religion. Language does not just describe religion, but language itself *constitutes* religion. People “do things” with language that makes it religiously meaningful, for instance, in how narratives constitute people’s religious identity (Neitz 2004:397).

## *Practices*

Another aspect of the cultural conceptualization of religion focuses on practices. In my conceptualization, religion needs to be understood as a body of cultural practices: the things that people do attributing religious significance to their everyday actions and their daily lives. In this cultural conceptualization of religion as practice, religion is not so much about particular beliefs, but rather religion is located in practices that may or may not have any relationship to beliefs or doctrines. Religion then is not all about mental assent or believing a set of doctrines, but it is lived out performatively in ways that imbued with religious meanings.

For instance, Ruth Frankenberg (2004) studies how people's spiritual practices can range from prayer to work, to their dressing, even extending to how they practice sex. Conceptualizing religion as practice unbounds religion from being in the locus of the head, but extends it to religion as expressed through embodied practices and manipulation of physical environments. Meredith McGuire's work, *Lived Religion* (2008) also elucidates eclectic and creative practices that center on how individuals put into practice their religious lives via material objects and the setting aside of particular spaces designated as spiritually meaningful for individuals.

The idea that there is an element of "doing" religion that is beyond belief seems useful for my purposes. It offers real potential to study *difference + closeness* as it raises the possibility that different religious groups can "do things"

together, without necessarily needing to share a common set of beliefs or doctrine. For instance, Courtney Bender's work on how volunteers work together in a soup kitchen (2003) explores how both non-religious and religious people work together for a common cause. Religious volunteers attribute religious meaning to their volunteer work, without infringing on meanings that other non-religious volunteers attribute to their own volunteer work.

### *Relations*

Thirdly, a cultural conceptualization of religion also should factor in the web of relationships that constitute religion. Religion is a relational network between people and groups in society. Religion is also embedded in the web of social discourses within a society. Instead of a conceptualization of religion as a well-bounded "thing", or as a specialized domain of social life, a relational conceptualization of religion looks at the web of relationships and interactions that constitute "the religious".

Religion is intrinsically embedded in its social context. So you cannot put religion on one side, and put society on another. I see religion interacting with social contexts that are evolving, changing, and transforming, and hence religion itself is susceptible to change. Religion is hence concomitantly dynamic and changing, interacting with local contingencies as they present themselves.

A relational conceptualization of religion brings to the fore issues related to how religious groups draw boundaries of identity and otherness in their interactions within the social world. Boundaries become salient in this



conceptualization because religious groups need to have a sense of who they are in relation to the wider social world. Lichterman examines the network of relationships that religious groups find themselves in, and the ways that they successfully or unsuccessfully negotiate their relationships with diverse “others” (Lichterman 2005). Other researchers of religion study how people interact with the Gods (Orsi 2005) or spirits in diverse ways, making the spiritual visible, concrete and “present to the senses”.

Taking these three elements collectively, this cultural conceptualization of religion provides an answer to the claims of the variant of secularization theorists who look at declining attendance and participation in religious institutions as a sign of the overall decline of religion in society. But perhaps what they have missed is that the ostensible “location” of religion has shifted, forsaking the “old wineskins” of institutions and finding relevant forms and expressions of faith through language, practices and the web of relations religion is embedded in.

### **Research question**

The central question of my research centers on social boundaries and inclusion, where religion is the chosen site for studying particular issues related to boundaries. The Emerging Church Movement is the particular empirical field of investigation for these boundary issues. I ask a different kind of question than what is already known about religion. Instead of addressing how religions define a unique and exclusive identity, and draw strong boundaries of distinction and

separateness, I ask: *How do religions practice inclusion and engage in social bridge-building across lines of difference?*

### *The Social world of the Emerging Church*

As a necessary precursor to my theoretical discussion, I first provide a picture of the social world of the Emerging Church Movement in chapter 4. I discuss the movements' core ideas, principle voices and participants. I also examine their organizational forms and core activities.

### *Social cognition and boundaries*

Since the Emerging Church is geared toward an ethic of inclusion to a diverse range of "others", *what are the cognitive processes from which a new mental perception of the "other" is arrived at, such that the "other" becomes someone to engage, dialogue, and learn from?* How can we explain perceiving the "other" as one to draw close to, instead of abstaining from? I take on this question in chapter 5, on how the movement engages in practices of mapping relational boundaries and borderlands.

Secondly, my project also explores: *what kind of boundary work by religious groups takes place to foster inclusion?* How are boundaries reworked and negotiated in practical terms? How do they conceptualize the meaning and negotiate the boundaries of "us" and "not us" and accomplish togetherness with people from both categories? I explore how the Emerging Church relates to categorical others in the form of other Christians, people of other faiths, and people with no faith in chapter 6 on inclusion and managing differences.

### *Culture and practices*

*What are the Emerging Church's cultural resources for action? What are the cultural schemas, cultural repertoires, and rhetorics, discursive resources they draw upon or create to accomplish bridge-building and spiral outwards socially? If building relational bridges is the goal, how is this accomplished through particular practices, and modes of interaction? I explore how the movement employs culture to engender critical interactions and engagement opportunities with diverse others. I explore how the Emerging Church movement builds bridges and spirals outwards in chapter 7.*

### *The postmodern world*

The Emerging Church speaks of the reality of the postmodern world and feels it must be appropriately attuned to it. The movement asserts that postmodernism ushers in new ways of thinking about identity and otherness, particularly in building relational bridges across differences. How does the Emerging Church Movement “do things” with postmodernism in such a way that it constructs the very postmodern world that it speaks of? This is the question I take on in chapter 8 on how the Emerging Church constructs the postmodern.

## **Chapter 2 Literature review: in search of difference + closeness**

*I explore the literature in the sociological fields of cognition and boundaries, the sociology of religion as well as the sociology of culture. I establish that a particular combination of difference + closeness has not been comprehensively addressed in boundaries theories, and that it needs to be. I look to these areas of the literature to find conceptual and theoretical resources, as well as for gaps in the literature that I can undertake. I discuss how I arrive at my primary theoretical agenda and empirical focus to work towards an investigation of difference + closeness with the Emerging Church Movement.*

### **In search of difference + closeness**

In this literature review, I demonstrate how *sameness + closeness*, as well as *difference + distance* have been adequately theorized, and how it is the particular combination of difference and closeness where theoretical development is much needed. My literature review will be divided into 3 parts, each discussing the 3 major theoretical perspectives in which I situate my project: 1) boundaries and social cognition, 2) the sociology of religion, and 3) the sociology of culture.

### **Boundaries and social cognition: the pathway to maps and borderlands**

In searching for *difference + closeness*, a logical starting point seemed to be theories on boundaries and social cognition. In this first part, I review the literature and argue that the tendency in the field of boundaries and cognition to point us toward *difference + distance*, and *sameness + closeness*, but it does not adequately point us toward an understanding of how a unique combination of *difference + closeness* is accomplished, or how it operates. I also argue that this

unique combination is hardest to explain, but that it bears great theoretical potential if sociologists can develop concepts to shed light on its reality.

Cognition and boundaries issues have also become central to the study of culture and identity. Cerulo's *Culture in Mind* (2002) and DiMaggio's "Cognition and Culture" (1997) have been instrumental in providing a framework for applying insights from social cognition theories to a broader cultural analysis. In similar fashion, Lamont and Molnar discuss how, "the study of boundaries in the social sciences" (2002) has been gaining academic prominence. Brekhus (2007) highlights how this "cognitive turn" in social theory has elucidated the classificatory work of social actors in constructing their social worlds and constructing viable identities. He identifies an established "Rutgers school of culturalist cognitive sociology", which is a perspective that provides key insights into how groups of people construct the culture that mediates meanings for individuals (2007:449).

Founded on the insights of Goffmanian theory, boundaries theory has explored how social life is possible through segmenting and compartmentalizing the social world. It traditionally asks the Durkheimian question: what are the implicit and explicit social rules that make society functionally possible? Boundaries theorists have shed light on how identities are operationalized culturally. How do people bring identities to bear in strategic ways that suit their particular and customized "identity projects"? (Cerulo 1997) What do people practically "do" to activate identities strategically? Brekhus (2003) highlights different identity "styles" (lifestyler, commuter and integrator) of gay men who live

in the suburbs and how they “do” their sexual identity in order to negotiate their social worlds. This includes activating cultural repertoires that supply strategies of action to negotiate space and time, as well as grammars to articulate and make publicly available their identities in ways that are coherent with their ideal self-representation.

*i. Cultural cognitive sociology: Zerubavel’s legacy*

Eviatar Zerubavel’s theoretical contribution is seminal in the field, and it has laid the groundwork for understanding the cognitive (but entirely social) processes through which humans make distinctions in everyday life by mentally partitioning their social world (Zerubavel, 1991, 1996, 1997). Through categorization and classification, we construct what Zerubavel would call discrete “islands of meaning” (1997) to make sense of our social world. Zerubavel’s work has ventured into a broad range of empirical applications, on social memory (1997, 2003), on how our social world is temporally partitioned (Zerubavel 1981, 1985) on historical cartographic practices that shaped our collective mental partitioning of “the world” (Zerubavel 1992), as well as how humans are attentive toward some things but willfully inattentive toward others (Zerubavel 2006).

But Zerubavel’s legacy is that he has inspired subsequent boundaries theories in his wake, to analyze the default tendencies of intra-group solidarity (*sameness + closeness*) and inter-group separation (*difference + distance*). For instance, Zerubavel developed the idea that our cognitive tendency is to exaggerate intra-cluster similarities: lumping, and inter-cluster differences: splitting (Zerubavel 1996). For Zerubavel, once mental gaps are institutionalized,

they become “inevitable facts”, and crossing them is difficult because it requires making categorical “quantum leaps” (Zerubavel 1991:32). Hence the gap between “us” and “them” becomes, in theory, is all the more difficult to bridge. Brekhus’ subsequent focus on social marking and the mental coloring of identity theoretically develops how “otherness” is reinforced and legitimates unequal treatment of racial and sexual minorities (1996, 1998). Similarly, Cerulo addresses the basis for which groups discriminate, classify and conceptualize “difference” (Cerulo, 2002). She looks at how groups employ conceptual categories and identity typologies to categorize other groups and bring them into “frame”. Cerulo also highlights that cognition is institutionally and culturally situated, and that institutions provide framing schemas (Sewell 1992) from which “otherness” is activated.

Theoretical works following Zerubavel, have tended to pass up on theorizing a more unique and difficult combination of *difference + closeness*. This is perhaps, with exception to Jamie Mullaney’s (2006) conceptualization of “firewalkers”, individuals who approach as close as possible to a boundary-line without “getting burned” or crossing the line. But Mullaney’s focus was not on a relational boundary-line between “us” and “them”. It was not focused on the relationship between different groups. Rather, it was an identity boundary individuals held focusing on how close they would come to the virgin/ non-virgin boundary, by engaging in sexual activity, without crossing over to the non-virgin side. Instead of just focusing on individual identity, the more difficult boundary question would be: how do people fire walk relationally between different groups

through *difference + closeness*? What do we have in social theory that makes sense of this? It seems like this is a question that cultural cognitive sociologists have not directed tackled.

ii. *Symbolic and social exclusion*

I found this similar tendency with cultural theorists of a different genre like Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Michèle Lamont (1992), who have explored issues of how social agents utilize the logic of distinction through consumption, tastes, and aesthetic judgment, to mark themselves as superior to others. While Bourdieu and Lamont have different concepts from what cognition theorists use, they are similarly concerned with *sameness + closeness* and *difference + distance*. Where Zerubavel talks about exaggerating inter-cluster and intra-cluster mental distances to define “us and them”, Bourdieu and Lamont discuss “social distinction” in terms of the cultural categories that people use to actively construct an identity that places themselves above others. Works like *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), *Money, Morals and Manners* (Lamont 1992) and *The Dignity of Working Men* (Lamont 2000) theorize how individuals establish their sense of self in the world, and legitimize their identities and social position in relation to categorical others through tastes, aesthetic and material consumption preferences. In “Anything but Heavy Metal”, Bethany Bryson (1996) similarly theorizes how people use cultural tastes to reinforce social distance between themselves and categories of people they dislike or see as inferior.



For cultural boundary theorists, the logic of “distinction” operates as a principle of organization in social life, and that culture is the structured categories by which action is organized. Culture provides “frames for action” and not just “frames for comprehension” in the cognitive sense. In “the study of boundaries in the social sciences” Lamont and Molnar (2002), discuss the field’s general theme of understanding the role of “symbolic resources” (conceptual distinctions, interpretive strategies, cultural traditions) in creating, maintaining, contesting, or even dissolving institutionalized social differences (2002:18). Cultural boundary theorists see boundaries in relation to strategies of action and resources that are employed by social actors to certain ends: to engage in “boundary work” (Yukich 2010), and culturally mobilize similarities and differences to define who they are.

In sum, this body of literature tends to focus on how symbolic boundaries exclude rather than include. A gap in the literature seems to point to the question: can groups *become more socially inclusive by being symbolically inclusive*? After all, Lamont and Molnar describe symbolic resources as a double-edged sword that can both create and dissolve boundaries (2002:168). An important question that begs to be answered is: What are the symbolic bases from which religious groups can engage in social bridge-building projects to include the “other”? What kind of “boundary work” can groups undertake to be more inclusive, instead of exclusive? This portion of the literature spurred me to think of how *difference + closeness* can potentially be accomplished through cultural practices of inclusion and bridge-building, since we already know that groups enact exclusion and exclusiveness through cultural practices. But on this note, it must be said that

culture and practices warrants its own review, which comes at the third part of this chapter.

*iii. Renegotiating identity and rules of inclusion*

Works that address processes of negotiating identity and rules for inclusion hold promise for my search for *difference + closeness*. For example, Cerulo highlights new directions in identity construction that focus on the identification process: the mechanics by which collectivities renegotiate rules of inclusion (Cerulo 1997:395). Cerulo highlights how social constructionists and postmodernists have directed scholarly attention to a collective struggle to self-name, self-characterize and claim social prerogative (1997:393). She also discusses how New Communication Technologies (NCTs) enables social interaction to be decoupled from face-to-face interaction and how “communities of the mind” are established void of place (1997:386). Cerulo identifies a “postmodern challenge” to identity construction which argues against a unified group experience, deconstructs neatly compartmentalized identity categories (especially binary either/ or distinctions) and establishes a prerogative to see the “other” in the “self” (1997:387).

Religion theorists have come close to addressing these questions. Edgell (1998) traces how congregations reinvent local identities by consciously being racially inclusive. This serves as an adaptive strategy to social changes experienced by the church. Other sociologists of religion study how religious groups seek to accomplish their identities in strategic ways. In *A Mosaic of Believers* (2005) Gerardo Marti examines identity styles within a multiracial

church that diminish racial identity and foreground a common “Christian” identity. Lichterman (2005) and Edgell (1998) explore identity styles that enable religious organizations to form productive relationships with the community at large, even though those relationships are filled with awkwardness, misunderstandings and mismatched expectations. These groups are variously doing the hard work of attempting to foster *difference + closeness*.

Hence, these themes are very much applicable to the Emerging Church movement, which is engaged in a struggle to both renegotiate the rules of inclusion, questioning given categories like “heaven-bound” and “hell-bound”, and actively seeking productive relationships with people from other religions. They too, employ New Communication Technologies for much of the work that they do to build relationships across difference, and are willing to explore flexible identity configurations. Communicating through new media creates new possibilities for how people find out about a movement, identify with it and participate in ways that problematize taken-for-granted assumptions of who is an “insider” and who is an “outsider” (Williams 2006). This too is resonant with what I see happening with the Emerging Church Movement in their use of technology and their ability to draw a broad audience.

#### *iv. Boundary conflicts and border disputes*

The body of works on boundaries also shows another ready application to religion in how boundaries are enforced and contested, or the “border disputes” between groups. Joshua Gamson’s “messages of exclusion” (1997) discusses the politics of identity boundary definitions, particularly, how and why exclusion is

enacted. He discusses how the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) enacted a rigid and well defined collective identity boundary against a group, which if it remained associated with, would threaten its wider political salience (a United Nations standing). Initially, a fuzzy, implicit boundary enabled a “you are us and we are you” identification with a group pushing man/ boy love. This association was cast off and was told “you are not us”, when ILGA’s credibility was at stake. This article highlighted “when and how exclusion takes place... is closely tied to the specific conditions under which the collective boundaries are being used politically” (Gamson, 1997:192). What Gamson is elucidating theoretically, is the politics of disassociation, emphasizing how *sameness + closeness* turns into *difference + distance*.

Border disputes also came through in Sylvia Fuller’s article on “Creating and Contesting Boundaries” (2003), and highlighted the dynamic nature of boundaries between what “orthodox” climbing is, and what “heresy” is, and how the latter becomes the former. Fuller notes how “even the most institutionalized cultural boundaries can be (and are) plausibly redrawn as people struggle to enact, change, or dissolve distinctions” (2003:4). Contesting factions mutually struggle to classify and reclassify the categorical contents of notions such as “safe” and “dangerous”. Fuller notes that differentiation and exclusion are logical responses to those who are threatened by something new, hence seeking to enforce *difference + distance*. In border conflicts, groups are driven by the need to avoid ambiguity, and hence seek to maintain purity and concomitantly define “danger” (Douglas 1966), as Zerubavel notes, “purity” is the antithesis of

ambiguity, and that “avoiding the unclear is essentially avoiding the unclear (Zerubavel 1991:37).

Gamson and Fuller also make reference to the larger cultural discourses and the communication environment which influence how border disputes and categorical conflicts are played out. In Gamson’s case, the organization he studied reacted to the communication environment, and protected its collective identity by excluding the group that threatened to discredit it in a very public way, in order to maintain its political salience. Gamson and Fuller’s works gave me pause to think about how the conditions of the larger communication environment inform the boundary struggles that groups face, whether to include or exclude groups or ideas on the fringes of “orthodox”.

This approach however, does not address my particular combination of *difference + closeness*, but it does provide some utility in shedding light on how the boundaries can be contested and challenged, or how the boundary-line is drawn and redrawn. The problem with this body of works, is that there is simply too much of a pointed focus on boundaries as borders. A border is literally a “line in the sand”, where if you are on one side, “you are us” (*sameness + closeness*), but if you are on the other side, “you are not us” (*difference + distance*). The focus on borders then, is particularly ill-suited to examining a unique combination of *difference + closeness*. Thankfully, Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) provides a way forward by stretching the concept of “border” out thereby turning it into a “borderland”. As “land”, borderlands help us conceptualize a place for encounters across differences. In her sociology of religion presidential address, Mary Jo

Neitz (2009) acknowledges the utility of this borderlands concept because it makes boundaries seem no longer static or unbridgeable. In borderlands, people have an opportunity to work across differences. Hence, the borderlands concepts holds much theoretical promise. Does the Emerging Church imagine itself operating on a relational borderland, to achieve *difference + closeness*? Or perhaps it might even envision itself as a borderland for such encounters. The borderlands concept proves promising for elucidating *difference + closeness*.

*v. Cognitive mapping and cultural schemas*

The metaphor of mapping also features prominently as part of the theoretical apparatus for explaining cognition and boundaries. Zerubavel notes how the social mind engages in cognitive mapping via a “topological mode of thinking” (1996) to understand the world. Social cognition theorists like DiMaggio, conceptualize mapping in terms of schemas, or knowledge structures that represent objects or events and provide default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, entailments under conditions of incomplete information (1997:269). Zerubavel says that we simultaneously exaggerate differences between things we perceive as separate, and exaggerate similarities for things that go together. A “mental cartography” informs the fundamental logic of classification we use to perceive the world and frame our relationships with others. It is with our mental cartography that people work out: where am I in relation to other people? How do we perceive ourselves as different or related to others? Fundamentally, people mentally “map” those who are like them as close

to them on their map (*sameness + closeness*), and people who are different as distant from them (*difference + distance*).

How would religious groups engage in what DiMaggio calls “deliberative overriding”: transcending the biasing effects of culture on thought” (1997:281)? The answer seems to lie in whether groups have the ability to draw alternative maps, where the stranger, the foreigner or the “other” is mapped as being close instead of far. And that the closeness of the other, instead of representing a threat, represents a relational opportunity. Such a focus would cohere with what Zerubavel notes as a shift from simply looking at “disputed borders” to a focus on something more challenging: the “alteration of the principles of mapping” (1991:114). Perhaps studying a group like the Emerging Church from the “mapping” perspective will shed light on how groups draw alternative maps to contest existing taken-for-granted maps that enforce the separation and segregation of the “other”. Looking at how groups come to creatively conceive ways of imagining *difference + closeness* seems like a necessary precursor to our understanding of how groups set out to accomplish it through actual strategies and practices.

Sociologists of religion have also seen utility in using this mapping metaphor to analyze religion, exploring: what are the maps religions construct of “people like us” and “people not like us”? Lichterman, for instance, uses the sensitizing concept of “mapping” to elucidate how groups define their civic identities and relationships to other groups (2008). Lichterman also discusses “battles over the map” religious people have in trying to figure out how best to

relate to others. This falls in line with Lichterman's call to future researches on religion to, "listen to mapping as it happens in concrete settings... to develop sociological insight into how groups use religion and how this informs the creation of civic identities" (2008:86). Hence, there is a theoretical impetus to use "mapping" as an analytical tool to study how religious groups imagine their relationships. There is a similar impetus to explore how groups might draw alternative maps to imagine relationships across difference previously unimaginable: *difference + closeness*. Studying the Emerging Church has the distinct potential of accomplishing these two theoretical objectives.

### *Summary*

In this section of my review, I have found that the conceptualizations of boundaries as borderlands, and as mapping, hold the most theoretical promise for arriving at an understanding of *difference + closeness*. Hence in my first substantive chapter, chapter 5, I develop my analysis of the Emerging Church Movement with an eye toward borderlands and mapping.

### **Difference + closeness in the sociology of religion**

In the first part of my literature review, I provided brief examples of where sociologists of religion have picked up on how religious groups attempt to do *difference + closeness*. In this second part, I look in more detail at the literature in the sociology of religion, paying attention to where boundary issues that hint toward *difference + closeness* emerge. This ranges from where religious groups are dealing with "us versus them" issues, or seeking to foster relationships with



other religious groups or denominations, or just simply finding ways to work across differences. Just as with boundary and social cognition theories, while the overwhelming tendency is for works on religion to elaborate on *sameness + closeness* and *difference + distance*, there are signs that in the sociology of religion *difference + closeness* is increasingly becoming an important field of research.

*i. The everyday life approach to religion*

The “religion in everyday life” perspective provides a pertinent approach to studying religion theoretically focused on boundary issues. This approach was birthed based on the premise of “religion that transcend and lies outside the boundaries of religious institutions”. It turns its attention to activity that happens outside of organized religion, looking at how non-experts experience religion, the kinds of religious meanings that they make, and what they consider completely valid and meaningful practices and expressions of faith outside of institutionally prescribed ways. According to Robert Orsi, lived religion straddles the boundaries between private and public religion (Orsi 2003).

In *Everyday Religion* (2007) Ammerman states that people will engage in the construction of the social world for themselves that makes use of the cultural elements available to them (Ammerman 2007:8). Lived Religion also views the boundaries between religious and secular as permeable and not tightly bounded, mutually exclusive realities, and explores how people develop and experience supernatural meanings from the ground up (McGuire 2008, Orsi 2005, 2002, 1999). Hence, the indicators of religious vitality are not in church attendance or

involvement in institution-based activities. Elsewhere, Ammerman identifies what she terms “Golden-Rule” Christians (Ammerman 1997) and traces Christians who straddle between institutional religion and personalized, moral practices. Elsewhere, she has explored how non-affiliated people create a religious identity out of cultural, traditional and ad hoc traditions available to them (Ammerman 2006).

It seems like this theoretical approach is a ripe field for searching for where religion works across differences. A key exemplar would be Courtney Bender’s *Heaven’s Kitchen* (2003), which focuses on how religion is enacted in everyday life through observing the interactions and verbal statements of individuals who help with an organization that prepares meals for people with AIDS. Significantly, the volunteers are a mixed bag of people with different types of religiosity and different levels of commitment. She explores how religion pervades people’s everyday lives as they conduct themselves in a religiously plural society through settings that are not primarily religious. Bender focuses on the interactional styles that make this working together across difference possible.

She elucidates interesting ways that people still maintain religiosity without imposing their religiosity on others, or even using religious language. Bender’s work exemplifies how porous the boundary of what constitutes “religion” or “religious activity” is. What matters is how the volunteers see the kitchen’s practices as religious, and how they feel about negotiating a secular setting while doing work that is for them religious. Volunteers make their tasks religiously

meaningful, without imposing those same religious meanings to their counterparts who are perhaps not religious. It is a form of “implicit” rather than “explicit” or overt religiosity. Bender ends her study by imploring scholars to look in places other than religious institutions to find where religion is operative.

Everyday religion works point to the tremendous potential of finding religion outside of institutional spheres. Although everyday religion practices have the potential to be very exclusive, scholars of religion like Courtney Bender argue that it is in these “outside institution” locations that one finds the necessary parameters for people to work across differences, freed from the strictures of institutional constraints. In Bender’s work, there is a great emphasis on how cultural practices enable people to work together *beyond belief*. Bender for instance, employs Bakhtin’s conceptualization of a “double-voiced discourse” (Bakhtin 1981) in shedding light on how different groups engaged in a shared language while suspending differences, and mutually accommodating different meanings coming from each other. This perspective points to how culture and practices can foster *difference + closeness* in face-to-face interactions that are not within religious institutional settings.

*ii. Congregational analysis*

Another approach to the study of religion that has gained ascendancy is what Warner terms as the “new paradigm” (Warner 1988) analysis of religion. It stems from the idea that religion in America is disestablished, culturally pluralistic, structurally adaptable and empowering. It pays attention to how religions are disestablishing which does not mean a decline. Warner notes that

the “new paradigm” approach to religion looks at a particular combination of disestablishment and institutional vitality as its analytical norm (2005:48).

The range of theorists here tend to look at religion as located in religious institutions, in particular, it pays attention to what congregations are doing, and the types of activities that religious people do in congregational settings. Even if we do look at religious organizations (as secularization theorists do) there are signs of health and growth, not decline and death. Furthermore, even if there is a pluralistic situation, it is positive and not bad for religion. In *Pillars of Faith* (2005) Ammerman argues through her congregational analysis against secularization, that there is growth and vitality in American congregations, as signified by their diverse civic partnerships, associations and community support. She argues that congregations adapt and transform, and contribute to their environment.

Works by Neitz (1987), Warner (1988) and Smith (1998) argue that counter to the logic of secularization religious groups have survived well not just despite the pluralistic environment, but *because* of it! Smith argues that pluralism is in fact a friend of tradition. It supplies evangelicals with lots of cultural outgroups to act against and distinguish themselves from. They hence create an identity that, as Christian Smith expresses, is “embattled” but thriving as a viable subculture (Smith 1998). Religious people define themselves against what they “are not”. Hence the emphasis in this body of works tends to be on *sameness + closeness*, and how religious groups draw their circles even tighter when they feel threatened. But what has not been addressed is: can the pluralistic situation be positive in providing the environment for religions to mutually coexist and

engage confidently with religious “others” without perceiving them as threatening?

Other religion theorists see religion in America as the ostensible location of *difference + closeness*. According to Warner, Pluralism is not just something that religions experience as an external structural condition, but that religion can be seen as *the ostensible location of pluralism* in the American context.

According to Warner, the master function of religion in America is that it is a social space for cultural pluralism. Historically, religion promoted the formation of associations among mobile people. Religious institutions were refuges for free association and autonomous identities. Warner notes that, “the very pluralism of American religion gives it power to promote group solidarity” (2005: 41). But this perspective does not account for the problematic reality that most congregations are by and large racially homogeneous. So is there really *difference + closeness* operative in these settings?

Robert Wuthnow notes a struggle between a “theology of exclusivism and a civic code of pluralism” (2005:10) and argues for a “good” kind of pluralism he calls “reflective pluralism” which involves awareness, mindfulness and attentiveness to diversity and difference. For Wuthnow, though he is making an argument on a different level of analysis than congregations and denominations, religion in America is at the heart of this struggle for a more mature pluralism. Could a more mature pluralism manifest itself in religious groups reaching across lines of difference? Could a more mature pluralism mean that the meaning of “religious affiliation” is made up of soft boundaries instead of hard ones? Could a

more mature pluralism attest to the fact that religious affiliation looks very different now from what it used to be, and religious people are coming to this realization, being more willing to explore various types of encounters with religious others? Hence, this portion of the literature does point our way toward addressing important questions of how religion in America can better accomplish *difference + closeness*.

*iii. Remaking tradition and institutional adaptation*

In this mode of analysis, researchers draw attention to the ways that faith traditions and congregations have the adaptive reflex to change according to the times. For example, Donald Miller (1997) looks at culturally progressive but theologically conservative “new paradigm churches” that are flexible in their organizational structures, and practical in their approach to doctrine, rather than being dogmatic and abstract. These churches are oriented to be “culturally relevant”, and draw upon therapeutic, individualistic, and anti-establishment themes of counter culture.

The studies in this genre have also explored how faith traditions have the ability to borrow and adapt for vitality. For instance, in Stephen Ellingson’s *Megachurch and the Mainline* (2007), he observes that mainline churches are learning from and adapting to forms of Megachurch pietism. Churches engage in what he calls “selective isomorphism”: where innovation is introduced gradually, in a way that keeps the core identity protected, while introducing change in a way that “makes sense” to congregants who come to see the need for modern interpretation of faith traditions. Boundaries are approached with caution, so that

if any shift does occur, it would not be a seismic, uprooting kind of shift, but a less felt and more comfortable one.

In *Religion and Family* (2006), Edgell is concerned with institutional adaptation to societal change which is manifest in more complex family arrangements. Edgell explores how institutions employ rhetorics to displace the nuclear family as the ideal form of family, in order to be more accommodating to families that are configured differently (blended/ homosexual/ single parent families). In the same way, in *A Mosaic of Believers*, Gerardo Marti (2005) examines how a multiethnic church employs a strategy of ethnic transcendence, which creates an ethnic “safe space” for people from diverse backgrounds. This is accomplished through what Marti calls a “selective accommodation to its social environment” (2005:3).

In all these instances, religious institutions and organizations remake boundaries and engender new rules and modes of inclusion according to the demands of a changing social world. Many are doing the work of fostering *difference + closeness* as a perceived matter of necessity for the sake of institutional vitality. While there is a strong focus on culture, like rhetorics (Edgell 2006, Ellingson 2007), the focus seems to be on religion in ostensibly institutional locations, which perhaps does not fit the reality of the Emerging Church quite so well. But it is still useful in how it provides an understanding of how religious groups employ culture to accomplish *difference + closeness*.

#### *iv. Building bonds and bridges*

Another perspective looks explicitly at how religion approaches boundary issues by building relational bonds and bridges to diverse “others”, including non-religious agencies and non-churched people. Sociologists of religion here, take on the issue of whether religious groups are really “reaching out” as they say they are.

Sociologists of religion have had several different takes on this issue. For Mark Chaves (2004), congregations are strong but principally inward oriented and do not reach outward. Congregations function more to “traffic in ritual knowledge, beauty through cultural activities, worship, education and arts” and do not “pursue charity or justice through social services or politics (2004:14). According to Chaves, congregations are strong in the types of services they provide to congregants and not because of what churches do for people outside institutional setting. Congregations are still primarily in the business of instituting *sameness + closeness*. As a contrast, For Ammerman (2005) congregations *do* make deliberate attempts to create social bonds (Putnam 2000) and make connections. She highlights much of the “bridging work” that congregations do in providing support for non-church partners (Scouts, Habitat for Humanity, Red Cross, etc.). Congregations and their connections with regional and local life attest to the vitality of religion “reaching out” and forging relationships across difference.



In the same vein, in “Making Inclusive Communities”, Edgell (1998) argues that religious institutions have the capacity to mobilize for social change. She traces how institutions foster new and inclusive spaces, by mining religious traditions for metaphors of community, as well as how religious identities are re-invented to be more racially inclusive. Edgell notes that “locally-oriented organizations may be our only hope for creating diverse and inclusive spaces” (1998:467). Lichterman’s *Elusive Togetherness* (2005) transposes the issue of religious vitality into religious organizations’ ability to build bridges across social divides through group customs and being reflexive about their place in the wider world. The questions for Lichterman then, is how religions can create broad civic relationships and socially spiral outward instead of being institutionally isolated. How do groups forge new relationship with individuals and organizations beyond their own group?

In my review of the literature, Lichterman’s work seems to take on the *difference + closeness* configuration the most explicitly. Integrating the strengths of the other theoretical approaches, Lichterman’s focus is still decidedly cultural. Lichterman’s observation is that beyond their stated objectives of “reaching out”, what is more important, are the group’s interpersonal customs which constrain or enhance their ability to reach out. Hence, it is the “style” of relating to “others” that affects their success. Bridge-building and “togetherness” that occurs when these religious groups reduce social distances instead of accentuating them, for instance in establishing relationship of mutuality as “partners” instead of a condescending view of “people who need our help”. The status of Lichterman’s

book in the Sociology of religion fulfills former Association for the Sociology of Religion President R. Stephen Warner's call for research to explore how religion can construct relational bridges, while constructing difference in less alienating ways (Warner 1997).

### *Summary*

It is in this body of works that I see a present impetus to further explore sites where social bridge-building takes place, where religious groups are crossing boundaries and forging new forms of relationships with diverse others. As we have seen from the current literature, most of the boundary issues have emerged through analysis on congregations and hard religious institutions. On the other hand, the Lived Religion perspective sensitizes us to religion already on the borders of religious institutions, and already negotiating sacred and secular, insider and outsider boundaries. Both these perspectives however have this in common: *they emphasize the cultural aspects of religion in action*. From looking at the literature, there is a need to explore where bridge-building and inclusion occurs at an *intersection* of institutional religion and Lived Religion. The Emerging Church seems to lie strategically at this intersection, with some practitioners in local congregations and meeting groups, while others operate through the internet. Some see themselves as "Emergent" while still identifying with their denomination, while others see themselves as "Emergent" independent of any institutional affiliation.

## **The Sociology of culture**

In this third and final part of my review, I establish the theoretical importance of culture, and explain how my particular conceptualizations of culture: culture in action (Swidler 1986) and culture in interaction (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), point to why it is necessary to look at a range of strategies of action and interaction that will shed theoretical light on how groups accomplish *difference + closeness*.

I want to show that there is a theoretical fit between the important questions that sociologists of religion are addressing, which are closely tied to concepts and theories in the sociology of culture. I conclude that there are important theoretical issues that can be addressed both in the sociology of religion and the sociology of culture by studying the Emerging Church, with a particular focus on *difference + closeness*.

### *Culture as independent and explanatory*

A survey of the literature shows that in social theory, culture has shifted from being “*the reality that needs to be explained*” to being “*the reality that explains*”. As Swidler explains, the older definition of culture was simply “an entire way of life of a people, including their technology and material artifacts”, or everything someone needed to know to be a functioning member of society (Swidler 1986:273). With Parsons, culture came to be defined as an overarching system of values, and that values motivated human action by providing the “ultimate ends” (1951). These older conceptualizations of culture have given way

to a focus on culture as publically available symbols and meanings. This points to Clifford Geertz's (1973, 1983) theoretical heritage for both anthropologists and sociologists alike, arguing for the autonomy of culture. Geertz conceived of culture as a system of symbols and meanings, and distinguished the semiotic influence of action from other influences. Other social thinkers have further developed from Geertz to argue for culture's explanatory power.

The "cultural turn" in the social sciences, meant that culture was no longer seen as superstructural, epiphenomenal or simply a byproduct of social structure, as was the case with Marxist and structural-functionalist views of culture. Wuthnow notes that older conceptions of culture placed a strong emphasis on the subjective, in terms of beliefs, attitudes, internalized norms and values, subjective predispositions, moods, meanings, mentalities (Wuthnow, 1987: 331). Culture was conceptualized as a matter of subjective beliefs that needs to be related to objective dimensions of social structure in order to be properly explained (1987:34). Departing from these views, culture came to be seen as an independent reality in its own right. A new generation of social theorists argues for culture to be conceptualized as an independent variable. Jeffrey Alexander's "strong program" argues that culture is not simply an "effect" of social structures. Culture is an "independent variable" that possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions (Alexander 2003:12). Alexander asserts that "culture is not a thing but a dimension, not an object to be studied as a dependent variable but as a thread that runs through... every conceivable social form." (Alexander 2003:7)

### *Culture as causal, structuring and constraining*

Instead of just merely providing values or ultimate ends from which action mechanically follows, theorists now look at culture as a causal agent (Hall, Neitz and Battani 2003:246). Sociologists of culture now understand that culture can operate independently of identity and beliefs, and are not necessarily dependent on them. Similarly, Jacobs and Spillman (2005) assert that cultural analysis can answer *why* and not just *how* questions, and that through cultural analysis we can understand “scope conditions” and mechanisms of causal analysis. For Bourdieu, “habitus” (1977) expressed embodied sensibilities that made possible “structured improvisations”. Taste and aesthetic sensibilities were the means by which social actors gained practical mastery over structure. Bourdieu notes that structures are reproduced through the very actions that individuals seek to achieve personal ends. In Bourdieu’s conception, *structure flows through culture*.

In *The Meanings of Social Life* (2003) Alexander demonstrates how concepts like good and evil, friendship and enmity, god and country, civilization and chaos are the *culture structures* that underpin action. For Alexander, culture structures: it consists of narrative discourses and cultural codes that frame understanding. Culture structures make it possible for people to conceive of some things and not others, and to conceive of things in narrowly specified ways. For Alexander and Smith symbols provide a “nonmaterial structure” that patterns action (1993). Sharon Hays (1994) similarly argues for culture to be seen as part of social structure, as does Sewell, who argues that cultural meanings can construct social structure (1992).

In *Cultural Sociology* (Spillman 2002), different authors theorize how culture is structure in the way that it frames cognition (Zerubavel, chapter 21), morality (Cerulo, chapter 24), and can restrict discursive repertoires that people can use to talk and think with (Williams, chapter 26). Culture as structure can also be thought of as “cultural frameworks”, or “cultural idioms” (Skocpol 1985) which deal with meanings on the level of text and discourse. Cultural frameworks are manifest in sign systems, symbolic codes, cultural schemas, genres and narratives, all of which can be considered “structural elements” of meaning-making. Other theorists like Margaret Archer (1996), call for an analysis of the complex interaction between cultural and social structural formations. Battani, Hall and Powers call for attention to be paid to “culture’s structures” particularly in public discourse (1997). For instance, Tannen (1998) describes how warfare language permeates common discourse. People “enter a fray”, or “take shots”, and “shoot down adversaries”. Culture constrains thinking by dictating the temperament of political discourse. Metaphors become calcified in language and people literally “become what they speak”.

#### *Culture as action, agency and enabling*

From another perspective however, we can view culture as providing strategies of action, promoting agency and enabling social actors to “do things” in the social world. Culture enables, because it is a resource, or in Ann Swidler’s concept, culture is a “toolkit” (1986) from which individuals can draw upon strategically for social action. Cultural repertoires for thinking and acting are contextually available to social actors, and they pick and choose according to

needs, according to contingent and situational demands. Social actors draw upon cultural resources for agentic purposes.

Works spearheaded by Mustafa Emirbayer shows that culture is increasingly prominent when it comes to theories on social agency. Culture features in Emirbayer and Mische's conceptualization of a temporally-oriented agency (1998). They discuss "narratives" as providing a cultural resource by which actors develop a sense of forward movement in time and provide "maps of action" that can be employed strategically to face problematic situations. They note that "repertoires" of stories help define community membership within temporal frameworks. Emirbayer and Mische conceptualize agency as being dependent on "cultural schemas" that provide strategies for action, echoing Sewell (1992). Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) see human agency as the capacity for socially embedded actors to appropriate, reproduce, and innovate upon received cultural categories and conditions of action.

This approach to culture looks at the ways groups do "culture work" (Yukich 2010, Edgell 1998). Social agents are engaged in the intentional and strategic manipulation of culture, through tapping on cultural repertoires and rhetorics in order to accomplish specific social goals. A constructionist perspective in social theory has been always looked at how social agents actively create their world. They engage in claims-making and construct certain issues in the public eye as a "problem" or "crises" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, Best 1987). They employ rhetorical and persuasive strategies to a broader audience, at times succeeding in creating moral panics (Thompson 1998). Social actors produce

cultural discourses or “symbolic representations”, actively characterizing ongoing social events, past, present, and future making “claims” about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action” (Alexander, 2003:93).

This agency-centered approach to culture can also be found in social protest and social movement literature, which has been attuned to how social agents exploit elements of culture, like collective action frames (Benford and Snow 2000), personal and group narratives, stories and organizational myths (Polletta 2006). These cultural elements then serve to mobilize sentiment, stimulate recruitment (Polletta 1998), produce a collective identity (Gamson 1991) to impact public opinion by constructing a notion of “public good” (Williams 1995) and to gain political traction with people in power.

The agency-centered sociology of culture literature has looked at how social actors actively construct their social worlds. Social agents create cultural artifacts like new ideas, new concepts, and new ways of thinking, by drawing on disparate sources.

#### *Difference + closeness in culture*

Given my focus on “how people do it”, it would seem that the agency-oriented approach to culture seems most promising for my quest for *difference + closeness*. In one sense, this is quite true. I am interested in the skills, competencies, proficiencies of social actors to draw up strategies of action to actively shape their social world. I want to know how culture can be deployed strategically to accomplish goals. However, it also seems necessary to give a



nod to the more structuring dimensions of culture. After all, a “toolkit” simply does not appear out of thin air. People have competencies to do certain things because existing structures have made them available. So in my search for *difference + closeness*, I want to straddle this tension between the agentic aspects of culture, and balance it with the more structuring dimensions of culture.

As Swidler notes, our understanding of how culture works flourishes, “in the gaps where people must put together lines of action in relation to established institutional options, (2001:132) emphasizing a productive tension in the space between the “structural” and “agentic” aspects of culture. Similarly, Emirbayer and Goodwin note that cultural formations both constrain and enable actors, in blocking certain possibilities for action, while ordering and making comprehensible certain issues (1994). Penny Edgell expresses the same sentiment, in her choice of the term “culture work”, which signifies “agency” as people reflexively adapt to change, but is simultaneously “shaped by the available repertoire and by previously institutionalized schema” (Edgell 1998:467).

So in my focus on culture, I am seeking elements or forms of “culture” that constrain thinking about *difference + closeness*, as well as how social agents actively create new ways of thinking about *difference + closeness*. For instance, cognitive schemas or the cultural “maps” that people have of “us and them” bias people to think in terms of *sameness + closeness* and *difference + distance*. But can social agents create their own maps so that *difference + closeness* become “thinkable”?

Mapping is just one cultural form. In the same way, can we observe how groups attempt to accomplish *difference + closeness* through other cultural forms, like metaphors, narratives, symbols, rituals, talk, gestures, rhetorics, relational customs or practices of “doing things together”? At the same time, do the structuring dimensions of existing metaphors, symbols, narratives etc. constrain the attempt to forge *difference + closeness*?

### **Conclusion: a theoretical agenda and an empirical focus**

After arriving at this place where I considered the theoretical significance of culture, I decided to go back to the literature in the sociology of religion, to see where there is a combination of existing works that fulfill the following criteria: 1) they shed light on religious groups accomplishing *difference + closeness*, and 2) how it is accomplished through cultural forms and group practices. I wanted to see what I could learn from these works, and similarly what gaps in the literature I could find.

By far the most productive body of research that fits the criteria above can be found in the range of works by Paul Lichterman. Throughout Lichterman’s career, he has been interested in bridging divides of all kinds. He has been interested in piecing together multicultural community (Lichterman 1995), in the gap between gay civic organizations and their ability to participate in civil society (Lichterman 1999, 2001), he has been interested in the gap between religious groups and the people in the wider world they are trying to “reach” (Lichterman 2005, 2006, 2008). Furthermore, Lichterman’s approach has always been

cultural. He has always paid attention to the expressive components of culture, looking at community as a “cultural practice” (2001:517), listening to “identity talk” (1999:103), observing “group-building customs” (2001:3, 2005), he has paid attention to religious language, vocabularies and “talk” of maps (2008).

Furthermore, the concepts Lichterman employ seem to operationalize *difference + closeness* appropriately. Concepts like “bridging”, “bridge-building”, “inclusion” and “social spiral” all hint at some sense of this idea of different groups somehow coming together. In *Elusive Togetherness* (2005) Lichterman illuminates bridge-building interactions that occur in face-to-face settings. He observes styles of talk and group customs that religious groups employ in their interactions with others to be more inclusive. Through focusing on bridge-building, Lichterman seeks to develop what he calls the “social spiral” argument (Lichterman 2005:26), about how groups can generate outward ties. For Lichterman, the spiral activates outwards when groups “learn to do things with a widening circle of people” (Lichterman 2005:14).

It seems my project of seeking *difference + closeness* resonates with Lichterman’s attempt to get at the “social spiral” through observing strategies of inclusion and bridge-building across difference. Lichterman’s work answers very important questions about the culture that religious groups enact toward the “other” in inter-institutional settings has a direct bearing on the success of attempts to build bridges and foster diverse relationships across difference. Lichterman also finds that groups succeed when they exercise “reflexivity”: thinking self-critically about where they fit into the wider social world (Lichterman

2005:15). Reflexivity is also accomplished in the group setting through talk. Hence reflexivity is also culturally accomplished through group practices.

However, Lichterman leaves unanswered the question of whether bridge-building and inclusion can occur in non face-to-face interactions, and if so what does it look like? Extending from that, what then, would be some of the advantages or disadvantages of bridge-building and inclusion that take place online or discursively through articles, as compared to just face-to-face interactions? Furthermore, might there be some theoretical light we can shed on bridge-building and inclusion as it occurs dynamically in both spheres? Could bridging and inclusion in one sphere affect or carry over to another?

Another question is that Lichterman's focus is ostensibly on well-bounded groups like religious institutions or civic groups, which are well organized and have finances and resources. Would Lichterman's findings about what makes groups successful at bridge-building and inclusion, still hold if our focus was on loosely-bounded groups, which are less organizationally oriented, more culturally oriented and which face problems of mobilization and participation? (Neitz 1994:128) Would there be a positive or negative correlation between the boundedness of groups and their ability to build relational bridges?

The Emerging Church seems to be a good fit as a loosely-bounded religious group, which will provide some contrast to Lichterman's bounded religious groups. Certainly it seems that the costs and constraints of doing *difference + closeness* would be very different for bounded and unbounded

religious groups. While switching the “organizational form” I am able to hold constant the variable of culture, since Lichterman’s focus has always been on culture and practices, enabling me to pay attention to the same things that Lichterman did: communication, interaction, and expressive cultural forms. Hence, following Lichterman, I have a theoretical agenda as well as an empirical focus. Hence in the next chapter, I will attempt to operationalize my study of the Emerging Church, with a focus on elaborating the kinds of cultural forms that operationalize culture in the Emerging Church Movement.

### **Chapter 3 Methodology and fieldwork**

*I lay out in detail my chosen methods, which consist of on-site fieldwork observations of various Emerging Church groups: congregations, cohorts and hybrid-emergent groups, observations of Emergent meetings and conferences, in-depth interviews with people involved in the Emerging Church Movement, as well as an analysis of published and online content from the movement. Through my methods, I hope to observe “culture in action” (Swidler 1986) and “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003): to understand how difference + closeness is accomplished through a range of cultural forms. I describe the on-site fieldwork sites where I conducted participant-observation, the interviews I conducted, as well as the analysis of content from publications and online sources.*

#### **Getting at the social world of the Emerging Church**

While the Emerging Church is still very much an emergent religious movement in America, *yet the formal ambiguity of the Emerging Church simultaneously establishes the conditions which make it sociologically significant.* The Emerging Church consists of individuals and groups that would be rightly characterized as a loosely bounded network (Neitz 1994). Its lack of clear organizational and membership boundaries, and its lack of existing institutional or denominational labels make the Emerging Church hard to operationalize for research. To define the movement was already a problem, how could I pin it down enough to carry out a research? Trying to conceptualize the movement into operational definitions for measurement and analysis proved a difficult task.

The story of my own introduction to the Emerging Church tells of some of the methodological challenges due to the unbounded nature of the movement. I

first came across the use of the word “Emergent” while listening to a conservative Christian radio talk-show around 2006. The DJ was criticizing 2 “porn-pastors” of a website called xxxchurch.com who visited pornography conventions and passed out bibles. He described what they were doing as “very emergent”. I remember thinking to myself, “what is this emergent thing?” And that made me embark on a quest to find out more about this “emergent thing”. I was able to learn about the Emerging Church Movement from a variety of online sources, like personal blogs and Wikipedia. I subsequently found the Emergent Village website, and started listening to podcasts. Eventually I picked up Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian* (2001), which many on the Emergent Village websites were touting as a “must read”. I remember discussing this book with my dissertation advisor, and both of us being excited by the prospect that this might be something worth studying. I continued reading more of their books, blogs, and started listening to their podcasts. It really was through what I can only describe as a thoroughly “discursive” process, that I found out more about the Emerging Church movement and considered whether I should study it. Through the Emergent Village website, I found out about a Midwest Emergent gathering in Chicago, in 2007, and decided to attend it. This was when names, faces and ideas came to life.

At that meeting, I went out for lunch with four men who were involved with Jacob’s Well Church in Kansas City. They eventually became my contacts there. It was from them that I found out that actual Emergent congregations existed. I also heard for the first time about Emergent meeting groups called “cohorts”, and

a host of other conferences and meetings that revolved around this “emergent thing”. I was progressively getting a better picture of what made up the movement: its ideas, actors, and organizing forms. My understanding of Emergent as a movement was starting to take shape. I subsequently realized that my own process of familiarizing with the movement would be echoed by many of my future interviewees, as being the “same way” they got involved in the Emerging Church. Thinking back, this process can be summed up like this:

Ideas → meetings → people

I read about their ideas, subsequently attended my first meeting, and from there got to know many people from the movement personally. From this realization, I came up with a set of basic operational concepts that I thought would enable me to get a grasp on the movement. I thus had a basic methodological rubric to get to the social world of the Emerging Church:

Ideas	Meetings	People
Analyze discourses	Participant observation	In-depth interviews

*Emergent: more than the sum of its parts*

My interest in religion has always been toward expressions of religion that are at the cutting edge of change. I am always geared toward what people are saying and doing that is different, and challenging to the existing status quo. At the same time, through my theoretical training I have become deeply interested in questions of boundaries: how social inclusion and exclusion are enacted, and



the cognitive processes of “othering”. Hence, my project merges these two interests – on religion and on social boundaries – and takes on how togetherness is accomplished across difference, or what I call *difference + closeness*. How are religious groups sensitizing themselves to changing boundaries and changing notions of otherness? And yet, what are social actors doing that challenge existing faith boundaries? In my preliminary research, I have sensitized myself to the “boundary work” (Edgell 1998, Yukich 2010) of voices from the Emerging Church as they “talked” about how Christians should treat Muslims and atheists with respect and even learn from them. They seemed to “map” religious others differently from those who would normally shun them.

Beyond talk, I was also interested in “who are they” and “how do they do it?” My methodological approach was to locate where organizing activity occurs for this religious movement, more specifically, where people “do things together”. I observed two types of activities and their broader location: 1) local groups: in the shape of different organizing units and coordinated activity with face-to-face interaction, and 2) discursive: both offline and online through mediated publications, like books, online blogs, discussion forums and podcasts. The social world of the Emerging Church is located in the cross section between these two broad spheres of activity. Which is why in the next chapter, I distinguish between face-to-face and discursive social worlds (chapter 4).

Howard Becker (1982) provided me with a good methodological starting point of how the coordinated activities of different people collectively constitute what he calls the “Art World”. Becker implores social researchers to look at

activities instead of objects or mediums like “film” or “photography” for instances. Rather, it is what people *do* with film and what people accomplish *through* photography that matters (Becker 2007:15). It is through a network of cooperation of people doing things together that enable us to understand the cultural and relational processes involved in producing art. How do different social agents function as part of a larger coordinated effort? Translating this to my project, this would require identifying social agents and the different roles that they play that collectively constitutes the world of the Emerging Church.

Following Becker, I want to study how boundaries are negotiated and inclusion is operationalized in organizing and coordinating activity. Literature from the movement always talks about a “new” way of doing Christianity that is non-hierarchical, non-institutionalized and non-bureaucratic, and overall more inclusive (as denoted by the term “wiki-faith”) to a host of diverse others. The critique is that much of what counts as church in America are socially homogeneous “Christian clubs”. If this is the rhetoric from the movement, I wanted to see if they lived up to their rhetoric, and were themselves being non-hierarchical and inclusive in local Emergent meeting groups.

Cyberspace is a crucial location where much of Emerging Church activity takes place, and is an important medium for their communication. At my very first Emerging Church conference, I heard Emerging Church author Tony Jones express how the movement “would not be possible” without the internet. Therefore, people from the Emerging Church acknowledge that the internet creates the very conditions for the movement’s existence. There is no denying

that cyberspace is a social space where lots of significant human interaction occurs. Studies show that people increasingly practice their faith through the internet (Beaudoin 2000). Even institutional churches are engaging communication technology by video-casting sermons and making their cultural products available online. So I find it necessary to conduct my research in a location which is not only a frontier for much of religion, but also where the Emerging Church itself operates prominently.

### *Operationalizing “culture in action”*

As per my literature review, I sought to operationalize “culture in action”, which Swidler articulates through the metaphor of culture as a “toolkit” (1986). The toolkit refers to a repertoire of competencies that individuals and groups can draw on for strategies of action, in the case of my research, to accomplish *difference + closeness*. Hence, I sought to operationalize “culture in action” through identifiable cultural forms that were deployed strategically.

For example, the Emerging Church uses the metaphor “conversation” to describe itself. In doing so, it seeks to de-emphasize insider/ outsider boundaries, and hopes to engage everyone in an inclusive conversation. Metaphors, like language and vocabulary are cultural forms that can be strategically deployed to accomplish inclusion and bridge-building. Metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson, structure reality (1980) and provide a way for groups to envision themselves in ways that are useful to meet certain group objectives.

Sociological studies of religion are following a larger cultural turn by taking religious *language* as the object of investigation. (Lichterman 2008, Neitz 2004, Wuthnow 1987) According to Lichterman, recent work advocates investigating religious vocabularies and forms of self-presentation that we can see and hear in everyday life, and seeing what actions accompany them (Lichterman 2008:84). So I see culture operationalized not just through language and talk, but through other tangible and observable cultural components like rituals, practices and even how space is created or used in the service of fostering inclusiveness or bridge-building. As Lichterman states, cultural forms like speech, language, vocabulary, rhetorics, schemas, are not “add-ons” to the religion “underneath” but rather they are part of “religion in practice” (Lichterman 2008:85). I seek to uncover the religion in practice that is geared toward fostering *difference + closeness*.

#### *Operationalizing “culture in interaction”*

Eliasoph and Lichterman’s “Culture in Interaction” (2003) provides an appropriate exemplar, showing how groups employ shared codes or repertoires to communicate and share ideas. Eliasoph and Lichterman discuss “group style”: recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group’s shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in group settings. Group style is defined by how people use vocabularies, symbols, or codes and “put culture to use in everyday life”. They note that field researchers need to observe the different components of “group style” that include “group boundaries” (conventions of relating to the wider world), “group bonds” (conventions of mutual

responsibility) and “speech norms” (conventions of appropriate speech in group contexts). I observed each of these elements in my online-based fieldwork.

In this approach, I observed cultural practices and identity styles in online interactional settings. I uncovered: what are the strategic ways that culture is manipulated, through cultural repertoires and rhetorics to accomplish togetherness across difference? In Lichterman’s *Elusive Togetherness* (2005), Lichterman follows the interactions where it happens. He observes styles of talk and group customs that religious groups employ in their interactions with others to be more inclusive. He also observes how groups come to decisions about what identity styles to employ that will facilitate bridge-building.

My methodological challenge is to advance Lichterman and Eliasoph by applying their approach to online interactions, since much of what has been analyzed in social research as “interaction” focuses on face-to-face interactional settings. I strongly feel that important theoretical contributions can be made to both the sociology of culture and the sociology of religion by using online interactional data. Since as Marshall McLuhan, Joshua Meyrowitz and other media theorists have asserted: particular characteristics of a medium (like the internet) make it physically, psychologically, and socially different from other media and from face-to-face interaction, regardless of the content of messages (Meyrowitz 1997: 61).

An appropriate exemplar on online interaction is J. Patrick Williams’ research on The Straight Edge youth subculture (2006). He studies the

complexity of subcultural affiliation and how authenticity is contested between “scene” and “net” Straight Edgers. Williams shows how boundaries that define a legitimate Straight Edge identity become a lot more complex because of the internet. Net Straight Edgers typically learn about the subculture online and come to identify with the Straight Edge lifestyle. They contest the view that they are not “real” Straight Edge just because they do not belong to scene, and simultaneously remake the boundaries of what defines a Straight Edge identity. In Williams’ research, both culture and boundaries feature prominently in a site that is both physical (scene) and virtual (net). We can see the dynamics of cultural interaction that are facilitated through the internet, and how this impacts the structure of the Straight Edge subculture.

Since my project aims to uncover what practices foster *difference + closeness*, my fieldwork rubric follows Eliasoph and Lichterman’s (2003) methodological outline on observing “culture in interaction”, which centers on “group style”: which constitutes a) group boundaries – what the group thinks and says about its relationship to the wider world, b) group bonds – assumptions about mutual responsibility and what defines membership, and c) speech norms – appropriate communication. All of these components of “culture in interaction” feature in my research.

### **Fieldwork with Emergent groups**

My sampling strategy was to do fieldwork with Emergent meeting groups on local, regional, and national levels. Doing so would give me a good perspective on how the social world of the Emerging Church functions on various

levels, and it would also provide a good cross section of demographic and denominational profiles of different people, and different groups who were engaged with the Emerging Church.

I identified 3 organizing units. Each type of organizing unit has specific challenges and specific kinds of issues that they face when it comes to negotiating boundaries and inclusion. I observed different “styles” of togetherness (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Different organizational units have different things to deal with, including different kinds of boundary negotiation issues, different problems and strategies of inclusion. What kinds of boundary work is each type of group doing?

I discuss the methodological relevance of each type of organizational unit, and what I expect to observe and how those observations will contribute to my findings. For the most part, I am using a convenience sample that is determined by physical location. But I also detail my logic for sampling each of these different Emergent groups.

There are in fact, local Emergent meeting groups all over the United States. As a convenience sample, I decided to focus my research area to the Midwest. However, I cannot rightly call this a research on a “Midwest Emerging Church”, since in the first place, the movement is hard to delineate purely by geographical boundaries, since so much of their activity takes place in cyberspace. But for local meeting groups, my focus on was on the Midwest. My awareness was that there were groups in Kansas City, St. Louis and Chicago, all Midwest cities. My focus on the Midwest was sufficient for me to cover all the

variation of groups, like cohorts (in Kansas City, St. Louis and Chicago), small congregations (Wicker Park Grace, Jacob's Well Community Church both in Chicago) and larger congregations (Jacob's Well in Kansas City). So by focusing on the Midwest, I was able to get a sample of meeting groups that was representative of the kinds of local Emergent meeting groups in the whole of the United States.

For my sampling strategy for regional and national Emergent groups, it made no sense to establish a geographical limitation. I targeted to observe at least two regional and two national Emergent gatherings for my research. My strategy was to follow the posting of events through Emergent Village and other Emergent websites, and go to whichever regional and national meetings I could find. Doing this has taken me to the following cities: Chicago, Illinois, Kansas City, Missouri, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Fort Wayne, Indiana. All travel was at my own expense, even though I did seek out funds to sponsor my research but was unsuccessful.

#### *Local*

On the local level, I have done multiple site visits with Emergent congregations and cohorts in Kansas City and Chicago since January 2009. I also spent an extended time in Chicago, doing fieldwork with Emergent congregations. For my regularized site visits, I wanted to have a variety of group sizes where I could observe different dynamics of "doing things together".



### *1. Large congregations*

Jacob's Well proved an interesting case, because they are one of the most established Emerging Churches in the US. Jacob's Well is located in a suburb of Kansas City, near the University of Kansas (KU) medical center. It was started in 1999 by founding Pastor Tim Keel. It initially rented the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of a struggling Presbyterian Church. It progressed to having services in the main sanctuary on Sunday nights, eventually taking over the whole building when the Presbyterian Church closed down. Jacob's Well ran 3 services, with each service running approximately 200 to 300 people. Tim Keel is one of the more recognized Church leaders in the Emerging Church, who has successfully started, grown and sustained an Emergent congregation. In July of 2009, Tim Keel resigned and Jacob's Well went through a time of searching for a new Pastor. Some members of Jacob's Well were my entrée into the Emergent conversation, and I was able to conduct interviews with them, as well as the Administrative Pastor of Jacob's Well, Deth Im.

### *2. Smaller congregations*

Secondly, I wanted to conduct observations with smaller Emergent congregations which still met regularly, but were smaller in size of between 20 to 40 people. I wanted to conduct my research in a smaller size congregation like this because I felt it would be easier to conduct participant observations, and to gain contacts on a personal level. I thought it would also be a good contrast with bigger congregations like Jacob's Well. Like larger congregations, smaller

congregations meet weekly, and this contrasts with the third type of group called “cohorts”, which do not meet as regularly as congregations.

I conducted most of my fieldwork with such a group in Chicago called Wicker Park Grace. Wicker Park Grace uses an art gallery. Average attendance at Wicker Park Grace was about 30 people, when I was conducting my research. They lit candles, and sat around in a circle. Services usually have a very artsy feel to it, with stringed instruments, original songs, and poetry readings. There were also elements of liturgy integrated into the service. Wicker Park Grace was quite racially diverse. I met people of different colors and nationalities. Wicker Park Grace yielded some good observational data. I also was able to interview the Pastor of Wicker Park Grace, Nanette Sawyer, who was ordained and supported by the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), and a few attendees from Wicker Park Grace. I would visit Wicker Park Grace once a month, when I made trips down to Chicago for fieldwork. I also conducted my research there intensively from December 2009 to January 2010, attending their Sunday evening services weekly.

### 3. *Cohorts*

I also did my fieldwork with Emergent cohorts in Kansas City and St. Louis. Cohorts contrasted from the latter two, because they are more organic and group size also tends to be smaller. Cohorts provide a contrast because they do not meet as regularly as congregations do. Cohorts are also the most organic form of an Emergent organizing unit. Cohorts are based purely on the initiative of individuals who wish to start one. They are run by volunteers. Cohorts are also

typically small. They usually range between 5 to 10 people. My fieldwork with cohorts did not yield as much data as I would have hoped. This is in part due to the inconsistent nature of cohort meetings. I went to Kansas City cohort meetings on two occasions, but the cohort stopped after the organizer developed health problems. The St. Louis Emergent cohort was even more embryonic at the time of my research. From what I gathered by subscribing to their emails, there were a handful of meetings with only 2 or 3 people. I was not able to attend any of the initial meetings, due to short notice. But thereafter the cohort stopped meeting. I thought it would be important to study cohorts because they represented the most direct link to Emergent Village, since Emergent Village lists cohorts and their locations for people seeking out Emerging Church meeting groups.

Although my study with cohorts did not yield much data, the fate of the two cohorts I wanted to study, was symptomatic of problems in general that many cohorts faced in their struggle to organize and gain momentum. Even though this was disappointing at first, but from a different perspective, this presented itself as pertinent data that was relevant to my analysis. I was also able to conduct interviews with 3 other cohort leaders that I had met through conferences, and through other fieldwork, which enabled me to see some patterns in the responses that emerged in my interviews with these cohort leaders.

Cohorts have significantly less structure than Emerging Church congregations. On the Emergent Village website, cohorts “meet on their own accord, at their own time and place, and discuss what they choose”. Anyone who wants to start a cohort in their own city can do so, without having to go through

any gatekeepers. Cohorts are not equivalent to “church plants” because they are not sponsored by a larger church. They do come under the larger Emergent Village organizing body, which provides very little tangible support to cohort leaders apart from what is available on their website. Cohorts are also not supplied with any budgets or monetary resources, and many cohorts do not meet regularly. It is typically left to individual cohort organizers to organize meetings. There is neither a set agenda nor curriculum. Cohorts typically gather at non-traditional locations like coffee houses, bars and clubs, and meeting sizes are typically small. The format of interaction is typically discussion and conversation, instead of a singular speaker dominating sessions.

I attended cohort meetings in Kansas City, one of which was regarding interfaith dialogue, where about 8 people attended. Cohorts are also typically comprised of people from existing faith traditions, and existing churches who want to explore the Emerging Church movement. Cohorts are the only site that brings together people of different and existing denominations. Cohorts make an interesting case of how togetherness is accomplished by these people across denominational lines. Many cohorts are faced with the difficulty of “what exactly do we do?”, and they strive not to let any one person dictate proceedings. Hence, it makes an interesting case-study of how “inclusivity” is practiced in organizing activity, and what it would look like as the rule of thumb for decision-making. For instance, I witnessed a “corporate agenda setting session”, when the coordinator announced that she would like ideas for future cohort meetings, which followed with various people suggesting different ideas.

For cohorts, I looked at what opportunities and obstacles the small and relatively embryonic nature of these groups meant. What does inclusion look like in a small group setting, and how do different denominational affiliations come into play in their interactions? I am also interested in how the lack of structure or power centers makes togetherness across difference more “elusive” or more achievable. What are the relational customs, what are the interactional patterns and trends that can be observed in these cohort meetings? How do denominational affiliations figure into how participants interact?

Initially, I wanted to interview cohort coordinators from Midwest cohorts. But in the end, I conducted interviews with cohort coordinators from Atlanta, New Mexico and Arizona, people that I met at conferences. From Cohort organizers I gained an understanding of the trials and difficulties with running cohorts given the unbounded nature of the movement. I also explored what it means to be an Emerging Church cohort “leader”, since the movement is so unstructured. What is the goal of cohort leaders in terms of the people that they are trying to bring together, and what do they hope to see happen with the cohort? Is the form-fuzziness and lack of structure a hindrance or does it facilitate what they are trying to do on a cohort level? For participants of cohorts, I wanted to understand: what drew them to attend a cohort? And if they did have concurrent affiliation with established traditions, what draws them to engage with people from other faith traditions? What are they looking for in joining a cohort, and what was their experience being part of the cohort?

## *Regional*

Compared to local, place specific meeting groups, I did my fieldwork observing meetings and conferences on a regional level. On the regional level, I attended a July 2007 Emergent Midwest gathering in Chicago, IL, where I heard many prominent Emergent voices for the very first time. Also in one of the sessions, an atheist took the platform as key speaker. Although I did not know it at the time, but this was the kind of data that would be significant to my work, since I am interested in how Emergents relate to the “other”. This was my very first Emerging Church conference, and it was through this conference that I gained some initial personal contacts in the movement. This conference formed my initial impression of people in the movement, even as I had just been beginning to pay more attention to their publications and online material. This was where I met prominent Emergent names like Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt and Spencer Burke for the first time. Many of the people I would later interview, I met from this first conference. This also gave me a sense of the variety of people who were engaged in the conversation: from mainline pastors to evangelical Megachurch staff, to atheists and agnostics. The next available regional conference where I conducted research was the Transform East Coast gathering that was held in Washington D.C. in late April to early May 2010. Unlike many of the other conferences I attended, this was a “free” conference: meaning, there was no fee for attending. Many prominent Emergent authors were in attendance, like Peter Rollins, Brian McLaren and Samir Selmanovic. This conference was also interesting for the fact that it brought together many people who were

practicing Emergent ideas in localized communities of faith. Besides opportunities to observe “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), these regional conferences provided me with useful contacts for in-depth interviews.

### *National*

These were typically larger gatherings, with upwards of 500 people. On a national level, in October 2009, I attended a conference called *Christianity 21*, which was a conference which featured 21 speakers, each speaking for 21 minutes. This was a conference that was organized by prominent Emergent authors Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. What was interesting about this conference was that all of the speakers were women speaking on the weighty issue of the future of Christianity. I also attended a Catholic-Emergent conference that was held in New Mexico in April 2010. The year before, in 2009, the same Catholic-Emergent conference was first held, but I was not able to attend it personally. I was, however, able to subscribe to the video broadcast of all the main sessions for a fee of \$25. So I was able to observe the speaking sessions of almost the whole conference.

### *The ones that got away*

In my proposal, I stated my intention to study hyphenated Emergent groups. Hyphenated Emergents are people who have existing institutional affiliation/ sponsorship, who identify with the Emerging Church movement, while also maintaining their denominational affiliations. There are currently Presbytermergents (Presbyterians), Methomergents (Methodists), Luthermergents

(Lutherans), and even Baptimergents (Baptists) groups. These hyphenated Emergent groups exist on the borderlands of already established institutional structures, while seeking to forge something new in the process. Many are clergy within established traditions. Many hyphenated groups have organizational structure, official websites and coordinating group meetings. Hyphenated groups are situated within the tension of encrusted, established institutional structures, while simultaneously being informed by the anti-hierarchical postmodern orientation of Emergent thought. They straddle a fine line between demands of the denomination, and Emergent ideals. It was not feasible for me to research hyphenated group meetings. I faced problems of access as these meetings were usually on the leadership level. Given that I had spent a significant amount of my personal resources on researching regional and national meetings, I did not pursue this for my fieldwork. But as I detail in the section on in-depth interviews, I was none-the-less still able to interview several hyphenated Emergents.

#### *Field notes and data recording*

During participant-observation, I took both written and laptop typed field notes with the range of groups that I visited. Generally, as a rule of thumb, during local group meetings like church services or cohort meetings, I took detailed notes after the event instead of during, since I was typically involved with the service and hence it was not appropriate to be taking notes. I would write my field notes from memory not more than four hours after attending local meetings. But when I attended regional and national Emergent conferences, I felt at liberty to take notes on my laptop since I did not feel doing so would be disrupting to the



proceedings. In fact, at conferences, I would typically observe many other people on their laptops. So being on my laptop and taking field notes during the event was not an anomaly at all.

In my field notes, I would typically makes notes about the demographic profiles of the people in attendance, typically along lines of race, gender and age: the visually observable social characteristics. I also took notes on interactions that I had with people, as well as interactions that I observed between people, or other things that I observed relating to inclusion or bridge-building. I also paid attention to the configuration and management of space, and how people were spatially organized. I also looked at rituals and symbols and if (and how) they were used strategically to accomplish inclusion or bridge-building.

### **In-depth interviews**

My sampling strategy for interviews elicits voices from various ECM locations, including a) key voices and public figures, b) pastors and other local group leaders, and c) others from independent and marginal locations. As an example of each, in 2008 I interviewed Emergent author Brian McLaren about Christian-Muslim relations (a), in 2009 I interviewed two Lutheran and Presbyterian Pastors prominent in Emergent (b), and in 2010 interviewed a newcomer to the Emerging Church who had just attended her first conference, after reading about the movement, through books and the internet (c).

Each of these profiles of individuals provided a different but significant dimension to the pieces of the Emergent puzzle that I was attempting to put together. For instance, interviewing key voices and public figures (a) like Brian

McLaren and Spencer Burke, gave me a sense of what core ideas were driving the movement, and what was their take on key issues in my interview rubric, like inclusion, bridge-building and postmodernism. Interviewing local leaders (b) provided me with a good understanding of work that was occurring, “on the ground” with practitioners who were trying to turn Emergent ideas into reality. This ranged from cohort leaders to Pastors of big and small Emergent congregations. But it also included people that I interviewed from the Emergent Village leadership structure, who provided me with some useful insight into the objectives, and constraints they faced in trying to “manage” Emergent. Interviews with individuals from other independent and marginal locations (c) provided me with useful data on how individuals were drawn into the movement, what their personal experiences were, and how they evaluated the movement’s attempts to be inclusive and build bridges. This also included people who had relatively “weak” links to Emergent.

I conducted my interviews through a variety of mediums. My interviews ranged between thirty minutes to an hour. About half of my interviews were done in person. Another half of my interviews were done over Skype - a video chat platform. Some interviews were conducted during various meetings and conferences that I attended. I recorded all my interviews with a digital recorder and transcribed them for analysis. In all, I conducted 50 interviews with an even spread of people between categories (a), (b) and (c), although I prioritized and interviewed more people from category (c), since an important component of my project was to assess the success of the Emerging Church in being inclusive and

building relational bridges. I was also careful to sample toward minorities where possible, since I was aware that the movement has been perceived as a “white, educated middle-class male” phenomena. I was very interested to get minority viewpoints, which is why overall I have interviewed more females than males. And I had also taken the opportunity to interview minorities where possible, especially since I wanted to find out whether they felt like “token minorities” in the movement. So for instance, I interviewed an African American male, Melvin Bray, as well as a Puerto Rican American named Eliacin Rosario-Cruz. Both provided me with an important minority perspective on the Emerging Church. Furthermore, these minorities would be in a good position to assess the success of the movement in being inclusive and bridge-building across differences. As another example of my deliberate sampling for minorities and other marginal voices, one of my prominent interviews was with a lesbian woman who ran the blog [queermergent.com](http://queermergent.com), who told me her story of how the Emerging Church had helped her in her faith journey.

My interviews were also a key source of helping me “fill in the gaps” of fieldwork I would have liked to conduct in an ideal scenario, but that I did not get to do due to budget, time and geographical constraints. For instance, although in my initial dissertation proposal, I stated that I wanted to conduct observations with hybrid-Emergent or hyphenated groups like “Presbymergent” and “Luthermergent”, I was unable to do so, because none were meeting within a reasonable distance to Columbia, meetings were infrequent, and I had budget

constraints. But I was able to interview various individuals who were involved with Presbytermergent, Luthermergent and Anglimergent groups.

### **Publications and online data**

I also looked at the movement's publications, and a variety of online data. This is a very important component of what makes up the Emerging Church. Discourses and how they are transmitted are important for cultural movements. Merely focusing on Emergent groups in localized settings "would miss much of what the culture is about." (Neitz 1994:134) This is especially so when so much of its activity takes place online. Research has shown how insider/ outsider boundaries become problematic when people participate in a subculture through online media, and see their subcultural identity just as legitimate as people participating in local groups (Williams 2006). I felt it was important to examine online media for what was being said, and how it was being said, and what *effect* it produced. The more I researched the more I realized that there was a very important discursive element to the movement that would have been missed if my focus had been purely on face-to-face, local groups.

My sampling for publications and online data distinguishes a) discursive from b) interactional data. Discursive data are ideas from books and other publications from the ECM that articulate *difference + closeness*. Interactional data centers on online encounters between the ECM and its audience (hostile, friendly, religiously other, etc.) from websites like emergentvillage.com and theooze.com. There are a myriad of websites, blogs, and different types of mediated content that are related to the Emerging Church movement. In this

myriad of websites it becomes necessary to practically narrow and delimit the field. I hence lay out the process by which I have thought about data collection, data coding and data analysis, as well as the logic for my chosen method of analyzing internet data. From the past years of familiarizing with the movement's online presence through preliminary fieldwork, I identified the following sources of online data: websites, personal blogs, podcasts, videocasts, online articles, and online videos.

### *Sampling criteria*

It seemed that taking data from this number of sources may be too much to handle. So my initial sampling strategy to narrow the field was to look at particular internet-communication forms and exclude others. So if websites are my chosen source of data, I would not look at other mediated forms like podcasts or videocasts. However, I concluded that lots of useful data would be excluded if I only looked at websites, and not personal blogs or podcasts. Furthermore, many of these mediated platforms are linked to each other, making them hard to separate cleanly. For instance, if I wanted to look at certain Emerging Church websites, I would inadvertently find podcasts and videos that are embedded within the websites.

Significantly, each of these communication mediums taken together discursively constitutes the world of the Emerging Church. They disseminate their ideas, and engage in cultural production along multiple online platforms. It would be important not to exclude too much of the available data. Furthermore, this movement has emerged on the horizon only in the last 10 years or so, and

online data identifiable with the movement is by no means too vast or boundless in quantity.

Hence, I decided to strategize another approach where I can leave open the types of internet-based media platforms to draw data from, so that I did not exclude valid data. Instead of sampling by type of media platform, *I sampled by the specific content of data*. I have distinguished two broad categories of data that I will be looking for online: 1) discursive data and, 2) Interactional data. In particular, I found a wealth of both discursive and interactional data on Emergent websites theooze.com and emergentvillage.com. In both these websites, there was a variety of blog posts, formally written articles, as well as interactions between critics, observers and writers. There were also links to a range of podcasts and videos.

### *1. Discursive data*

Discursive data would consist of how people from the Emerging Church are thinking aloud or “theorizing” about on my conceptual categories that operationalize *difference + closeness*: boundaries, inclusion, bridge-building and postmodernism. Discursive data is substantively focused, where the content of the data addresses a subject or topic. What is important are the content of the ideas. These might consist of self-articulation and “other” articulation: who are we as Christians? How should we approach the “other”? What does it mean to be an Emergent Christian? Discursive data might also consist of context or condition articulation: What does it mean to be in a postmodern world? How has culture

shifted? I would also pay attention to the use and activation of rhetorics: how people position their critics/ supporters in a way that advances an argument or position.

Discursive data sources

**Websites** like Emergent Village and theooze.com which are convergence points for many in the movement. Many **online articles** and **online videos** are posted that discuss boundaries, inclusion and postmodernism. Typically these articles or videos discuss a rethinking of what Christianity should be in a postmodern context, particularly in terms of the shape of relationships with diverse others. I found online articles that addressed inclusion and exclusion issues. I also found online articles that showed how various groups were doing *difference + closeness* in local group settings. Some of the Emerging local congregations I visited, also had Church websites that would feature articles written by members. This also provided some interesting and useful data. For instance, in my fieldwork with Chicago Emergent group Wicker Park Grace, I found personal “stories” of people who attended Wicker Park Grace, and I used this information as data. From these discursive data sources, I would get written “accounts” of peoples’ experiences attending Emerging Churches. Some examples of data I used include:

- “Empathic Postmodern Christian Agent of Diversity”, Mark Karris, article published on theooze.com Jan 27, 2009.
- “The line of exclusion”, Nic Paton, article posted on emergentvillage.com weblog May 7, 2009.

- “The Emerging Church: Being Tribes without being Tribal”, YouTube video posted Jan 15, 2009.

**Personal** and **group blogs** of many in the movement articulate these issues too.

Examples of group blogs are the Presbymergent site [www.presbymergent.org](http://www.presbymergent.org) as well as the Anglimergent site [anglimergent.ning.com](http://anglimergent.ning.com) where people with both denominational and Emergent affiliation post blogs. Some of these blogs are personal sites of individuals who are leading Emergent groups in local settings.

Some examples of data from these sites are:

- “The Converging Church” blog entry/ article on personal blog [emergingpensees.blogspot.com](http://emergingpensees.blogspot.com), posted October 9, 2006.
- “Welcoming the Other” blog entry/ article on personal blog [julieclawson.com](http://julieclawson.com), posted June 15, 2009.
- “Emergence, Postmodernity, and the Love Ethic”, blog entry on [presbymergent.org](http://presbymergent.org), posted January 10, 2009.

**Podcasts** and **videocasts** are significant sources of discursive production from the movement. Emergent Village, [theooze.tv](http://theooze.tv) and another podcast called Homebrewed Christianity are examples where issues related to inclusion, bridge-building and postmodernism were discussed, a small sample of titles that were relevant are:

- “An Emerging, Progressive, and Relational Vision of Faith” (Homebrewed Christianity podcast episode 60)
- “Phyllis Tickle – Beyond Denominations, the Hyphenated Church” ([theooze.tv](http://theooze.tv) videocast episode 17)
- “Samir Selmanovic on finding our God in the Other” (Emergent Village podcast dated February 11, 2007)



## *2. Interactional data*

Interactional data is categorically different from discursive data in that the former asks: How are they actually interacting online? Instead of being substantively oriented, my focus here is expressive, in terms of what is said between people and how it is said. With interactional data, I am looking for the actual “culture in interaction”, by identifying customs, norms of relating, speech acts, communication conventions, interaction strategies etc. This method of focusing on interactional data is what Lichterman would call a “forum” lens of analysis that “requires probing everyday conversation as it unfolds in naturally occurring settings, for the open-ended, self-reflective interactions (Lichterman 1999:105). Forum denotes an analytical lens, then, that sensitizes us to kinds of interaction that may occur in a variety of movements or civic groups (Lichterman 1999:104), like the Emerging Church.

I paid close attention to the kinds of vocabulary and terminology used in these interactions. Gestures of inclusion like “welcome to the conversation” (that Emergents often use in reply to their critics) would be an example of data that I would be looking out for, and especially ways that people from the movement address particular individuals who are critical of the movement. Emergent voices have also discussed the concept of “orthoparadoxy” (Friesen 2007), which they articulate as learning to live in “paradoxical tension” with categorical “others” who do not believe and think the same things that they do: how does this appear in tangible ways in terms of inclusive customs and conventions of relating to diverse others?

## Interactional data sources

**Websites** and **online articles** are good sources of interactional data because of the diverse range of people that interact via criticism or commentary of articles. For instance, a voice critical of the movement may react to an article. I would then observe the interactions between commentators that follow. In the same way, discussions that follow a good many Emergent related **podcast** are also sources of interactional data between those critical and supportive of the movement.

The most important criterion for consideration is that of interaction: where can I find a high degree of interaction occurring, particularly between different groups? For instance, it would be interesting to look at how people from the movement answer their critics and interact with them online. Hence websites which are convergence points for a host of different people – including those for and against the movement, where voices of audience/ supporters and antagonists alike are voiced. I want to observe the “boundary-talk” that occurs, where interaction facilitates reflexivity toward boundaries, where “talking” together becomes a new bases of solidarity across differences. Also, what kinds of interactional “speech norms” do Emergent folks employ? How do they talk to their critics, and other people who new to the movement? By paying attention to interactional data, I was able to capture and conceptualize the various rhetorical strategies used by people from the movement to promote their cause.

For instance, my dissertation features good interactional data where Emergent authors respond to critics. In chapter 7 (bridge-building), I even highlight examples of how other people have spoken out in defense of the Emerging Church. And in chapter 8 (postmodernism), I analyze some interesting data where Emerging Church leader Brian McLaren responds directly to criticism by Evangelical leader Chuck Colson about his opinions on postmodernism and the Emerging Church.

### **Data analysis procedures and theory production**

#### *First phase: starting with broad primary categories*

I started with broad conceptual categories to group all my data. The four broad categories I started with were 1) boundaries, 2) inclusion, 3) bridge-building, 4) postmodernism, and 5) other (data that might be relevant but that has no broad category). I organized all my data according to these broad categories. Data that I thought might be relevant to my project but did not immediately fit into category 1 to 4 were placed under category 5. This will enable me to potentially pick up on things that were not on my conceptual radar, but somehow felt like they might be relevant. This was a safeguard against excluding too much data, while also providing me with a data source to create other conceptual categories if necessary.

#### *Second phase: establishing patterns in the data and creating subcategories*

After data collection, I coded my data and dropped all my data into one of the 5 broad conceptual categories, I then sought out patterns in the data that

enabled me to create sub-categories which I used to further compartmentalize and make sense of the data. For example, data that fell into the category “bridge-building” was subdivided into: 1) perplexity, 2) discursive bridging 3) face-to-face bridging 4) the social spiral. I then further developed these categories, for example category 1, perplexity, was further subdivided into 1a) perplexing talk, 1b) self-working perplexity, 1c) perplexing encounters and 1d) perplexity elaboration, based on patterns that I noted in the data.

As I was deciding how to organize my analysis, it seemed that the broad conceptual categories would work well as discrete chapters. I decided that category 1 “boundaries” was too broad, and category 5 “other data” was not a real conceptual category in the first place. Furthermore, data from both category 1 and 5 went into other categories like “inclusion” and “bridge-building”. Eventually, I replaced “boundaries” with “mapping”, and developed sub-categories within “mapping”. Hence, apart from chapter 4, which describes the social world of the Emerging Church, my four major conceptual categories represent the four major substantive chapters of this dissertation: mapping (chapter 5), inclusion (chapter 6), bridge-building (chapter 7) and postmodernism (chapter 8).

### *Third phase: contributing to and generating theory*

In all my substantive chapters, I have attempted to make some original conceptual and theoretical contributions. But my project also attempts to build on existing theories in social boundaries, the sociology of religion, the sociology of

culture. As examples of introducing original concepts, in chapter 5 on “mapping”, I introduce concepts like “reflexive mapping” and “navigational affinity”, in chapter 6 I make a distinction between “passive inclusion” and “active inclusion” strategies. As examples of theoretical contributions, in chapter 7, I attempt to develop Lichterman’s argument on the social spiral by elaborating a discursive component to spiraling that Lichterman did not pay attention to. In chapter 8, I seek to make a contribution to the sociology of culture, elaborating culture as a “tool commons”, in contrast with Swidler’s “toolkit” metaphor (Swidler 1986). Collectively, these original concepts and theoretical discussions are oriented toward generating useful concepts and theories that can contribute to a sociological understanding of *difference + closeness*.

Being interested in developing existing theories, I employed Michael Burawoy’s “extended case method” (1998), which offers a way of using field observations to shed light on existing theoretical questions. According to Burawoy, we can improve existing theories so that those theories better accommodate our own cases without losing existing insights that our own cases would not challenge (Burawoy 1998, Burawoy et al. 1991). So for instance, I hope to extend many of the concepts and theories that Lichterman uses in his cultural analysis of groups, like “bridge-building”, “reflexivity” and his discussion of the social spiral argument, not so much to disprove or discount his theories, but to see how best they apply to the Emerging Church, and simultaneously contribute to the explanatory power of these theories.

## **Chapter 4 Organizing emergence: the social world of the Emerging Church**

*I describe the social world of the ECM, discussing its core ideas, principle voices, practitioners, participants, and types of audience and how each contributes to the social world. I also discuss their organizational forms, collective activities and modes of communication and interaction. Using Wendy Griswold's Cultural Diamond (1994) accounting device, I detail 1) cultural objects, 2) creators, 3) receivers and 4) social worlds, and the relationships between them. Taken together, these components of the Cultural Diamond provide an in-depth understanding of the social world of the Emerging church. Through detailing these four dimensions of the social world and their interrelationships, this chapter sets up my subsequent theoretical discussions in chapters 5 to 8, and argues that the Emerging Church social world facilitates "encounters" across differences (Tsing 2005).*

### **The social world of the Emerging Church Movement**

This first substantive chapter will flesh out the collective activity that constitutes the social world of the Emerging Church. Like Howard Becker's observation of Art Worlds (1982), my interest is the coordinated and cooperative effort of many individuals in various roles that constitute the Emerging Church, even though at times, the forms of cooperation are ephemeral. Like, Becker, I want to understand the complexity of the cooperative networks (Becker 1982) that define the Emerging Church.

To do this, I employ Wendy Griswold's culture diamond, which is a heuristic "accounting device" (Griswold 2004:17) for understanding the relationship of cultural objects to their social world. Griswold's culture diamond elaborates the relationship between 4 points: social world, cultural object, creator and receiver, and the 6 relationship links between those 4 points. In this chapter,

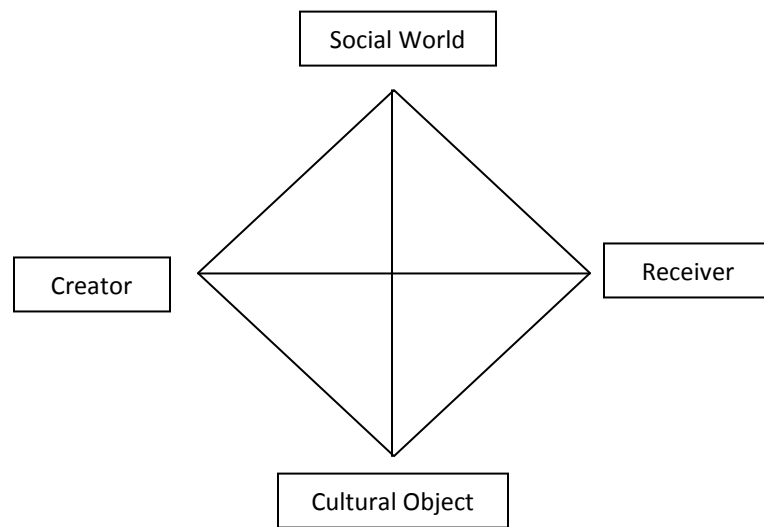
I use Griswold's 4 components of the cultural diamond. However, my objective is not just to understand the relationship of cultural objects to their social world. Griswold's focus is on cultural objects, while my focus however is on the social world. In other words, *how do creators, receivers, cultural objects and the relationships between them constitute the "social world" of the Emerging Church Movement?* This is what I hope to spell out for the reader in this chapter.

The Cultural Diamond is specifically designed to help us understand relationships (Griswold 2004:18). So for instance, through the Cultural Diamond I hope to provide the reader with a better understanding between creators and receivers in the social world of the Emerging Church. Similarly, I hope to show how cultural objects constitute the social world, as much as social worlds provide the context for cultural objects to flourish. Hence social worlds and cultural objects are mutually constitutive.

#### *Social world and not "system"*

I see the Emerging Church not as a "system", since "system" connotes functional parts that work together in a bounded fashion. A system, in essence is no more than a sum of its parts. Echoing Becker, my analysis is not a big "F" functionalist account of how activities must occur in a particular way for the Emerging Church to "survive" (Becker 1982: 6). I conceptualize "social world" as pertaining more to connections between people, ideas, objects or artifacts that are loosely related but none-the-less contribute to the makeup of an empirical phenomenon. My goal is not to paint a picture of a cohesive, tightly-run unit with

well-defined boundaries. The Emerging Church is hard to define precisely because it has fuzzy definitional and organizational boundaries. My purpose here is to forward more of a symbolic interactionist approach to social organization, where “social world” refers to the diffuse network of people who have a variety of patterned and emergent relationships with each other (Shibutani 1955, in Hall, Neitz and Battani 2003:191). According to Hall, Neitz and Battani, in a “social world” there is ongoing collective activity defined by participants being loosely connected, if at all. Social worlds “lack sharp boundaries of either location or membership” (2003:191), which fittingly describes the Emerging Church.



**Figure 1: The Cultural Diamond**



According to Griswold, a Cultural Diamond (1994) consists of four elements.

They are:

1. *Cultural objects*

A cultural object is a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, tangible, or can be articulated.

2. *Creators*

Creators are people who articulate and communicate an idea, purvey a discourse, and are involved in the production process of cultural objects.

3. *Receivers*

Receivers are people who receive, hear, read, understand, think about, enact and participate in cultural objects.

4. *Social world*

The social world is the context in which cultural objects and the people who create and receive them are situated in.

My format for this chapter discusses 1) cultural objects, 2) creators, 3) receivers and 4) social world in sequence. In caveat, while it is analytically useful to make these distinctions, I will elaborate ways that these distinctions are dynamic in practice.

### **Cultural objects**

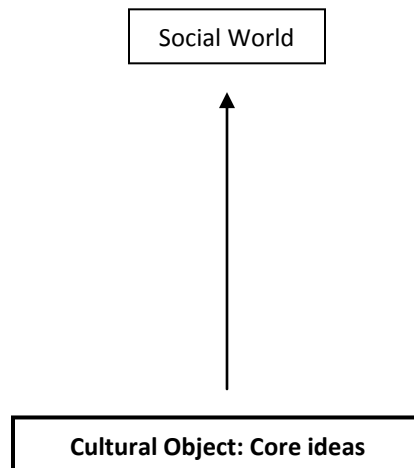
This first section looks at various cultural products that collectively constitute the Emerging Church. While Griswold focuses on the interactions

between creators and audience through cultural objects, this section will demonstrate the complexity of this interaction when the cultural objects are themselves sites where cultural production takes place. Cultural objects mediate the production of more cultural artifacts. In the digital age, the medium itself becomes the distribution platform for other cultural objects.

There are definite conceptual merits in thinking about the production of culture process that does not just take place in “industry” or mass production settings, as has been the tradition with much of the “production of culture” literature in Sociology. With the internet, the “production of culture” no longer takes place in specialized domains of production. Much of the cultural production that I am interested in here is produced through online mediated platforms.

As we will see, this blurs the distinction between “creator” and “receiver”, and facilitates people not just observing the movement, but actively participating in it as well. These mediated platforms allow for a more fluid relationship between creator and audience. The types of audiences show that people have what I call “participant options”, where they can “slide” from being “audience” to “creator”; from being a mere observer to being an active participant in the “conversation”, all the while, being able to selectively choose their level of engagement and self-disclosure.

## *Cultural objects 1: core ideas*



**Figure 2: Core ideas as cultural objects**

The Emerging Church Movement has no statement of doctrines, or core theological beliefs. The closest they have is a statement of “values and practices” on the Emergent Village website. There is hence tremendous diversity in what marks the Emerging Church, and critics have similarly had problems in exactly nailing down what the Emerging Church believes. The following discussion is by no means exhaustive, but it does present some of the recurring ideas that I have observed through the last 4 years. I would like to situate each core idea in how it fits into my dissertation chapters. The core ideas are expressed under the headings 1) reflexivity, 2) relational and 3) reframe. I discuss each in the following:

### *Reflexivity*

Reflexivity, in sociological parlance refers to the ability of individuals to think critically about themselves situated in context. The Emerging Church

Movement challenges Christians to exercise reflexivity in thinking about their own faith. They call all Christians to cast a critical eye on themselves. Emergents question: what are taken-for-granted assumptions and biases of Christians in the American context? What conditioning factors affect how Christians think about themselves and their wider world? How are present day institutional forms influenced by certain societal trends and factors? They are particularly interested in being attuned to the social, historical context of the Christian faith, and how that has itself colored or influenced the shape that Christianity in America has taken on. Many Christians find in the ECM the freedom to question, explore and doubt, something they do not find in the traditional church (Belcher 2009:110). Authors in the movement also provide much of the language and concepts that allow people to engage in this out of the box thinking (Sweet, McLaren and Haselmayer, 2003).

Emergents also believe that Christians should exercise epistemological humility. Christians have been absolutely certain about many things in the past, but have gotten it wrong before, for instance, in justifying slavery as “biblical”. The movement says that the certainties and absolutes of Christians have shifted at every age. Well-meaning Christians have gotten things wrong, and even committed atrocities based on their absolutes, a common example being The Crusades. It is hence important for Christians to always be open to the possibility that they might be wrong, others might be right, and that there is more to learn outside the walls of the Christian faith. Hence, the Emerging Church calls for Christians to be reflexive about themselves, and their place in the wider world. In

chapter 5, the next chapter, I discuss how the movement engages in a cultural practice of “mapping” diverse others as an expression of reflexivity. Reflexivity also features in subsequent chapters.

### *Relational*

The movement emphasizes right relationships over right doctrine. Regardless of what groups believe, what is most important is that groups are able to relate cordially and civilly with each other. The movement critiques how Christianity has traditionally understood and employed “insider” and “outsider” boundaries to exclusionary effect. Prominent voices within the Emerging Church, like Brian McLaren, Peter Rollins and Samir Selmanovic, argue for a need to respect, and learn from people of other faiths. There is a need to learn how to relate rightly to the religious “other”, especially Muslims, since they face negative stereotypes in the aftermath of 9/11 (Selmanovic 2009).

Within Christianity itself, the ECM has emphasized that they do not aspire to be another denomination, and neither do they want to become “another slice of the Christian pie”. Some of these denominational divisions have gotten in the way of doing some of the more important work as Christians. Furthermore, they think that every denominational heritage or faith tradition has some strong points that the larger body of Christ can learn from. What Christians need is a “generous orthodoxy” (McLaren 2004), that bridges divides between conservative and liberal spectrums of the Christian faith.

Emergents are sensitive to the way the Christian faith has operated along modes of exclusion, often along lines of class, race, gender and sexual orientation. It wants to draw diverse people to the table, without setting any pre-conditions to who can or cannot come to the table and what they can or cannot bring. The movement wants to be attuned to the ways that institutional religion has worked to sustain exclusion and preserve exclusiveness. The movement calls for a rethinking of how to engage and dialogue those traditionally excluded. Hence in light of this core idea of being relational, in chapter 6, I explore how the Emerging Church deals with the problem of inclusion and strategizes to manage differences in a more inclusive manner. Then in chapter 7, I explore how they engage in bridge-building with people of other faiths, as well as their critics.

### *Reframe*

The Emerging Church sees a need to question some of the dominant assumptions that have shaped Christianity. They ask: what are the questions institutional Christianity has missed out on? Brian McLaren expressed this in a conference once, by telling his audience, “What we focus on determines what we miss”. The movement pushes to reframe Christianity as being more than saving souls and getting people into heaven (McLaren 2006). Christianity should be more than getting “fire insurance” from hell (Belcher 2009). In line with that, Emergents think Christians are largely unconcerned with the environment because eschatologically, “it’s all going to burn anyway”. The movement wants to expand the Christian agenda beyond soul-saving, to include social justice (McLaren, Padilla and Seeber 2009), creation care, to global issues like war,

poverty and health issues like AIDS (McLaren 2007). The movement also seeks to reframe how Christians engage the biblical text (Condor 2009). Emergents question whether the bible should be read as the infallible word of God that is read like a command/ instruction book. For many Emergents, biblical inerrancy “does not sufficiently express the truth of the bible”,<sup>2</sup> and it is not that Emergents do not read or esteem the bible, but it is read differently than pure fact: it is a historical narrative that is full of tensions and contradictions, myth *and* history, and needs to be read in community (Condor 2009).

The Emerging Church seeks to reframe Christianity *through* a lens of postmodernism and *for* a postmodern world. The movement argues that Christianity needs to be attuned to the way the world has changed, particularly in a postmodern context where old structures and old ways of doing things need to be set aside. It requires a rethinking of institutions, ministry, and ecclesiology etc. Hence the implications of a “postmodern shift” are central themes of books by prominent Emergent authors (Jones 2001, McLaren 2001, and Keel 2007). The movement regularly employs the language of “shift” in its narrative, saying that the shift to a postmodern world is all at once post-colonial, post-foundational, post-denominational and post-Christendom, all of which modern religious institutions are incapable of dealing with. In chapter 8 on postmodernism, I discuss how the Emerging Church constructs a postmodern world through a process of claims-making to convince their audience that the postmodern world is here, and that the world has fundamentally changed because of this shift.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/september/39.62.html>, “The Ironic Faith of Emergents” in *Christianity Today* by Scot McKnight, posted 9/26/2008, accessed 07/31/2010.

## *Cultural objects 2: Books and publications*

Books are an important medium in the dissemination of Emergent ideas. As mentioned previously, Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian* (2001) and a strong host of his other books by authors like Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt and Peter Rollins, have been widely read by those who identify with the movement. Many individuals I interviewed narrated their story of how they came to be Emergent especially through McLaren. Emergent Village also has a line of books called "Emersion books", which it publishes in partnership with Christian Publishing group Baker Books. Emerging Church books have also been published in partnership with other publishers like Jossey-Bass and Abingdon Press.

What gives discursive significance to the Emerging Church are not just publications by authors from the movement, but there is also a healthy dose of publications about the movement from those who do not sympathize with the movement, and are seeking to critique it. Response books like *Truth and the New Kind of Christian* (2005) use McLaren's book as a launching pad to talk more about postmodernism and how it relates to the Christian faith. There are also books like D.A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (2005) that challenge the lack of doctrinal absolutes in the movement. Other reactionary publications include *Why We're not Emergent: By Two Guys who should be* (DeYoung and Kluck 2008) which forwards an Evangelical-oriented point by point critique of what the movement stands for, and where it is going wrong. Another book titled *Deep Church* (Belcher 2009) attempts to find a middle ground between Emerging Church, and what the author calls "traditional church".



There are also books by religious academicians which profile and attempt to characterize the movement. There are a number of books from Fuller Theological Seminary professors that have variously attempted to profile the movement in the US and Europe, for instances, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, authors of *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (2005), from a 5 year study, identified 9 core practices that define Emerging Churches, profiling churches and practitioners across the US and Europe.

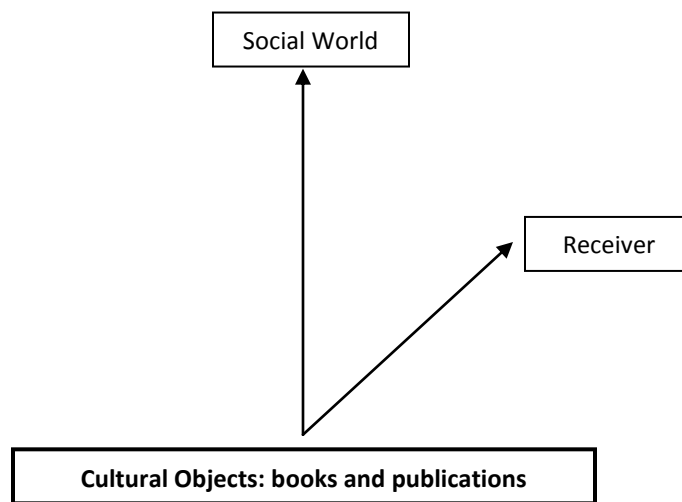
Evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* has a compilation of over 40 publications related to the ECM. The special section, titled “The Emergence of Emergent”, identifies the ECM as “one of the most provocative and controversial church movements of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, with some of the most heated arguments over what it is trying to do and who it encompasses”.<sup>3</sup> The special section has a compilation of a range of book reviews, analytical and explanatory articles on the movement and its broader significances spanning from 2001 to 2008.

Books are an important center-piece to those engaged personally with the movement. To many of my interviewees, books were a starting point and a lifeline, being instrumental in people experiencing paradigm shifts in their faith. I heard similar stories from interviewees who spoke of Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian* (2001) as a starting point to their paradigm shift, or that it

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/special/emergent.html>, “The Emergence of Emergent”, accessed 07/27/2010.

provided a breakthrough experience with readers, by expressing questions and doubts they previously did not have a platform to talk about. For people who are not part of locally meeting Emergent groups, books are often their only lifeline to the movement. Hence books and publications contribute to the social world via “Emerging Church” being a bona fide category of works. Books and publications also provide an information medium to a wider audience.



**Figure 3: books and publications as cultural objects**

*Cultural objects 3: online media*

Undoubtedly, the internet is a crucial apparatus that makes possible the social world of the Emerging Church. At an Emergent gathering in Chicago in 2008, I heard Tony Jones acknowledged that the Emerging Church “would not have been possible” if not for the internet. This highlights how dependant the movement is on cyberspace for its existence.

Websites like Emergent Village are a point of convergence for Emergent-minded Christians. It is a resource not just for ideas through articles that are posted, but it also facilitates connections to others who are similarly oriented. In addition, websites like Emergent Village bring the movement into encounter with a broader audience, including both critics and sympathizers alike. Online articles typically allow comments. Sometimes, it happens that people who leave comments start interacting with each other. This provided some of the most interesting interactional data, which I saw as an opportunity to observe “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

Websites also provide different resources for people interested in the movement. A website like theooze.com provides online articles, book reviews, chat rooms, as well as links to other internet resources. It also features its very own video cast channel – theooze.tv – that you can subscribe to on iTunes for video interviews with authors, practitioners and leaders of the Emerging Church Movement. Websites also provide information about conferences and other location specific meetings. Hence, websites are open access “information hubs” for events and activities in the Emergent World. Importantly, websites are “gathering spaces” for likeminded people. Founder Spencer Burke describes theooze.com as a location where “church leaders can converse about and collaborate on resources... by providing places for people to gather and communicate both online and offline”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://cavepainter.typepad.com/about.html>, Spencer Burke biography, accessed 07/27/2010.

Websites and online media are a life-line in how it enables people to realize that they are not alone in their faith journey as “Emergents”. As Spencer Burke, founder of theooze.com expresses,

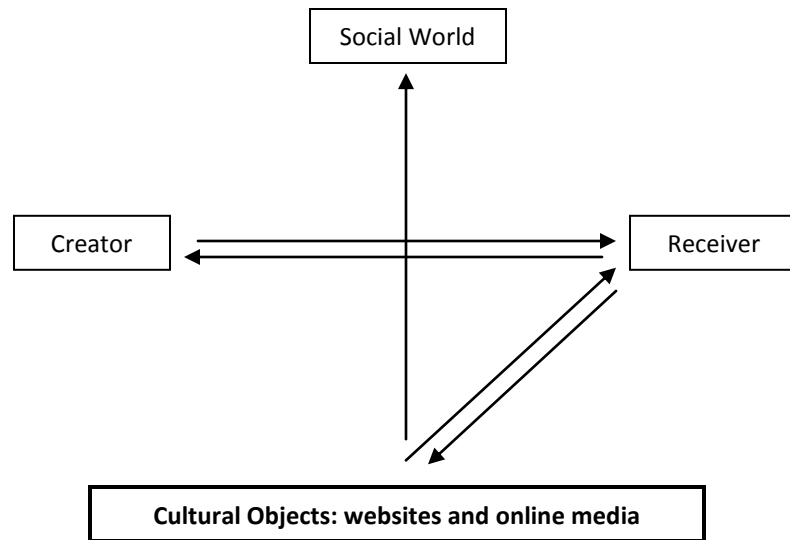
I joke sometimes about **THEOOZE** being a support group for crazy people in their garages-individuals who are struggling to fit in their churches and understand how the cultural shift affects their faith. I laugh about it, but it's actually true and you know what? I think it's needed. *There's something wonderfully freeing about knowing that you're not the only one.*<sup>5</sup>

Blogs are another important online media platform that Emergents use.

Blogs are personally created and controlled spaces for Emergents to put their thoughts out in cyberspace for anyone who might be interested. Blogs are sites where extensive discussion and elaboration over topics takes place. Blogs have an expressive function and allows individuals to put themselves on the “map” of the Emerging Church. Often, you will find with personal Emergent blogs, a “blog roll” where Emergent thinkers list other Emergent thinkers as having interesting and significant blogs. Beyond blogs, we must also consider how social media tools like Facebook and Twitter provide other channels for people to engage in the social world of the Emerging Church online.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=827&page=3>, “From the third floor of the garage: The Story of TheOOZE”, by Spencer Burke, posted 05/01/2003, accessed 07/27/2010.



**Figure 4: websites and online media as cultural objects**

Applying Griswold's culture diamond, the bi-directionality of the arrows implies that websites and online media as cultural objects allow for interaction between creators and receivers, in a way that merely readings books does not allow for. An example of this is when I messaged Emergent author Samir Selmanovic over Twitter, and asked him if he used an author named Jonathan Sacks in any of his writings. He replied to say that he did. The bi-directionality of the arrows from receiver to cultural object also demonstrates that through websites and online media, receivers are afforded the option of reacting to these mediated content and becoming creators in their own right, by writing blog posts, or book reviews on things related to the Emerging Church. Hence the online platforms give more cultural agency to people engaged with the Emerging Church Movement. This is why online content features so prominently in my dissertation as data: *due to the agency it affords people to participate in social worlds.*

## Creators

Next, moving on from a focus on cultural objects, I now turn my attention to elaborating on the different people, or participants involved in making the social world of the Emerging Church. On Griswold's culture diamond, there are basically two types of participants in a social world: creators and receivers. I use Griswold's concepts, but also elaborate on my own subcategories to explain the Emerging Church.

### *Creator 1: key voices*

The Emerging Church Movement is defined by a prominent set of voices that both give prominence to the movement, and inform the movement via their influence. These key figures are prominent through the books they publish, and this also drives much of the movement in terms of ideas. These leaders are not "leaders" in the sense of an established hierarchy of control. Rather these are leaders in terms of the ideas that they put forth. They are also symbolic leaders in that they are the most recognized faces associated with the particular movement.

Brian McLaren, in particular, has been influential as a leading thinker in the Emerging Church Movement. His bestselling book, *A New Kind of Christian* (2001) was an entrée to Emergent ideas for many people I interviewed. His book has also been used at many seminaries to discuss issues related to postmodernism and Christianity. In 2005 Brian McLaren was named as one of the 25 most influential Evangelicals in America. *Time* magazine labeled McLaren

a “paradigm shifter”, who has spurred a rethinking of what it means to be a Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Leaders like McLaren, Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt also draw crowds to Emergent events, and regularly feature as key speakers.

Tony Jones is also a prominent voice in the movement. He blogs on beliefnet and has written several books on postmodernism and the Emerging Church. He was also the first and only person pay-rolled by Emergent Village when he worked a half-time appointment as their national coordinator from 2005 to 2008.<sup>6</sup> He also hosted the Emergent Village Podcasts in its early editions. Other Key figures like Doug Pagitt and Tim Keel are well known for establishing stable local congregations, which they publish books on (Pagitt 2005, Keel 2007). Another key figure is postmodern philosopher Peter Rollins, who has written several influential books integrating philosophical insights into theology. As an Irish with a strong accent, he is charismatic, and is a much sought after speaker.

These key thinkers are not just purveyors of ideas. They are also instrumental in drawing audiences to conferences – another important component of the social world of the Emerging Church. For instance, Brian McLaren’s book *Everything Must Change* was the center of a 12 city tour that drew more than 500 people when he stopped by Kansas City. Other prominent leaders in the movement like Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt are frequent speakers of Emergent conferences who similarly pull crowds. In fact, Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt also formed their own company JoPa Productions that organizes

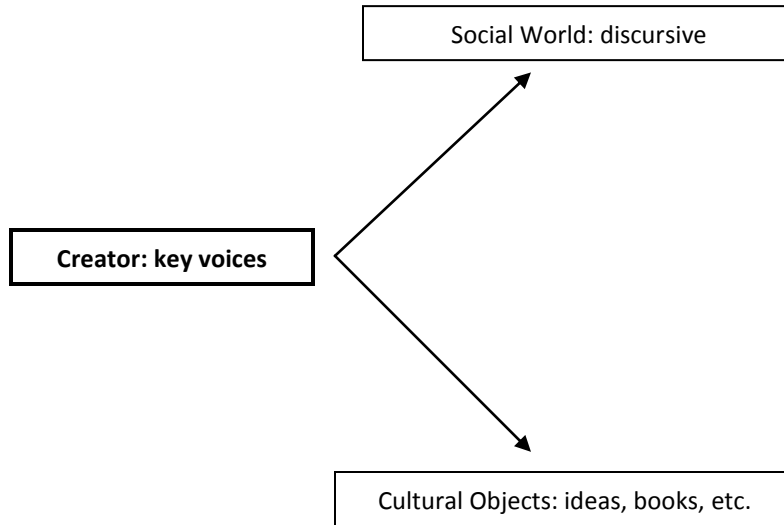
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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/presskit/emergent-village-makes-significant-changes-in-structure>, “emergent village makes significant changes in structure”, posted 10/01/2008, accessed 07/31/2010.

and promotes Emergent events. They organized two conferences in 2009, one that brought in prominent theologian Jürgen Moltmann to Chicago, as well as a conference called *Christianity 21*, which intentionally featured exclusively women speakers.

People like McLaren and Jones, while often considered “leaders” of the Emerging Church, are not so much leaders in terms of executive control. But they are individuals that both observers and critics identify as influential voices that many people pay attention to, and represent the Emerging Church Movement in the United States. While Emerging Church “leaders” should ideally be “leaders who refuse to lead” (Rollins 2006), they maintain power in many ways that perhaps contradicts their discourse. While Emergent leaders declare that they are not “in charge” of the movement, many still perceive that they are. An extensive discussion of this will feature in chapter 8 in a section called “the ironies of postmodern praxis”. According to Griswold’s culture diamond heuristic, key voices in the movement are producers and authors of cultural objects, like ideas that they purvey through books and other mediated content. They contribute to the social world as perceived as “leaders” who exert influence on the movement, even though they are not in any official executive leadership role.



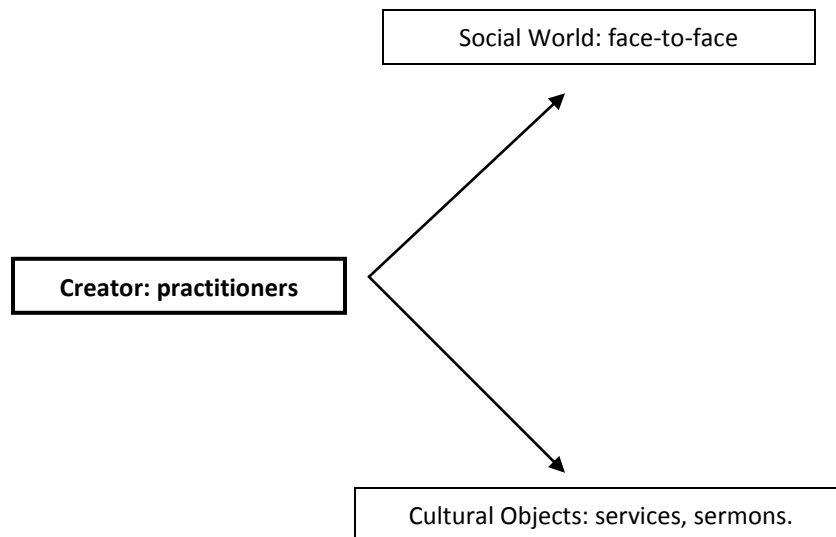


**Figure 5: key voices as creators**

*Creator 2: practitioners*

Another distinct group that I would put under the category of “creator” is who I call “practitioners” who put these ideas into practice in local settings, be it Emergent cohorts, congregations, or other types of faith communities. Some practitioners do so from within their existing faith traditions. For instance, hybrid groups like Presbymergent and Luthermergent are Emergent groups that form within existing denominations. Practitioners are often Pastors, and other types of leaders who are putting Emergent ideas into practice in local settings, with face-to-face communities. Practitioners also consists of organizing units that are native to the movement, like cohorts, and established Emerging Church congregations like Jacob’s Well in Kansas City, and Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis Minnesota. Practitioners operate faith communities on all levels of the local groups I delineated for my fieldwork in chapter 3. Hence using

Griswold's heuristic, practitioners operate face-to-face social worlds, and by doing so create cultural objects for precisely these social worlds.



**Figure 6: practitioners as creators**

### Receivers

*Griswold asks: Who receives these ideas? And yet, how do they contribute to the social world of the ECM?* This is a concern tackled both by Griswold (1994) and Becker (1982). For Griswold, cultural objects only become cultural objects when they are received by an audience. It is in the transaction between creator and audience that cultural object truly emerge: i.e. when it enters the pool of human discourses (Griswold, 1994:xx). Howard Becker describes the role of audiences in the appreciation and consumption of art that also constitutes the art world (Becker, 1982). In the social world of the Emerging

Church, there is also much to be said about the integral role of audiences in making this world.

In this section, I want to show how the social world of the Emerging Church Movement is constituted by its audience. Many people tell a similar story of how they came to engage with the movement. As I will discuss in a later section on the cultural production of publication/ books, the Emerging Church builds its influence through the body of works under the label “Emergent” that are on the market. Another obvious avenue for engaging the movement is through the internet, and the myriad of websites, personal blogs, podcasts and videos centering on the Emerging Church. Below, I elaborate on my own typology of audiences who are engaging with the movement:

Types of receivers:

1. *Initial encounter observers*

This is someone who comes across the “Emergent” or “Emerging Church”, (in the same way I did) for the first time. Some may be predisposed to dismissing the Emerging Church off-hand, because they already have a preconception of what it is. In that case, they will not proceed to other types of audience engagement. Others may want to explore for themselves.

2. *Explorers*

Explorers delve deeper into the movement’s literature, and start to form ideas of who the main voices in the movement are, by reading their works.

They are familiar with Emerging Church websites like [emergentvillage.com](http://emergentvillage.com) and [theooze.com](http://theooze.com). Explorers have not yet committed their identities into the “fray”, and are at this point more consumers who have not made their social presence known. Some explorers may look within their familiar channels of information and quickly conclude that the Emerging Church Movement is heretical. Emerging Church people often hope that relatively disengaged observers will investigate Emergent ideas for themselves, instead of relying on second hand knowledge.

### 3. *Engaged observer/ critic*

The engaged observer or critic is willing to speak up and starts posting comments on Emergent websites. They actively and publically engage with people from the movement, blogging about their books, and evaluating their theology. Engaged observers know enough about the movement to form opinions both for and against the movement. Some may not completely agree with all Emergent ideas *in toto*, but still find the movement useful to dialogue with. They engage with ECM websites and blogs as a way of learning more about what the movement can contribute to their own Christianity.

### 4. *Identifier*

Identifiers are those who overtly identify with the Emerging Church Movement, and adopt the label “Emergent”. An identifier is well-versed with the core authors of the movement, and can articulate what it means to be an Emergent or postmodern Christian when asked. Identifiers are

typically active in cyberspace both as *producers* and *consumers*, and have blogs or are at least active in the blogosphere. Identifiers themselves contribute to the social discourse often by speaking up for Emergent ideals, and responding to criticism. Identifiers make it a point to attend meetings and conferences at least once a year to network with other likeminded “Emergents”.

##### 5. *Friends-of*

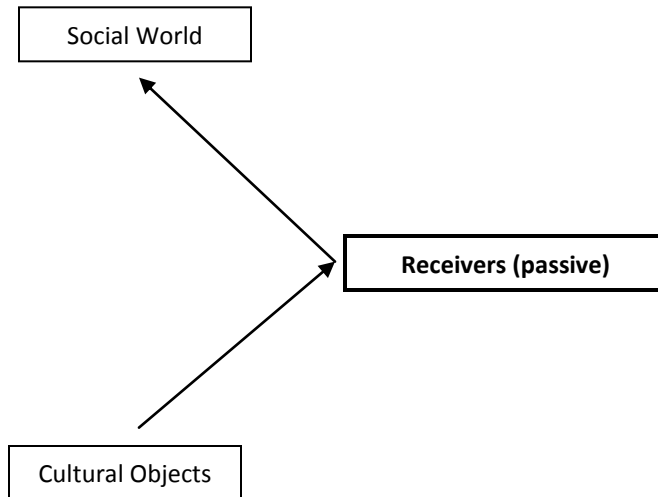
“Friends-of” audience are typically churches or groups, who may not identify as Emergent, but still consider themselves friendly to Emergent. They typically have a “friends of Emergent Village” icon on their blog or website as an identifier. “Friends-of” are typically churches or groups who already have a denominational identity, but may not want to be known as an “Emerging Church”. Often, “friends” may not necessarily agree with everything the Emerging Church Movement stands for, but they are still willing to be associated with the movement.

This brief survey represents the variety of people engaged with the Emerging Church on different levels. The accessibility of the internet allows people to access the ideas from anonymous locations, and keep their identities uncommitted if they so choose. Alternatively, when they have progressed from being cursory or exploratory engagers, they might then commit their identities in a public manner by publishing opinions on blogs, or commenting in person on other Emerging Church related blogs. People who are in isolated geographical

locations can still access the ideas, come to identify with the movement and adopt the Emergent label, as we shall see in the next chapter.

The audience consists of individuals who listen to the claims-making discourses coming from the movement. In Griswold's schema, the Emerging Church's audience is the recipients of claims (Griswold 2004:108). The audience is important because it assesses whether claims-makers are considered believable, and whether they are convinced enough to take action. Chapter 8 on postmodernism takes on a constructionist perspective (Loseke 1999), which looks at how the movement engages in claims-making to literarily "construct" the social world as a postmodern one. They assert that the world has fundamentally changed, and things are different in postmodernity.

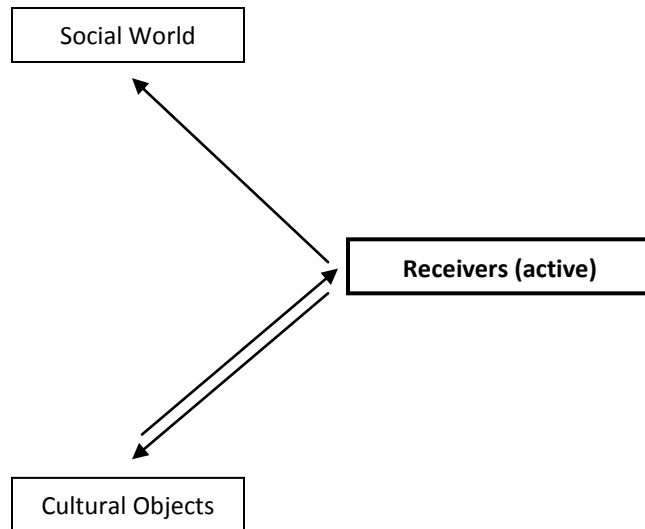
In Griswold's rubric, receivers consume the cultural objects through reading books by Emergent authors, and accessing articles from the internet. Receivers contribute to the social world by simply consuming these ideas, giving a sense that "there are people out there to whom these ideas matter". Receivers can be considered the "market" for which Emergent books are written with a specific target audience in mind.



**Figure 7: passive receivers**

The above diagram shows how certain receivers are purely engaged in consuming cultural objects; for instance in my type 1 and 2 audiences: “initial encounter observers” and “explorers”. But other receivers progress to become active contributors to producing cultural objects of their own, when they start writing their own blogs, review Emergent books online, or by making comments on podcasts or online articles. The most useful way to conceptualize the difference is to distinguish between passive and active receivers (Griswold 2004:104). Types 3, 4, 5 audience: “Engaged observer/ critic”, “identifier”, and “friends-of” are receivers who can actively participate in creating cultural objects of their own. Hence, another diagram is necessary to illustrate this, where active receivers are also creators of cultural objects in the social world of the Emerging Church, indicated by the arrows between receivers and cultural objects going both ways. For passive receivers (figure 7), passive receivers merely consumer cultural objects, hence the arrow only goes one way. For active receivers (figure

8) they consumer cultural objects as well as produce them, indicated by the arrows going both ways:



**Figure 8: active receivers**

*Critics as active receivers: social world contributors*

The above diagram emphasizes an important point about how critics, as active receivers, are integral contributors to the social world. Critics use personal blogs, and ministry websites dedicated to critiquing the Emerging Church. An example of the latter is a website called [www.apprising.org](http://www.apprising.org), which declares itself as an “online discernment” ministry. It scours Emergent related blogs and criticizes them directly. Apprising Ministries also aggregates Emerging Church related website and blog posts, so that as a reader, you get a list of hyperlinks to the “latest heresy”. So, on the internet, beyond websites *from* the Emerging Church you have a host of websites *on* the Emerging Church dedicated to criticizing it.



It is also interesting to note that the movement has some very prominent critics in high places. Evangelical leaders like Albert Mohler, John Piper and Chuck Colson, theologians like R.C. Sproul, have all publically criticized the movement through writings and conferences. I argue that the prominent status of some of the movement's critics has inadvertently focused more attention on the movement. John Piper has out and out discredited the Emerging Church as an unhealthy reaction from 20 and 30 somethings to the mega-church phenomenon, also declaring it dangerous for downplaying the importance of doctrine.<sup>7</sup> While Southern Baptist conservative leader Albert Mohler published a two part response to the Emerging Church Movement, balancing a critique with an acknowledgement that there is much in the movement that evangelicals can learn from, noting that some of the best, brightest and most sensitive and insightful individuals from the younger evangelical generation have been drawn to the movement. Mohler writes:

Undoubtedly, they have much to offer in terms of legitimate criticism of mainstream evangelicalism. The evangelical movement is far too immersed in pragmatism, experientialism, consumerism, and anti-intellectualism. Evangelicals seem only too eager to provide evidence of cultural isolationism and an eccentric grasp of cultural priorities....far too many evangelicals seem unconcerned about the absence of authentic ecclesiology--failing to see a vision of the church that is driven by the very missional and incarnational priorities that drive many within the Emerging Church Movement.<sup>8</sup>

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[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/AskPastorJohn/ByTopic/38/2664\\_What\\_is\\_the\\_emerging\\_church/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/AskPastorJohn/ByTopic/38/2664_What_is_the_emerging_church/), "What is "emerging church?"", published 03/12/2008, accessed 07/27/2010.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/06/30/what-should-we-think-of-the-emerging-church-part-two/>, "What should we think of the Emerging Church, part 2", published 06/30/2005, accessed 07/27/2010.

My dissertation will discuss in detail how these key figures lend discursive weight to the Emerging Church Movement, thereby constituting its social world. In chapter 7, I discuss how the movement has attempted to build bridges with their critics, and the successes and struggles they encounter in the process. In chapter 8, I show how they similarly engage critics on the issue of postmodernism. These chapters flesh out just how integral a role critics play in constituting the social world of the Emerging Church.

### **Social world**

Up to this point in the chapter, I have fleshed out 1) cultural objects, 2) creators and 3) receivers, and how each contributes to the social world of the Emerging Church. In the following section, I would like to focus my attention on the social world of the Emerging Church itself, and talk about the complex relationship between cultural objects, creators and receivers due to the specific types of social worlds that the Emerging Church operates in. As my previous analysis of creators and receivers has shown, there are two types of social worlds: 1) the face-to-face social world of Emerging Church congregations, cohorts, meeting groups, and conferences, and 2) the virtual or ideational world of the Emerging Church through mediated platforms, or what I label as the discursive world.

### *Social world 1: the symbiosis of face-to-face worlds*

There are essentially two subcategories of the face-to-face social world. Firstly, there are local groups that meet regularly, and secondly, there are conferences and meetings which are more occasional. My research covers both types.

#### **Types of face-to-face groups**

<b>Type 1</b>	Local groups	Geographically limited	Regular participants	Practitioners driven	Regular meetings
<b>Type 2</b>	Conferences	Geographically varied	Varied participants	Key voices driven	One-off meetings

In the previous chapter on methods, I have already detailed the variety of local groups, and why I chose to study them. While these face-to-face social worlds seem distinct in terms of their characteristics, in actuality there is a significant amount of interdependence between them, or what I call a “symbiosis”. For instance, local Emergent groups are instrumental in organizing conferences. Brian McLaren’s Everything Must Change conference held in Kansas City a few years ago, was organized by Emergent congregation Jacob’s Well, a local congregation. In fact, one of the administrative Pastors from Jacob’s Well was in charge of registration at the conference, and he would later become my interviewee. Similarly for the Emergent Midwest gathering I attended in Chicago in 2008, many Chicago area Emergent groups were involved in making

that particular conference happen, and from what I gathered from interviews, even paid out of their own pocket to organize the event.

Also, although these meetings are organized around notable Emergent authors who make an event worth attending, these conferences showcase a mix of existing prominent voices, and up-and-coming thinkers and practitioners. For instance, in a 2010 Transform conference I attended in Washington D.C., while notable names like Brian McLaren and Peter Rollins spoke, the conference also featured many practitioners who were leading local faith communities in different parts of the United States. In one particular session, I observed a roundtable of practitioners describing the very different works they were each doing in their various faith communities, some were situated in the inner cities, and others were focused on the gay community, and others were focusing on the arts community. In this way, I saw how conferences “promoted” the work that practitioners are engaged with on the ground. Face to face social worlds are hence integral to each other.

*Connecting social worlds: progressing from ideas to relationships*

Secondly, face-to-face and discursive social worlds are also interlinked. On the Emergent Village website, it states that one of the practices of EV is for people who identify with the movement to attend at least 1 gathering a year to cross paths with other Emergent thinkers.<sup>9</sup> Emergent conferences are tremendously important for individuals who might typically be accessing these

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/values-and-practices>, “Values and Practices”, accessed 08/02/2010.

ideas from isolated locations. Many involved in the Emerging Church conversation do not have local meeting groups, and attend churches that are not emergent-thinking or practicing. Attending conferences grounds personal experience in collective reality, so that people know their experiences are not unique, and that their questions resonate with an actual community of likeminded people. This was exemplified by a female in her 30s who attended her first Emerging Church conference, making personal connections for the first time despite consuming Emergent ideas for a few years. For people who have no local community, being at conferences tells them that they are not “crazy” for thinking the things they do. One Emergent blogger describes how conferences to him were a virtual “life-saver”, since he had no local Emergent community.

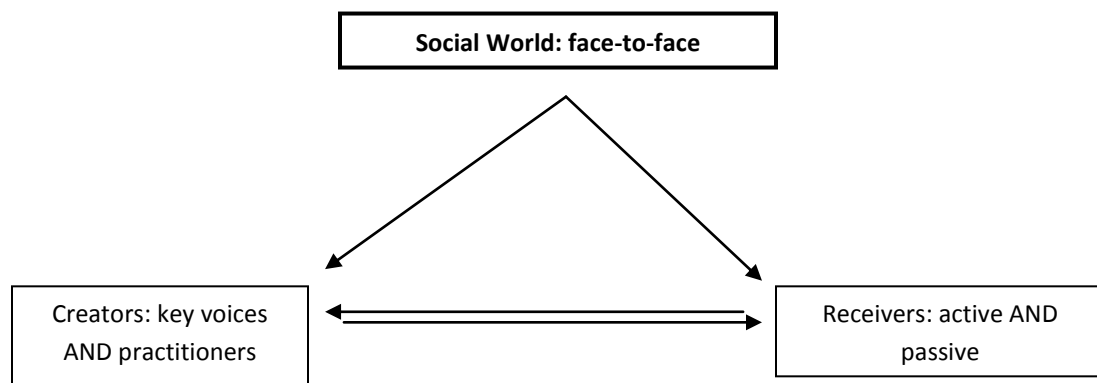
Conferences are significant because while connections are established and acquaintances are fostered online, the face-to-face interactions at conferences are where relationships are solidified and personal networks are forged or strengthened. Gatherings are also the intersection points for people sharing about their respective Emergent projects, whether it is a new church plant, an existing cohort, or a social justice mission. I talked to one couple who were co-pastors of a church plant in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. I had not met them before at previous conferences. They told me about how their Emergent faith community was receiving support from a conservative denomination, but that they were not able to be open about their association with the denomination because the denomination did not want any connection with Emergent. Stories and experiences like these are traded at conferences, friendships are forged, and

support groups are formed that turn into relationships that carry on beyond the conference.

Conferences are also where I saw a range of people from different faith traditions, Evangelicals, Mainliners, even Pentecostals and Catholics engaging with the Emerging Church, *and* engaging each other. You also see a diversity of people who are putting to practice emergent ideas in different ways: some from a perspective that is anti-denominational, while others are operating within their established faith tradition, interacting with those who are making emergent groups happen without authority or leadership. I talked to one Mainline Pastor who told me he saw in the Emerging Church the opportunity for Evangelicals and Mainliners to cross paths and learn from each other, indicating another way that social worlds can connect.

Conferences are also where “well-known” Emergent figures interact with their readership. Emergent authors like McLaren, Jones and Pagitt are typically accessible to anyone who wants to talk to them during conferences. In my first time hearing Brian McLaren speak, I was able to talk to him and get contacts of people he knew in Malaysia and Singapore who were in tune with Emergent ideas. This eventually led me to become part a “postmodern reading group” in Singapore that hosted a talk that I gave on the Emerging Church and postmodernism. During the Transform gathering in Washington D.C., I talked to an individual who had flown in from Malaysia to the U.S. just for the conference. In particular, he was an avid reader of Emergent author Peter Rollins. On the last day of the conference, I was with a group of about 10 people that went out for

dinner together. Peter Rollins subsequently joined us. I was sitting right next to Rollins, and decided to switch places with the person from Malaysia, since I knew he was a “fan” of Rollins. Talking to this person later, he told me about how he was very happy that he had gotten the opportunity to discuss some of Rollins’ ideas with him in person. I illustrate this dynamic of how face-to-face social worlds facilitate interactions through Griswold’s culture diamond, where the arrows between creators and receivers go in both directions. In the same way, in chapter 7 on bridge-building, I look at how Emergents foster relationships with critics in face-to-face settings.



**Figure 9: face-to-face social world**

*Social world 2: the discursive social world and intertextual cultural production*

A second category of social world that I see is what I call a “discursive” social world, which I take to be distinct from the first variant of the “face-to-face” social world. The discursive social world consists of ideas and interactions that are not place-specific, unlike face-to-face social worlds. Emergents often acknowledge that with little formal organization, no central governing body or

funding agency, the fact that there is an “Emerging Church Movement”, is in large part due to the opportunity provided by cyberspace for the movement to flourish.

Since the symbolic interactionist approach to cultural production (Hall, Neitz and Battani 2003) emphasizes collective activity and the highlights what boundaries look like in a social world, we need to understand in what ways social media enables collective activity in a way that transcends boundaries imposed by the limitations of older media. The extensive use of social media channels like Facebook and Twitter facilitates the blurring between producers and consumers, creators and receivers. It is not just a question of accessibility to ideas, but the ability that people have to choose *if* and *how* they want to participate. Through a single social media channel like Twitter, users can receive links and be pointed in the direction of Emergent-related content found in blogs, podcasts, and YouTube videos. These same users can then immediately become producers by posting opinions or even forwarding hyperlinks on Twitter. This cyber environment facilitates the production of cultural objects that becomes public and enters the circuit of human discourse (Griswold, 2004: 16).

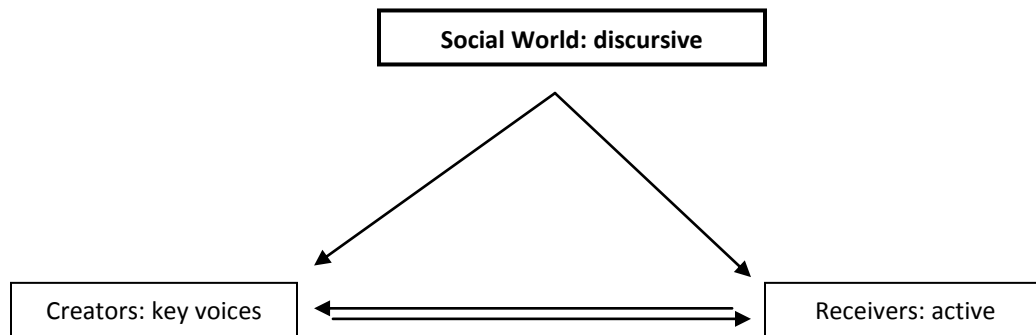
Social media outlets allow for receivers to engage with the movement intertextually. For instance, when Brian McLaren’s latest book, titled *A New Kind of Christianity* was released in February 2010, the blogosphere was already abuzz with reviews and commentaries even before the official release of the book. Even though I ordered the book myself, I did not receive my copy until a few days after the release date, but for weeks in advance, I had already been



reading reviews from amazon.com and from various critics and commentators. I was fed with a regular line of hyperlinks from Twitter that directed me to the latest reviews and posts that were appearing fresh on blogs and websites. Discussions, arguments and counter-points were already being made by participants to these discussions about McLaren's claims. On Twitter and Facebook, Brian McLaren counted down the days to the release of his new book. On theooze.tv podcast, I watched McLaren being interviewed on his book by Spencer Burke. Social media ensured that McLaren's book and some of the arguments for and against it, in the lived religion language, were already "present to my senses" (McGuire 2008), even before I received an actual hard copy of the book.

In addition, discursive social worlds are also fertile sites for interactions across differences. One reason why discursive data is so central to my dissertation is because so much of the interaction with "others" happens in ways I do not see occurring in face-to-face settings. What was really interesting to me was to observe how key voices from the Emerging Church were responding to directly to critics. It was also interesting to read arguments online that would take place between supporters of the movement and those against it. In the process of "arguing", I saw how critics were drawn into cordial relationships which initially started off hostile. I was curious: how did this happen? I was also intrigued by the fact that when key voices respond to criticisms from Evangelical leaders like Albert Mohler and Chuck Colson, these leaders actually respond back. These are what led me to consider how discursive social worlds afford opportunities for interaction between creators and receivers that were not reliant on face-to-face

social worlds. Hence, this diagram is similar to the previous. Discursive social worlds afford an opportunity for creators and receivers to interact, hence the bi-directionality of the arrows between them.



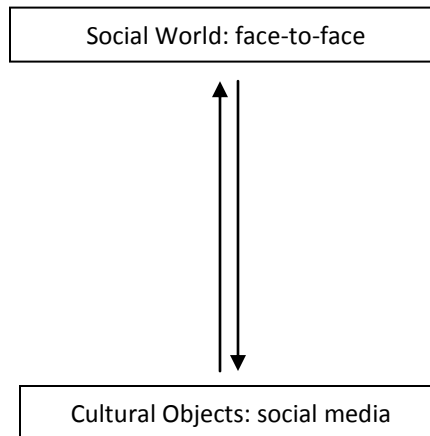
**Figure 10: discursive social world**

In looking for *difference + closeness*, I realized that I was seeing a lot more of it in the discursive social world, than in the face-to-face social world, which is why my data throughout the dissertation is slanted more toward the discursive. But this does not diminish the reality that fostering *difference + closeness* were much more tangible and observable in the discursive social world of online interactions, and back and forth letters between Emergent key voices and their critics. It seemed that in face-to-face social worlds, the dynamics of *difference + closeness* were a lot more elusive, and harder to observe, although my fieldwork did reveal instances where I saw this happen.

## **Relationship between social world and cultural objects**

### *Mutual constitution of social worlds and cultural objects: Conferences as media event*

With the Cultural Diamond heuristic, I gained another insight: I realized that social worlds and cultural objects constitute each other. For instance, at the Christianity21 conference in Minneapolis, many people were online and on their computers during sessions. People were posting comments and quotes by speakers on the conference's Twitter page: #C21. Participants were engaged in a form of cultural production through social media, "telling" of the conference through Twitter. I noticed that through an analysis of tweets from the conference, you could actually construct a relatively coherent understanding of the theme and content of talks. Furthermore, you could always tell which points resonated with people by the number of people reacting to the same statement via their tweets. The face-to-face social world event was generating a collective production of cultural objects focused *on* the conference, in as much as these cultural products constituted the social world by providing "accounts" of what was going on in the conference.



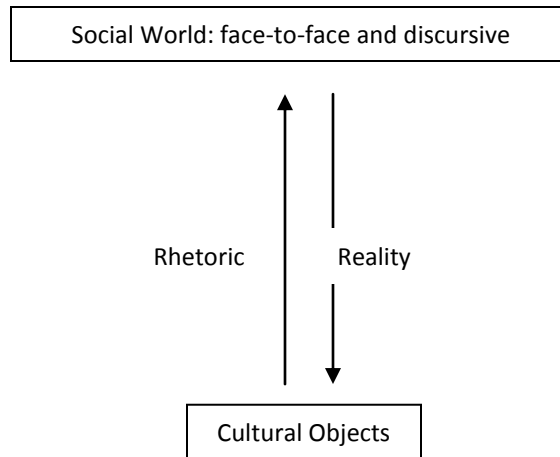
**Figure 11: social worlds and cultural objects co-constitute each other**

Through cultural products that are mediated online, face-to-face social world events are not symbolically sealed, as you have multiple mediated platforms to experience the event a) as it happens through talks, and b) as people experience and narrate it through social media channels like Twitter. This shows how dimensions of religious life are lived and experienced through social media and the internet, and the kinds of practices afforded to people using these mediums to communicate and express themselves discursively (Ammerman 2007, McGuire 2008). This is instructive of how social media contributes to a more multi-faceted cultural production, which blurs distinctions between “producer” and “consumer”, and in fact enables individuals to simultaneously be both.

*The rhetoric and reality of cultural objects versus social worlds*

Another important aspect of the social world we have to consider is whether the movement lives up to its ideals. While cultural products give us a sense of what the movement preaches “in theory”, it is when we look at actual social worlds (both face-to-face and discursive) that we can get an idea of whether they live up to the rhetoric that they preach. This tells us that we cannot take the claims of the movement at face value. Social worlds help us verify whether they live up to their claims expressed through cultural products. So for example, despite the rhetoric of inclusiveness, what kinds of diversity do we see at face-to-face meetings? So the ideals and aspirations to be an inclusive and open “conversation” are met with the reality of a largely white, middle-class educated audience at many of the Emerging Church conferences I attended.

Discursive aspirations of inclusivity and diversity meet on-the-ground realities of homogeneity along social lines. So the diagram below illustrates how cultural objects argue for what the “ideals” should be, but whether Emerging Church social worlds reflect that rhetoric is a totally different question; hence the broken arrow.



**Figure 12: rhetoric and reality between cultural objects and social worlds**

Hence in chapters 6 and 7, I take on this question of whether the movement lives up to its rhetoric of being inclusive (chapter 6), and whether it is successful in building relational bridges with diverse “others” (chapter 7). Similarly, in chapter 8 on postmodernism, I look at whether the movement lives up to its claims about how things should be done in a postmodern world, assessing whether they really live up to the ideals of postmodern praxis.

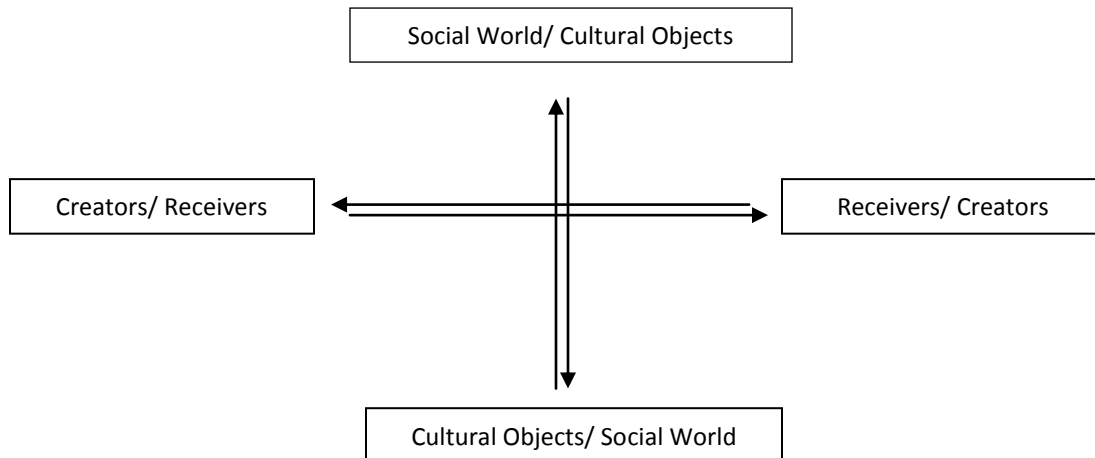
*Summary: Social world as “encounter” space*

I summarize this chapter by arguing that the Emerging Church is an “encounter” space that facilitates boundary-crossings between creators and receivers, and where absolute boundaries between social world and cultural products are transcended. According to Anna Tsing, “encounters” are productive interactions that occurs when diverse groups bring differing and sometimes even clashing ideas on a single issue. She argues that there are genuine productive

tension in “encounters” that occur across difference. Tsing seeks out sites which are fertile for encounter: where one finds collaboration without consensus or collaboration with “friction” at its heart (Tsing 2005: 246). She looks for where there is a loose form of solidarity and “working together” but not necessarily homogeneity or agreement (2005:245). It seems like the Emerging Church is such a fertile site for “encounter”.

It is important to qualify that no single dimension of the Cultural Diamond accounts for why the social world facilitates encounter. Creators alone do not create encounter. For example, key voices who talk about *difference + closeness* do not by themselves make those interactions happen. Similarly, cultural objects alone do not produce encounter. While it is true that the movement has no hard boundaries based on creed or shared beliefs; and its core ideas are about transcending theological and relational boundaries, good “ideas” alone do not bring people together.

*It is in the unique relationships between creators and receivers, between cultural objects and social worlds that taken collectively produces encounter.* In the social world of the Emerging Church, the relationship between creators and receivers is dynamic. This blurring of distinction between creator and receiver, and the dynamic interaction between them, has to do with the interactional possibilities provided for by the discursive social world. The discursive social world provides the *enabling context* for such interactions. Hence, in my illustration below, creators and receivers are in dynamic interrelationship with each other.



**Figure 13: The Emerging Church as “Encounter” space**

In similar fashion, the boundaries between social worlds and cultural products are also highly fluid to facilitate encounter. This is in part due to cyberspace being simultaneously a context or a “social world”, and a tool that facilitates cultural production. So it is hard, if not impossible, to draw a clean line between cultural objects and social worlds. One good example is how critics, who publish criticisms of the Emerging Church online, while they might intend for their writing to be cultural products, they in fact have no control over how their writings come to constitute the social world when their writings enter the circuit of human discourse. The point I am trying to make echoes the familiar saying “bad publicity is still publicity”, or that “there’s no such thing as bad press”. In the same way, negative criticism leveled at the Emerging Church (cultural products) ultimately contributes to its discursive constitution (social world). Hence *“encounter” connotes a social world where individuals are not always necessarily aware of the extent of their contribution to that given social world.*



So in the above diagram on the Cultural Diamond, I have depicted how for the Emerging Church, cultural objects and social worlds are again not on separate sides, but are on both. The way that cultural objects and social worlds co-constitute each other, facilitates drawing in diverse people into the social world of the Emerging Church. This is why besides their critics the Emerging Church has come to involve both Mainline and Evangelical Christian groups, atheists and agnostics, as well as with Muslim and Jewish groups. Those with social justice agendas, interfaith agendas and those pushing LGBTQ reform in the church have similarly found a “home” in the Emerging Church Movement.

Organizationally, it is loosely coordinated rather than tightly and deliberately managed. It is made of connections between individuals and groups with extremely porous boundaries, and with little or no identity gate-keeping. Dualistic designations like “insider” versus “outsider”, or “member” versus “non-member” make little sense in the social world of the Emerging Church. Encounter is at the heart of the Emerging Church, since Tsing says that one of the best places to look for friction is, “in the formation of collaborative objects, which draw groups into common projects at the same time as they allow them to maintain separate agendas” (Tsing 2005:246).

In the next chapter, I look at how the Emerging Church Movement cognitively “maps” their relationships with diverse others.

## **Chapter 5 Mapping boundaries and borderlands: thoughtfully imagining encounters**

*In this chapter, I analyze how the ECM reflects on and rethinks dichotomous “us versus them”, “insider versus outsider” boundaries. Looking at discourses to observe “thinking in action”, I analyze how they articulate social boundaries that are less rigid, enabling honest encounter and exploration with diverse others: a relational “borderland” of mutual openness. I examine the “maps” they use to think about their relationships with diverse others. This chapter demonstrates how thoughtfulness about boundaries and difference is a necessary precursor for religious institutions to be relationally competent. If institutions draw dichotomous or ethnocentric maps, then what kinds of relationships are possible?*

### **Why mapping?**

This chapter captures how the Emerging Church thinks about its relationships to others through the practices of “mapping”. Since my overall project seeks to elucidate a very particular combination of *difference + closeness*, mapping was an important initial step in me trying to understand just how the movement goes about accomplishing this. The map metaphor helped sensitize me to boundary issues the movement was dealing with on many fronts. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Emerging Church Movement seeks the rethinking of dichotomous boundaries like Christian/non-Christian, saved/unsaved, holy/unholy etc., what they see as a highly problematic ways of framing “us” and “them”. Since I became interested in the Emerging Church, I have seen how the movement constantly talks about its relationship to other Christian groups, other religions, and other “movements”. Given that the movement’s core ideas in the previous chapter are on “reframing”, “relationality”

and “reflexivity” (chapter 4), the collective activity of “mapping”, in fact combines characteristics of all these three core ideas. Through mapping diverse relationships, they are attempting to reframe us versus them dichotomous boundaries and foster relationships across difference. In doing so, they practice being reflexive about their place in the wider social world. So mapping is an important starting point of my analysis on the cultural practices of the Emerging Church.

Cultural cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel asserts that the map metaphor captures an enduring feature of human cognition, in how people locate groups that are socially near or far from them in their own minds (Zerubavel 1991). Maps also structure our perception of reality. At times, the maps we carry in our heads are more real than the actual terrain on the ground, or that maps enable us to mentally “discover” some new territory even though we have never physically been there (Smith 1978, Zerubavel 1992). It is important then, to establish the theoretical significance of mapping, to see what questions it can address, and what answers it promises.

### **Theoretical basis for maps and mapping: cognition and culture**

Social cognition theorists assert that as humans, cognitive schemas help make the world coherent for us under conditions of incomplete information. We rely on approximations and representations of “how things are” in the world. Schemas are essentially a kind “map” in our mind, since as DiMaggio explains, schemas are “knowledge structures that represent objects or events and provide

default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, and entailments (DiMaggio 1997:269). Hence we carry around in our heads all sorts of mental maps about things in the world, despite our lack of perfect information. But these mental approximations of the social world do not come out of nothing.

Since we are always part of what Eviatar Zerubavel describes as “thought communities”, our perception of the world and where things belong, is always filtered through a social lens. (Zerubavel 1992:70) Zerubavel highlights that we share with likeminded others a common vision of how things in the world are either similar or dissimilar, and establish that certain thing should be kept apart (or brought together) based on this perception. This then, is a “mental cartography” of our fundamental social categories, which is indispensable for understanding the underlying structure of the world (Foster 1996, Zerubavel 1996). Mental cartography can also pertain to how we perceive some things but completely miss out on other things in our environment. As Wayne Brekhus notes, “Just as we visually highlight some physical contours and ignore others, we mentally foreground certain contours of our social landscape while disattending to others” (Brekhus 1998:35).

But this classificatory impulse is not just applied to “things” in the world. In fact, in order for groups to establish a distinct identity for themselves, to perceive fundamental differences between “us” and “them”, we exaggerate in our minds the mental divides that separate us from other people (Zerubavel 1996). In other words, in the mental maps that we make of the social world, we lump and split people according to our perception of where they fit in relation to us: whether

they are similar and hence “closer” to us, or whether they are different and should hence be considered “distinct”, separate or “cut off” from us. Social cognition theorists establish the complex way we map our world, and construct distinct and tightly bounded identities for ourselves based on these maps.

Through concepts like “rigid-mindedness” and “fuzzy-mindedness” (Zerubavel 1995), we hypothesize how certain groups construct, timeless, clear-cut maps that are not subject to revision. For the rigid-minded, there is a dogmatic correspondence between the map and reality, with the map being literally indistinguishable from the actual territory. While for the fuzzy-minded, maps are still contingent representations that while, useful are subject to revision. They entertain the suspicion that distinctions are not as “clear cut” as they might seem on the map.

But mapping is also as much a question of culture and practices as it is one of cognition and comprehension. Cultural sociologists like Bourdieu and Lamont theorize on how subjective elements of taste and aesthetics, construct for individuals a hierarchy of inferiority and superiority that is based on cultural practices and consumption patterns of music, food and art, etc. (Bourdieu 1984, Lamont 1992) We can also think of mapping as a cultural practice, where instead of focusing on what is on the object “map”, our focus is rather on “mapping” as a verb, as an action word. In this conceptualization, mapping is the often collaborative process of actively marking out the social terrain, charting out territories and making sense of different social groups that occupy those territories and figuring out how to relate to others. “Mapping” is ostensibly staking

one's claim to certain territories and identifying allies, and positioning oneself politically in relation to others.

This sense of “mapping” as a verb, instead of “map” as an object, is something that has been taken on too, by sociologists of religion. Eliasoph and Lichterman note that religious groups act in ways that cohere with a group's imagined map, and strategize their actions and affiliations to stay on as much as possible on the “good” side of the map (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003: 763). In fact, Eliasoph and Lichterman point to the importance of methodologically paying attention to the “mapping” of group boundaries: or the way groups position their tangible interactions in relation to broader, less tangible social maps (2003:778). In “Religion and the Construction of Civic Identity” (2008) Lichterman puts mapping front and center in his discussion of how religious groups can resolve conflicts and work across difference with other groups by redrawing identities and relationships: a process he calls “mapping”, which brings together insights from interactionism, cultural sociology, and the sociology of civic action (Lichterman 2008:85).

*What I paid attention to*

Similar to Lichterman, in this analysis, my goal is to pay attention to “language” and the resulting “identity work” that is expressed through “how people use words and gestures collectively and individually to articulate who they are and are not... which they and others can then recognize and evaluate (Lichterman 2008:85). In this chapter, I take on Lichterman's call to “listen to

mapping as it happens” (2008:86). While Lichterman paid attention to mapping as it occurred in face-to-face interactions in physical settings, I pay attention to mapping as it occurs discursively, through books and publications coming from the movement, as well as online environments like blogs and websites. I also include data where “talk” of maps and mapping appeared in my interviews.

So instead of visual maps, that we are more used to, I am dealing with conceptual maps. Instead of familiar visual aspects of maps that include pictures, colors, images and symbols, I looked specifically for “mapping talk” expressed through ideas, language and concepts. I operationalized mapping by tuning in to where the Emerging Church talked about themselves in relation to other groups. I describe this as discourses that talk about “where we are” in relation to “others”. I focused on reflexive talk of how people from the movement saw how they “fit into the bigger picture”, or the larger scheme of things. In looking for mapping practices, I was able to find data where individuals in the movement were diagrammatically “mapping” itself in relation to others symbolically through Venn diagrams and other types of diagrammatical drawings. These “cultural objects” proved useful for my analysis, as they helped me verify what I was hearing in “talk”, as we will see further on in this chapter.

### *Types of maps*

In my fieldwork with the movement, and subsequently through my analysis of the data, I was able to distinguish between three broad categories of mapping. The three most prominent are, 1) the Christianity in America map, 2) the interfaith

map, and 3) the global Christianity map. As all these types of mapping will feature in my subsequent analysis, here, I would like to just briefly describe these three types of mapping and how they relate to the Emerging Church.

*Type 1 map: The Christianity in America map*

The Emerging Church attempts to situate itself in relation to the broader religious landscape of established institutions and denominations. They are primarily concerned with the history of sectarianism and divisiveness between denominations that defines Protestant Christianity. The Emerging Church articulates that it seeks not to be “another slice of the Christian pie”. The movement, in aspiring not to be a “movement”, also has no aspirations to become another denomination. It seeks not to be another distinct entity or territory on the map of American Christianity. Emergent Village articulates a “commitment to the church in all its forms” and sees that every form of church “has both strengths and weaknesses, both liabilities and potential”.<sup>10</sup> They are sensitized toward the polarizing maps that divide “liberals” against “conservatives”, “mainliners” versus “evangelicals”, and seek an alternative basis of mapping that does is not couched in binaries or dualisms. They seek to address the lack of consensus and do something about how Christian groups traditionally do not work together, resulting in a failure to mutually draw from the strengths of every denomination. Similarly, they seek to map how other groups

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/values-and-practices>, “values and practices, published date unknown, accessed 08/06/2010.



have tended to be marginalized by institutional Christianity, like minorities along race, class, gender and sexual orientation.

*Type 2 map: The interfaith map*

The movement is deeply concerned with interfaith issues. At the heart of interfaith mapping, they are concerned with how Christians “otherize” people of non-Christian faiths, including atheists and agnostics. They see that Christians have traditionally mapped the religious other as either being in alien/ enemy territory, which 1) then is a no-go danger zone for fear that Christians will be “taken”, or 2) is an area on the map that must be conquered and colonized, so that the religious “other” will either disappear off the map (conquest) or be assimilated into Christianity (colonized). The Emerging Church seeks to draw an interfaith map, where Christians perhaps can see religious others as friendly territory, as “neighbors” of a different faith that Christians can get along with, and perhaps even learn from.

*Type 3 map: the global Christianity map*

The Emerging Church is sensitive to the ways that Christianity in the West, and particularly in the United States, has tended to perceive that it occupies the center in the map of global Christianity. For the Emerging Church, the Western Church needs to be “decentered”. The Eurocentric version of Christianity needs to be replaced with a global view of Christianity. Translating this to the Emerging Church, the movement always highlights how Christians (and the Emerging Church) needs to pay attention to non-western, non-white

voices of Christians from other parts of the world. The Emerging Church needs to identify itself as merely *one* expression of the Emerging Church, and not *the* expression. Global mapping sensitizes the Emerging Church to how they think that the landscape of global Christianity has changed.

### **Mapping as cultural practice to aid reflexivity**

In this section, I show how through mapping, the Emerging Church turns a critical lens on itself in order to practice reflexivity. Hence, the type of mapping featured in this section, is the type 1, “Christianity in America” map that I described above. In this section, I raise two examples of how the movement engages in reflexivity through mapping practices. The first example centers on an article posted on the Emergent Village website, in it, the author asks: where does the Emerging Church fit into the Christian tribes? What followed was a robust discussion that produced 22 responses to the original post. The second example, centers on Emergent author Tony Jones, who was reflecting on an Emergent event that he had organized. In his reflection, he was assessing whether the people they invited to speak at the conference were “representative” of a broad spectrum of Christian groups in America.

#### *Reflexive mapping 1: Who are we engaging?*

This first example of mapping is typified in the question: *who are we engaging in the Emerging Church conversation and who are we not?* The Emergent Village article, titled “Where does Emergence fit in the Christian tribes” was authored by an Emergent identifier named Gideon Addington. The editor

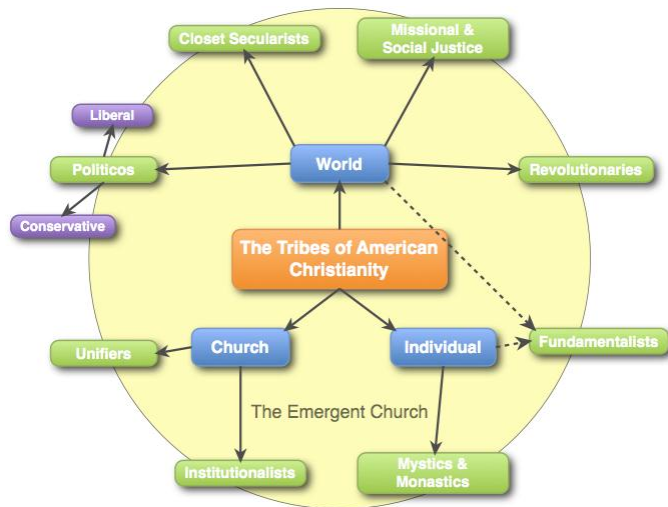
introducing the post notes that it, “addresses a fundamental question that we’ve been wrestling with... who is “in” and who is “out”? Why do some feel like “outsiders” to the emergent church movement (and to Emergent Village, specifically), while others don’t”?<sup>11</sup>

The author draws a big “circle” that represented the Emerging Church, and maps the location of different “tribes of Christianity”, outside or partially located within the big circle that represented the Emerging Church. Altogether, there are 8 different “tribes of Christianity”: 1) Missional and Social Justice, 2) Revolutionaries, 3) Fundamentalists, 4) Mystics and Monastics, 5) Institutionalists, 6) Unifiers, 7) Politicos and 8) Closet secularist. In the article itself, the author does not provide any definition of these eight tribes, but for my purposes, this omission does not hinder the analysis.

In the first diagram (below) he depicts what he thinks is the “ideal” scenario. He notes in the post that while ideally all the stated groups should be located within the circle to denote an engagement with the Emerging Church, he notes that “the mark of the ideal is almost always missed” and in reality many of these groups stand outside the circle that represents the Emerging Church.

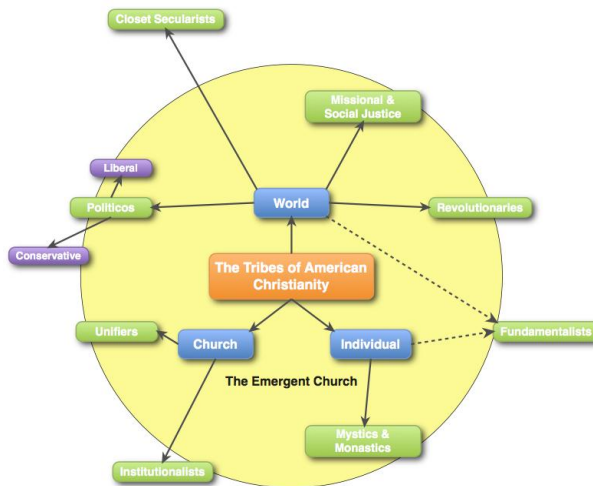
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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “where does emergence fit in the Christian tribes” by Gideon Addington, posted 08/25/2009, accessed 07/30/2010.



**Figure 1: The ideal**

In the second diagram below, he shows which groups in particular are “outside” of the circle that depicts the Emerging Church. In particular he notes four groups that are either outside of the circle, or are just barely in it. These four groups are 1) Closet secularists, 2) Fundamentalists, 3) Institutionalists, and 4) Conservative Politicos.



**Figure 2: The reality**

The author notes at the end of the post that the whole purpose of these diagrams was to help facilitate the Emerging Church Movement to be reflexive: *“I think we need to take a long look at who is being left out of our conversation, and how we might better invite them in if it is at all possible”*. What followed the post was a robust discussion by different voices (both supporters and critics) that raised questions about the way the map was drawn, what terms were used and why some groups were located where they were.

Keeping in mind my “social world” discussion in chapter, 4, the diagrams then, are the “cultural objects” that were created and posted online, which stimulated a discussion that involved identifiers, Emergent practitioners and critics of the movement, who through the internet, collectively engaged in a collective “cultural production” of ideas and opinions about “who’s in and who’s out”. This is another example of how cultural objects and social worlds mutually constitute each other that I discussed in the previous chapter. The “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) that ensued saw the author interacting with identifiers and critics, as they discussed why some groups were more engaged with the Emerging Church than others. Some critics criticized the movement for not being inclusive enough. Simultaneously “identifiers” made efforts to incorporate the opinions of its critics into the mapping exercise. Identifiers thanked critics for their perspective, and affirmed that their voices were needed. For instance, one Emergent identifier replied to a critic saying,

“Your critiques are very helpful, because they help us to see our “blind spots”... when our desire for “radical inclusiveness” comes off as hyperbole and superiority, then we need to pay attention and humbly thank you for pointing out our weaknesses”<sup>12</sup>

To which the critic replied,

“I was so encouraged by Steve’s generous response. Any person who serves the Savior is a friend of mine and the fact soooo transcends any of our differences.”<sup>13</sup>

I discuss this in more detail the next chapter, chapter 6, in the section on how the movement practices inclusiveness by engaging their critics to be “reflexive together”. Through the discussion, and through dealing with criticism, the author says all the input, both positive and negative, is useful feedback. The author notes, that “any typology will be faulty: prone to leaving things out, and touching upon the biases inherent in the person that made such a thing.” The author further says, “I actually asked for response regarding what biases I might be demonstrating in the original post”, showing a personal expressions of reflexivity in this example of group reflexivity.

In all, this mapping exercise is a prime example of how the movement attempts to locate itself in relation to other Christian groups in America. This is a more lucid example, with diagrams included. But other instances of “mapping” though less elaborate, are still expressed and captured in talk that I observed in other interactions. It is also instructive of the “interactions across difference” that take place in the discursive social world that might not perhaps occur in face-to-

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “where does emergence fit in the Christian tribes?” response 10, posted 08/29/2009, accessed 08/06/2010.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “where does emergence fit in the Christian tribes?” response 19, posted 08/29/2009, accessed 08/06/2010.

face encounters, emphasizing again the importance of the discursive social world. The diagrams appropriately represent how the movement seeks to engage, and be relevant to as many of the Christian tribes in America as possible, and the interactional dimension both illustrates and represents their seriousness about including critics in the conversation.

*Reflexive mapping 2: who did we give a voice to?*

I saw the practice of another kind of reflexivity, asking: *who did we give a voice to?* We got a hint of it in the previous example, where the identifier apologized to the critic for the movement failing to live up to its ideals of being “radically inclusive”. While the previous example focused on a “discursive social world” example of reflexivity, this example looks at an attempt to be reflexive about a “face-to-face social world” event that was organized by the Emerging Church.

The event in question was a Christianity 21 conference that was organized by Emerging Church key voices Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt. The data being analyzed here is a post-event reflection by Tony Jones on his blog, as to whether the people invited to speak at the conference were sufficiently diverse and sufficiently representative of *both* liberals and conservatives. The Christianity 21 conference, which consisted of all women speakers, was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Jones describes how he, Doug Pagitt and two other people involved with organizing the event attempted to “map” the speakers who had already been invited:

We made a chart with two axes on a large piece of paper, thus dividing the paper into four quadrants. One axis was "practitioner - theorist" and the other was "liberal - conservative." We then took our best guess on all 21 of the presenters, and placed them along the axes. *We were pleased to see that we had representation in all four quadrants.*<sup>14</sup>

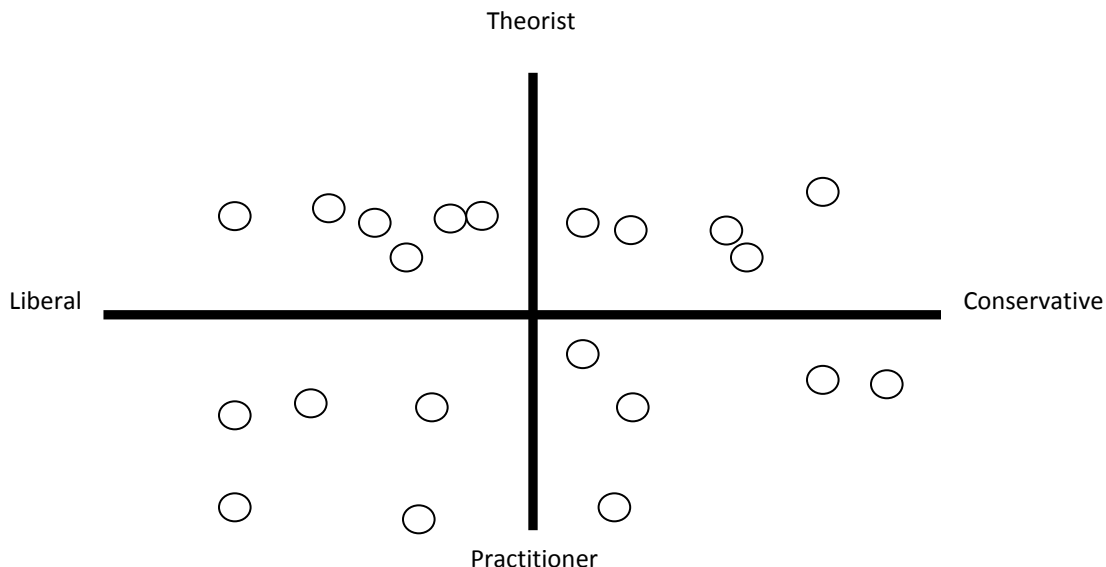
In this example, mapping was done with a vertical and horizontal axis. It was an exercise to see where the already-invited speakers might fit within the four quadrants produced by the two axes. Jones went on to reflect on how untypical it was to find both conservatives and liberals sharing the same stage. This comparison provided the basis for Tony Jones to conclude that the conference had created a "convergence space" not typically found on American Christianities polarizing maps that divide liberals and conservatives. Jones further notes, "and this got me thinking about how rare it is that among the most liberal Christian leaders (think GLBTQ supporters) and the conservative evangelicals (think Willow Creek) share the stage. In fact, it got me to wondering if there are 21 men out there who would even accept an invitation like this."<sup>15</sup> While in the blog post, Jones did not provide the actual chart, from his description, I thought the chart he described might look something like this:

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<sup>14</sup> <http://blog.beliefnet.com/tonyjones/2009/10/looking-back-on-christianity21.html>, posted 10/16/2009, date accessed 07/27/2010.

<sup>15</sup> <http://blog.beliefnet.com/tonyjones/2009/10/looking-back-on-christianity21.html>, posted 10/16/2009, date accessed 07/27/2010.





**Figure 3: hypothetical diagram of “who spoke at Christianity 21”**

In chapter 4 on the social world of the Emerging Church, in my section on “the rhetoric and reality of cultural objects versus social worlds”, I discussed how cultural objects were crucial in assessing whether the movement lived up to its ideals. In similar fashion, this “cultural object” (blog post) produced by Tony Jones, shows a self-reflexive attempt to assess whether the “face-to-face social world” Christianity 21 event lived up to the movement’s rhetoric of being “inclusive”. It must be noted that by inviting only women speakers, the conference was already being “radically inclusive” along lines of gender. This exercise in reflexivity, however, sought to assess whether the event featured speakers, both theorists and practitioners, who were along the liberal conservative continuum. This instance of reflexivity showed that the movement was not skewed one way or another, even though critics like Al Mohler have

been quick to publically dismiss the Emerging Church as just another form of liberalism.<sup>16</sup>

Mapping activities in the Emerging Church have taken on various forms. Some reflexive mapping activity is retrospective and seeks to evaluate the degree of inclusiveness based on the amount of diversity in Emergent gatherings, or whether they can identify people who belong to a wide spectrum of locations. The core concern of this kind of mapping is to establish: does the reality match our ideals? The first instance of mapping showed the Emerging Church attempting to map itself in relation to other Christian “tribes” with the purpose of better engaging them. From these two mapping examples, we can see how maps are important to the movement in aiding reflexivity.

I hope that I have showed that mapping is not something that just happens “inside” people’s heads. But we can see here the processes of mapping as a cultural practice, as something that people do both reflexively and intersubjectively in concert with others, as they attempt to figure out the contours of relationships between themselves and other Christian groups in America.

### **Battles over the map**

My research has also shown me a significant pattern in the kinds of discursive “contests” or battles that the Emerging Church Movement has engaged in with observers and critics, over *how* to map and *who* to map. By paying attention to these battles, we can learn much about the processual nature

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV6uxCch7oc>, “Let’s talk Post-Modernism and the Emergent Church” posted 11/17/2007, accessed 08/06/2010.

of mapping, and we can see how the “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) operates in the process of mapping. Since I am utilizing the metaphor of “battle”, I would like to extend the metaphor and divide my discussion into 1) offensive and 2) defensive types of mapping strategies and mapping interactions.

*1. Offensive mapping: critiquing and deconstructing existing maps*

The Emerging Church critiques the polarizing and dichotomizing maps that are often drawn by Christian groups. They take issue with the conservative impulse to draw clear-cut and dichotomous maps, to carve “distinct islands of meaning” (Zerubavel 1997:54) around labels like “saved” and “unsaved”. The Emerging Church also points to the kinds of ethnocentric drawing of maps that where Christians think that they are ostensibly the “center” of the world. In my previous section, I looked at how the movement deals with a type 1 map: the Christianity in America map. To raise a concrete example of offensive mapping in this section, I look at it with reference to a type 2 map: the interreligious map.

What interfaith maps do the Emerging Church Movement critique and deconstruct? In their article on “Atheist as other”, Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann (2006) give us a flavor of how people of faith draw “maps” in relation to atheists. Their findings tell us, for many Christians in America, atheists are perceived as less trustworthy and less moral than themselves or any other religious adherents. Many Christians either do not perceive atheists to even be on the same map as people of faith. Even if they are “on the map”, there are distinct and unbridgeable divides between people of faith and atheists.

Although the authors do not use the language of mapping, we can interpret their findings through the mapping metaphor. Essentially, Christians cannot see themselves sharing the same “location” on their map as atheists, because this threatens the boundedness of the Christian identity. The proximate location of religious “others” like atheists and Muslims then becomes highly problematic to those who draw maps that are absolute and dichotomous, to those who map out the territories distinctly and unequivocally.

In the framework of the mapping metaphor, the Emerging Church Movement perceives the construction of absolute boundaries and distinctions between Christian groups and other religions, as a deterministic modernist impulse to place people into neat boxes. To sustain a well-ordered reality, “ins” and “outs” are well-defined, and “orthodoxy” and “heresy” are clearly identified (McLaren 2001). When such clear-cut maps are drawn, it creates a virtual “safe-space” where religious others are categorically placed “outside” the boundary-line. The language and concepts from the movement seek to subvert this whole basis of mapping “insider” from “outsider”. Emergent thinker Samir Selmanovic, who has written a book on interfaith relationships, endorsed by Karen Armstrong, demonstrates one telling example of how this “insider” and “outsider” is subverted. He writes,

For God to create human beings to die in order to show the consequences of life outside Judaism, Christianity, or Islam is incompatible with the core teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. To think of God as favoring any human group would be simply un-Jewish, un-Christian, un-Muslim. A god would take a place of One God. *If God is not on the outside of our religions, whatever is inside is meaningless. Without God on the outside, the inside crumbles* (Selmanovic 2009:11-12).

Selmanovic's quote represents how the Emerging Church seeks to subvert the binary of inside and outside. In addition to deconstructing the division, Emergents further critique the "safe-zone" of the "inside", with Christians not seeing the need to engage or commune with religious others since they stand completely "outside" the one true faith. This was succinctly depicted in a cartoon that I picked up from my fieldwork, by a blogger going by the online moniker "Naked Pastor".<sup>17</sup>



For Selmanovic, he is arguing that *both* other religions and atheists should not be mapped "outside" of Christianity. In fact, he maps both other religions, and atheists as integral to broader map of Christianity and other faiths. Of people of other faiths, he writes,

Other religions can challenge (or at least help us to see) the idols we create because they expand the whole territory of knowing. They post difficult questions we don't want to ask, make assumptions we don't want to acknowledge or examine, create meaningful arguments against us we don't want to consider, and expose harmful practices we don't want to stop. Where we have created a vacuum of knowledge and virtue through

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.nakedpastor.com/archives/4772>, "Cartoon: the "other"", published 03/10/2010, accessed 07/27/2010.

our own religions, God enters that space through the religions of others – through strangers. When we let them come close and embrace them as our neighbors, they can help us see God’s presence, grace, and care where we cannot see it on our own. (Selmanovic 2009:146)

In similar fashion, for atheists, he writes,

Thus for me atheism is not an enemy of religion but another “rabbi of life.” Atheists are our brothers and sisters, our partners and teachers, necessary and good, in a circle with Jews, Christians, Muslims and people of other religions. They are not to be thought of as guests; they are part of the human household to which we all belong and without whom we would be worse off (Selmanovic 2009:176).

From this example, we can see how this kind of mapping is “offensive” in another sense of the word, where it is deeply offensive to the boundary sensibilities of the kinds of Christians who are adamant that no good can come out of other faiths, and even less so, atheists. What Samir writes exemplifies the offensive mapping in the “discursive social world”. I have seen this translated into praxis in the “face-to-face” social worlds too, where for instance, in a Chicago Emergent gathering an Atheist author was invited to speak.<sup>18</sup> This is a case that I will highlight later in chapter 6 on inclusion. But I wanted to briefly mention this to show that the Emerging Church expresses this mapping of the religious other in discourse, but also attempts to practice it in reality.

In offensive mapping, the Emerging Church seeks to subvert dualisms. They want to transcend saved/ unsaved, insider/ outsider, even liberal/ conservative dualisms. “Bad” maps entrench people in binaries, and hence they see a need to formulate new ways of mapping, or to look “outside” of existing maps. The Emerging Church breaches such either/ or clear-cut distinctions by

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/reflections-on-the-midwest-gathering>, “reflections on the Midwest gathering” posted 08/03/2007, accessed 08/07/2010.

themselves taking up many of these labels. For instance, in the prominent use of the term “heretic” or “heretical” in some Emergent authors’ books, they make the paradoxical point that one has to be a “heretic” to the establish encrusted Christian religion, in order to be faithful followers of the way of Jesus (Rollins 2009, Burke 2006). Similarly, a group closely associated with the Emerging Church, call themselves “Outlaw Preachers”,<sup>19</sup> demonstrating a willingness to be identified with the “outside” instead of the center: a statement of one’s own position on the map of Christianity in America. As Rollins describes, outlaws “live within a system... and aren’t constrained by the laws of the system itself, but who lives differently, with a different set of values and principles, that actually feed back into the main system and transform it.”<sup>20</sup>

## *2. Defensive mapping: defending new maps and new ways of mapping*

The Emerging Church has also had to defend themselves from critics in how they construct maps. For instance, in the post I analyzed previously: “where does emergence fit in the Christian tribes?” the author faced criticism by one commenter for being “presumptuous by making charts of “who’s in and who’s out””,<sup>21</sup> another chimed in, calling the author, “presumptuous, and a bit arrogant”, and that “using broad brush to describe any group... grossly simplifies the discussion.”<sup>22</sup> In another comment, the writer specifically took issue with the use

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.outlawpreachers.com/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.transformnetwork.org/video/pastor-nar-peter-rollins>, “Pastor Nar & Peter Rollins Discuss the Outlaw Preachers at Trans4m”, posted 05/05/2010, accessed 08/08/2010.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “where does emergence fit in the Christian tribes?” response 1, posted 08/29/2009, accessed 08/06/2010.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “where does emergence fit in the Christian tribes?” response 2, posted 08/29/2009, accessed 08/06/2010.

of language, noting “the language is condescending “allowing the fundamentalists to hide in the far corners.” Hiding in the corner? “Allowing”?”<sup>23</sup>

The author responded by clarifying his intention for the diagram to “facilitate contemplation and hopefully conversation”, while a more sympathetic commenter labeled the attempt as “a brain storm session thrown up on the wall”.<sup>24</sup> This situation seemed to boil down to the critics perceiving that the map was *prescriptive* as opposed to *descriptive*, while the author expressed his intent to do the latter. The author further clarifies that “what I’m saying is ‘if this is so, if this is what we imagine it to be... we have to figure out who is being left out, why, and how to change that.” Hence the author argues that this mapping exercise was to provide a tool for the movement to be more inclusive rather than as a statement of exclusion.

Critics, like the website apologeticsindex.org, have called into account various maps the Emerging Church has drawn up in relation to other faiths. For instance, a quote from Brian McLaren that has been much criticized, by apologeticsindex.org, and other “online discernment” websites, he expresses:

I don’t believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu or Jewish contexts ... rather than resolving the paradox via pronouncements on the eternal destiny of people more convinced by or loyal to other religions than ours, we simply move on ... To help Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and everyone else experience life to the full in the way of Jesus. (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 260, 262, 264)

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “where does emergence fit in the Christian tribes?” response 9, posted 08/29/2009, accessed 08/06/2010.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “where does emergence fit in the Christian tribes?” response 6, posted 08/29/2009, accessed 08/06/2010.



The paradox that Brian McLaren speaks of that is not to be resolved, essentially addresses the impulse for clear-cut maps that pronounce the “eternal” status of people. He marks a distance between “disciples” and “adherents to the Christian religion”, saying that one does not necessarily need to equate to the other. McLaren is arguing for a map where “disciple” does not preclude Buddhists, Hindus or Jews. There is a level of cartographic dissonance that does not sit well with critics as clear boundaries (that should be) have been breached. In addition, instead of seeing Christianity, Islam and Judaism as completely different religions with nothing in common, The Emerging Church emphasizes the shared traditions of monotheistic religions. In their mapping practices, they bridge the divide between what are perceived as “distinct islands of meaning”, aka other religions. Emerging Church conferences have been held with Catholic groups, Jewish groups and have also included atheists as speakers. They espouse the idea that, while yes, there are fundamental differences between us and atheists, or Jews, none-the-less they are not so “alien” to our context that they belong on another stratosphere. Hence theses “others” have a place “on our map”. For the Emerging Church Movement, religious others, including atheists are mapped as “fellow journeyers of a different path” in the bigger scheme of things.

The Emerging Church has engaged in defensive mapping in other ways. This is defensive mapping in a sense of declaring “this is what we are *not*”. They repeatedly emphasize that they are not seeking to be another denomination or institution, preferring “conversation” over “movement”. Their objective is not to stake a territory in the landscape of Christianity in America. They do not want to

be another “slice of the Christian pie”. For the Emerging Church, their objective is not to be a distinct entity that occupies a “new” territory on the map of Christian denominations in America. They hope that their map will inclusively encompass every Christian group, since they hope to serve the church “in all its forms”.<sup>25</sup> I attempt to depict this in a diagram on the Emerging Church as a borderland, later in the chapter.

Yet by being located “everywhere”, instead of on a particular location, according to a conventional mapping category like “denomination”, the movement is envisioned as something diffuse that defies being nailed down. Critics like John Piper, have criticized the Emerging Church for being merely a reactionary movement,<sup>26</sup> since they do not really have a stable organizational form to be identifiable with. In sum, many observers do not quite know where to place the Emerging Church on their own schema of Christian groups in America. To defy categorization is to at once defy being objectively “mapped”, and this has produced mixed results for the Emerging Church Movement. On the one hand, its relatively “open” borders have welcomed a host of different groups to identify with Emergent. On the other hand, people from the movement I interviewed are sometimes themselves dissatisfied with the lack of a consistent and coherent message that would give the movement more shape and form.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/values-and-practices>, “values and practices, published date unknown, accessed 08/06/2010.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkGq5A4QEjg>, “John Piper – The Emergent Church”, posted 03/24/2010, accessed 07/08/2010.

## Collaborative Cartography

As I have previously emphasized, pondering maps is not just a purely cognitive exercise. It is useful to extend the mapping metaphor to consider “cartography”, which is the study and practice of making maps so that spatial information is communicated effectively. In *Terra Cognita*, Eviatar Zerubavel provides the theoretical basis for understanding historically how cartography, and cartographic conventions, shaped the way the world was viewed in terms of territories and boundaries (Zerubavel 1992). This section discusses map-making as a social activity; as a collaborative exercise. Mapping is not limited to an exercise in “thinking together” like I have discussed in previous sections. Mapping is also a means by which people in the Emerging Church locate each other geographically, in time and space.

### *Collaborative cartography 1: from discursive to face-to-face social world*

A clear example of collaborative mapping is a Google map generated by an individual from Emergent Village, designed to help people “find each other”. Mike Clawson, a member of the Emergent Village coordinating team, initially published on his blog site a post titled “Where in the World is the Emerging Church?” in June of 2009.<sup>27</sup> He explained how he created of a Google map that would show where people engaged in the Emerging Church conversation were located. The map was created in such a way that enabled people to map themselves as individuals, or their Emerging Church congregations, cohorts or

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<sup>27</sup> <http://emergingpensees.blogspot.com/2009/06/where-in-world-is-church-emerging.html>, posted 06/08/2009, accessed 08/07/2010.

other meeting groups. As Mike Clawson explains, “we've decided to start by open-sourcing this map, basically letting anyone and everyone who wants to add themselves or their faith community - no gatekeepers or approval system”. Hence the collaborative element was built into the very heart of this cartographic activity.

The purpose of the “Where in the world is the Emerging Church?” Google map, enabled people to map their own geographic locations. As of March 2010, there were over 140 entries that included over 50 cohorts located across the US. When I subsequently interviewed Mike Clawson, he mentioned how a trickle of new entries comes in every few weeks. The purpose of the map was to raise people’s awareness of where they might be situated in relation to other Emergent thinking people. The map was also an “open-source” map, which essentially means, it was open for anyone to edit and add to. While the map is primarily centered on and most entries are densely concentrated on North America, individuals and churches from places like the United Kingdom, the continent of Africa and South America have also located themselves on this map.

When you click on an entry, you will typically find information about when and where a group meets, and how often they meet. You will also invariably find contact information like email addresses, or website URLs. One entry provides an email address contact, along with the descriptive: “Am new to but interested in talking to others about emerging church. Currently initiating new kinds of group dialogues to engage seekers” Another entry reads: “Looking for a cohort/ emergent faith community around Auburn, WA 98XXX.”



### **Where in the world is the Emerging Church? Google map**

While this was a map that was principally constructed along lines of “sameness” (consisting of people who identify with the movement, or who adopt the “Emergent” label), and hence it is not a map that shows the dynamic of *difference + closeness*. Nonetheless, this type of map serves an important function of enabling people in dispersed locations to have a sense of “who else is out there”. And as an original stated intention, the map was to enable people in isolated locations who identified with the movement, to find each other and establish face-to-face relationships. The map enables people to network and also to have a visual sense of what the network looks like and where other people are located. Though merely a representation, it provides a tangible sense of “we-ness” for people engaging with the Emerging Church Movement.

This mapping exercise enabled the Emerging Church to do something collectively that no single individual could have done by himself or herself. This collaborative mapping exercise is significant as it is also symbolic of how the

Emerging Church hopes the movement will gain traction and develop: through an open-source ethic of involvement. One interview respondent located herself as an individual in the Chicago area and explained to me how she wanted to put her name and contact “out there” to connect with other Emergent thinkers in the Chicago area, and that she does attend both Chicago area cohort meetings, as well as an Emergent congregation called Wicker Park Grace, both on occasion. In my interview with her, I noted that she indeed had an adequate sense of the Emerging Church “map” as it pertained to where she was geographically located in the Chicago area.

This example of the Google map raises the issue of how communication technology makes cooperative map-making doable in ways that older technology could not possibly have allowed. It is a new form of interactive map-making, engendering new possibilities of “doing things together”. According to Zerubavel, maps that held sway in Europe and the Americas, while shaping the notion of boundaries, separation and distance between territories were developed “piece by piece over a very long period of time” (Zerubavel 1992:6). With the internet and new communication technology now available, it seems that mapping perhaps can be done much faster. We need to theoretically grasp the significance of mapping that is done in an open-source manner. What happens when individuals actively engage in the cartographic process from independent and varied locations? As I have highlighted in the previous chapter, the Emerging Church as a social world is characterized by how discursive and face-to-face social worlds co-constitute each other. Collaborative cartography is another

example of this dynamic where discursive and face-to-face social worlds are intertwined.

*Collaborative cartography 2: discursive difference + closeness*

Collaborative cartography can be understood as a way for groups to openly consider the nature of their relationships, and work these issues out in the group setting. In collaborative cartography, participants openly question and critique the basis by which individuals draw boundaries and categorize groups on the map. For instance, one commenter to the diagram on the Emerging Church by Gideon Addington asked why the church and the world were “sectioned off in different boxes”. He adds: “shouldn’t the world be a larger box containing all the rest?” In that same comment, this individual also questions the choice of categories by the author, stating,

I don’t understand that categorization. Maybe you should say secular and religious instead of church and world. It seems to me the entire emergent movement is a philosophical rejection of that artificial divide. (Mike L., response 13)

In this quote, we see the challenging of boundaries or an act of separation (between “world” and “church”), and we also see a challenge raised toward the choice of categories (“secular/ religious” instead of “world/ church”) as well as identifying how the Emerging Church is oriented toward rejecting these kinds of artificial divides. It was notable that in this exchange over the Emerging Church and Tribes of Christianity, a commenter named “rick” who initially called into question the intention of the author (to “label and box”), and criticized the use of categories, through this process of clarification and talk, would later change to a

more conciliatory tone. This commenter ended up both agreeing with the use of categories, and acknowledged the merits of the whole mapping process:

Thanks Gideon, I hope I haven't been too harsh. As far as left and right politicians I agree... but yes, their relationship to the emergent conversation may be distant. Thanks for the blog, it's good to talk. (Rick, response 21)

The whole process of critique and response, and clarifying the diagram through this process brought author and observers into a dynamic interaction where they encountered and clarified each others' ideas in order to make the map more meaningful.

This demonstrates the merits of this kind of collaborative cartography across differences, and how those engaged in this kind of interaction might perhaps bridge differences and come to a consensus on how to understand the map. Instead of mapping being a deterministic and prescriptive activity, through talk, it became a collaborative and interactive enterprise that brought author and critic together. This kind of encounter across differences would be harder to observe in the face-to-face social world. But with the tools of technology that promote cultural production in discursive social worlds, it renders these types of interactions possible *and* observable for analysis, as I have done here. In both chapter 6 and 7, I discuss more instances of where the movement has collaborated with critics across differences.

### **Locating Borderlands**

So far in this chapter, I have talked about mapping as both a cognitive activity as well as a practical one. Another way that the Emerging Church seeks

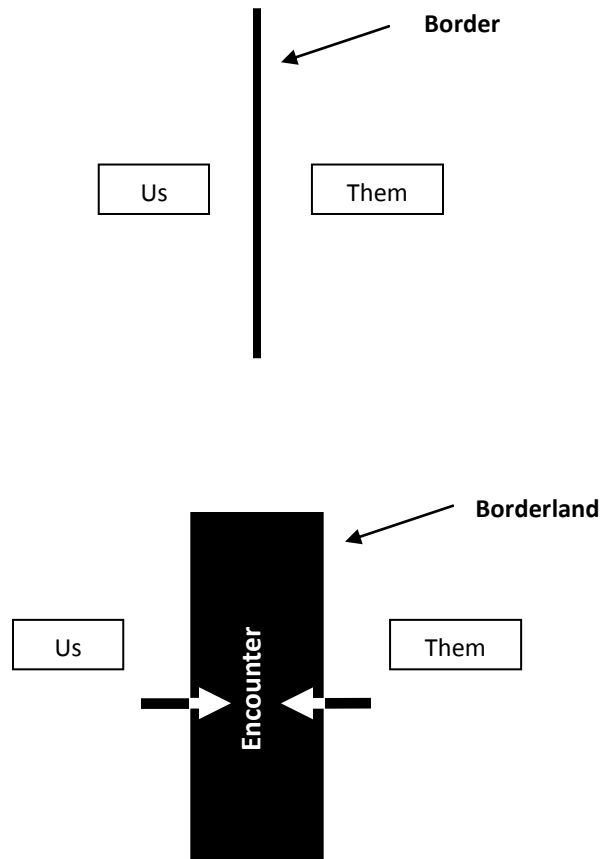


to “do things” with maps in practical ways, is, borrowing a concept from Gloria Anzaldúa, to locate borderlands (1999). However, the notion of “borders” often brings to mind conflict and tension where “lines in the sand” are drawn. As Jeffrey Sacks notes in the award winning *The Dignity of Difference* (2002), this is nowhere more apparent than with religious identities, where “the very process of creating an ‘Us’ involves creating a ‘Them’ – the people not like us. In the very process of creating community within their borders, religions can create conflict across borders (2002:10). Eliasoph and Lichterman also note that mapping borders is crucial to a group’s definition of itself, and does not come *after* identity is constructed, but that establishing borders is in and of itself *constitutive* of identity (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). However, Anzaldúa’s idea of “borderlands” modifies the concept of border to become more than a boundary-line. With an addition of the modifier “land”, the “borderland” becomes a place for encounter rather than just a line that one either crosses or stays on one’s “own side”.

For Mary Jo Neitz, “borderlands” is an important concept for understanding what groups are doing with boundaries, since “it acknowledges the boundaries, but shifts the analysis to look for ways that boundaries are neither static nor unbridgeable.” (Neitz 2009:358). Neitz notes that borderlands are places where different people encounter each other, and where something new can come out of that *encounter*. Speaking of “encounter” then, resonates with Tsing’s conceptualization of “encounter” as I have elaborated in the conclusion of chapter 4, describing the social world of the Emerging Church as

an “encounter space”. We can thus see a conceptual fit between Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” and Tsing’s “encounter” concepts, since borderland denotes a place of “collaboration without consensus” (Tsing 2005:246). A “borderland”, a place where “us” and “them” come together, for Anna Tsing, create an “opening for productive confusion” (Tsing 2005:247). Borderlands are “a place of possibility, or new creation” and denote a “shifting landscape of changing possibilities... where boundaries are unstable, and identities and relationships are in flux” (Neitz 2009:358). Lichterman has also argued that groups often have to engage in the “redrawing of identities and relationship on the map” (Lichterman 2008:84) in the face of conflicting encounters. The borderlands concepts, hence fits appropriately with the mapping metaphor being discussed in this chapter, and simultaneously works with my conceptualization of the Emerging Church as an encounter space.

In the below diagram, I diagrammatically show the difference between a “border” and a “borderland”, and how the latter is a “space” for productive encounters between “us” and “them”.



**Figure 1: Borders versus borderlands**

For the Emerging Church Movement, borderlands are important places of “encounter” with religious others, where taken-for-granted boundaries of separation are suspended for the sake of mutual encounter. In similar fashion to how Neitz describes the centrality of boundaries to borderlands, for the Emerging Church boundaries *are* still necessary, since to not respect or to gloss over boundaries does not respect “the dignity of difference” (Sacks 2002). Hence for the Emerging Church, to locate borderlands, is not a desire to find places where difference can be collapsed into sameness (assimilation). Rather, the intention is

to locate places where proximity is possible, while holding the tension of differences, be it in identity or in particular theological beliefs. Borderlands are hence locations where the delicate tension of *difference + closeness* is possible. An excerpt of my interview with Brian McLaren explains what he thinks are the necessary ingredients that engender a borderland of encounter:

Jesus invites us to love our enemies. To treat everyone, including our enemies, like neighbors. That idea to me is very powerful because he doesn't say "everyone is your friend" or "you have no enemies". To do that is a kind of colonization. But allowing the other to define himself as my enemy, in a sense allows the other to keep his dignity and differentness. But for me to include the person in my circle of concern preserves both otherness and some sense of unity and connectedness. *To me this is what the message of the Kingdom of God does. It invites us into some kind of embrace where you have the distinction of otherness, but also have the connection of relatedness.* (Brian McLaren)

Looking at this quote through the framework of the mapping metaphor, McLaren conceptualizes a potential borderland when an individual maps a religious other "in [their] circle of concern", preserving both the identity and distinctiveness of the other (difference) while also accomplishing "unity and connectedness" (closeness). In my survey of the literature from the movement, as well as my data from blogs, this "talk" of relational borderlands appears very prominently in various forms.

Emergent thinker and author of *Thy Kingdom Connected* (2009), Dwight J. Friesen notes in a contributing article to a multi-author edited work called *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (2007), envisions this "borderland" in the concept "Orthoparadox", or "holding difference rightly". He asks: what would a borderland

look like? What would happen there? And what are the rules of engagement in the borderland? He asserts:

Orthoparadox seeks to hold difference, tensions, otherness, and paradoxes with grace, humility, respect, and curiosity, while simultaneously bringing the fullness of self to the “other” in conversation, not to convert or to convince but with the hope of mutual transformation through interpersonal relationships. (Friesen, 2007:205)

In a relational borderland, the goal of engagement and interaction is not to “conquer” through assimilation, which characterizes much of what we think of as “proselytizing” or “evangelism”, where the goal of establishing *closeness*, is inadvertently to work toward *sameness*: an exercise to enact transformation in the “other”. Instead of assimilation, Friesen proposes the concept of “differentiation”, which according to him is “our ability to live separately from others, without being separated” (2007:206). In the borderlands, instead of seeking to instrumentally, “defeat, debate, condemn or even convert the other” (206), or to insist that someone crosses over the line in the sand and comes over to “your side”, relationships in the borderlands are marked by “mutual exploration, humble submission, deference, and wonder (2007:209). We can interpret this as a commitment for religious others to mutually engage one another in the borderland with sustained and honest contact, instead of merely making forays across the border with the offensive mindset of wanting to “win people over” to one side or the other.

Another prominent Emergent thinker, Samir Selmanovic says in concert with borderlands metaphor, that Christians need to entertain the possibility of “finding our god in the other” (Selmanovic 2007:189). Samir is also founder and

Pastor of Faith House Manhattan, which is a faith collective that houses Christians, Muslims and Jews who worship together as a community. Samir's own collective embodies this idea of a borderland of encounter where difference meets closeness. Elsewhere in his writings, Samir has elucidated how borderlands can produce a "productive tension" when groups enter into disagreement. Selmanovic writes,

When we take a stand and pull the argument in our own direction, *we create an empty space between us, a possibility for the emergence of a truly new idea, an unexpected solution, a way forward.* When we disagree, we pit ourselves against one another. But seeing that all of us humans are in this together, we can learn to disagree for one another. When we disagree against one another destruction or even death results; when we disagree for one another, life happens (Selmanovic 2009:175).

According to Selmanovic, in the borderland of encounter, when groups pull in different directions, then they engender "space" for "something new" to emerge where both will benefit. This is embodied by the paradoxical notion of groups disagreeing *for* one another. Where Tsing notes "encounter" as a "productive confusion" (Tsing 2005:247), Selmanovic voices encounter as "productive disagreement". Both occur in the borderland.

### *The Emerging Church as Borderland*

Emerging Church practitioners, though they do not use the term, orient their actions toward engendering spaces which I find consistent with the notion of "borderlands". Prominent Emergent author Peter Rollins was on an Emerging Church speaking panel in a seminar at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was in this conference that I was first introduced to an idea called "suspended space" that I would later encounter in Rollins' writings. Rollins is also

the founder of an Emerging Church collective in Belfast, Ireland, called Ikon. He is a prominent Emergent writer and sought-after speaker, who is influential in the Emerging Church Movement in America. During the Seminar, Rollins explained how he adopted the term “suspended space” from philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to think about the kind of worship collective that he wanted to form. He described how Ikon meetings are a “suspended space” because individuals symbolically “empty themselves of their identities” and suspend their positionalities when they come for the service.

In a Youtube video that I would later find, Rollins explains in an interview that Ikon tries to,

...create a place in our week, a liturgical hour where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, republican nor democrat, employed nor unemployed, liberal nor conservative, where we can encounter each other at a deeper level.<sup>28</sup>

Rollins expresses the Ikon meetings are purposed to create a participation space where labels do not matter and where people come to converse and decompartmentalized instead of being compartmentalized as labels, hence being perceived through the stereotype of any one identity (e.g. gay, conservative, atheist, etc). In comparison to what Brian McLaren and Dwight Friesen say in the previous section, where a borderland denotes bringing the “fullness” of the other to all interactions, *Ikon* practices suspending identities and positionalities as a way of creating this convergence space. The means and the conceptualizations

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<sup>28</sup>[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sRsOhy\\_WWA&feature=Playlist&p=B9E3E8FF329EB156&playnext=1&playnext\\_from=PL&index=7](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sRsOhy_WWA&feature=Playlist&p=B9E3E8FF329EB156&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=7), “Part 1 – Phyllis Tickle and Peter Rollins discuss Emergence Christianity”, posted 02/09/2009, accessed 07/27/2010.

differ but the intended goal is the same: to promote true encounters across difference, between diverse people, or *difference + closeness*.

In *How (not) to Speak of God* (2006) Rollins underscores how in the borderland of an Ikon service, conversion is not one that is offered “by ‘us’ to ‘them’”, but rather, that everyone in attendance “is a potential implement of our (collective) further conversion. Consequently, the evangelical nature of the community does not resemble a one-way diatribe leading from ‘us’ to ‘them’ but rather embodies a multiple dialogue that moves from one to another” (Rollins 2006:79).

Rollins’ description of Ikon’s attempt to engender “suspended space” here fits the conceptualization of borderlands, since the linear and singular direction “us to them” in conversion encounters is exchanged for a dynamically engaged “multiple dialogue” *conservation* encounter where the intention is that all experience and receive “conversion” from all others in attendance. While a more pointed and in-depth discussion of inclusive practices in the Emerging Church will be fleshed out in the next chapter (chapter 6), this example gives us a flavor of how Emergents approach thinking about difference, where The Emerging Church and their meeting spaces seek to be the “borderland” of encounter they envision.

Other data from my research also indicates that people engaging the movement from their existing faith traditions, see The Emerging Church Movement as a borderland, where regardless of their denominational affiliation,



or specific theological/ doctrinal orientation, they feel both the desire and the safety to “draw near” to others involved with the conversation because they are potentially going to hear something different, and encounter something unexpected, but in a spirit of mutual discovery and learning from what denominational “others” bring to the table.

One prime example comes from an interview I conducted with a Pastor of a Lutheran Church located in the Chicago area. I first met Pastor Fred Nelson at a Chicago area Emergent gathering in 2007, (where he was asked to conduct liturgical services for the entire meeting group) and I later interviewed him in early 2010. Pastor Nelson is a white male in his mid 40s, who received a doctorate prior to entering into ministry. When asked about his involvement with the Emerging Church Movement, he expressed that he saw in the Emerging Church Movement a “convergence” space for Mainliners and Evangelicals to bring the strong points of their traditions together and learn from each other. This was consistent with a similar pattern of responses that I received from various interview subjects who were involved with Emergent from within their existing denominations. Interestingly, later on in the interview, Pastor Nelson expressed a concern that Evangelicals and Mainliners, while “moving toward each other”, might be in danger of “bypassing” each other by adopting each others’ “extremes”. He would later cite an evangelical congregation (also having ties to the Emerging Church Movement) in the Chicago area that had taken a “liturgical turn” in their worship, as an example of adopting extremes. Pastor Nelson, in his own words, and through his hand gestures (bringing his hands together, fingers

pointing to each other, toward the center) mapped the Emerging Church Movement as a borderland of encounter where those who partake in this *difference + closeness* stand to mutually benefit through the encounter.

I have also picked up other instances of people from the movement articulate the Emerging Church as a “borderland”, although using different, but parallel concepts. As my diagram demonstrates above, the Emerging Church envisions itself as a location for a variety of groups to come together across their differences, not just between mainline and evangelical Christians. In fact, the diagram above represents different groups that I have noted in one way or another, are on the scene as part of the Emerging Church Movement. One individual, writing on an Emergent Village article posting, expresses this borderlands concept this way,

One thing I've been thinking about recently is the idea of Emergent Village as a “liminal space” or, to use Peter Rollins terminology, a “suspended space,” where some personal theological positionality is “suspended” or held as “transitional”/“in-between” in order to really listen and engage “the other” in dialogue. We are fully who we are (e.g., evangelical/post-evangelical, Presbyterian, Anglican, etc.), and we allow others to be fully who they are (e.g., Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, etc.). We are all followers of Jesus Christ, part of his body, the Church. And there's an epistemic humility in being willing to enter that “liminal space” and do so in community together—because it's an admission that we each could be wrong, and, even more than that, that we ARE wrong, we just don't know what we're wrong about (yet).<sup>29</sup>

Hence the Emerging Church Movement locates itself as a “borderland” where different groups of people can converge on to encounter each other. This, perhaps, is why there are Luthermergent and Methomergent groups, as there

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/the-circle-of-inclusion>, “The Circle of Inclusion” response 51, posted 06/06/2009, accessed 08/06/2010.

self-identified Queermergents. On the scene, are also Jewish Emergent groups, (which will be the subject of my discussion in chapter 7 on bridge-building), and Muslim groups who identify with the ethos of Emergent. In fact, if there were groups that wanted to call themselves “atheistemergent” or “agnostimergent”, they too would be welcomed by the movement as part of the broader Emergent conversation. I have also heard the idea of “borderlands” being expressed as “temporary autonomous zones”, by Brian McLaren, and as “Liberated Spaces” by Emergent Village board member Eliacin Rosario-Cruz in my interview with him. Hence, there are many ways that people from the Emerging Church attempt to articulate a relational borderland of encounter.

### **Navigational affinity: mapping “others” on a similar journey**

The “mapping” metaphor can also be extended to understand how the Emerging Church thinks about itself, in tandem with other religions, each navigating their respective journey of faith. Instead of drawing dichotomous maps, where religious “others” are perceived as residing in completely alien territory, with nothing in common (difference + farness, instead of difference + closeness) discourses from the movement show significant ways that they map religious “others” as different, but still see them as having common experiences, and hence being able to share experiences that are worth mutually engaging with.

Where previously, I have discussed mapping in terms of cartography, or “map making”, in this section, I discuss the map metaphor in a somewhat

different dimension, in terms of navigation, which connotes travelling and “getting” to places. The Emerging Church imagines themselves in relation to diverse others, not just in terms of “encounters” in borderlands, as I discuss in the previous section. In this section, I analyze how *religious others are mapped in terms of being on a similar journey, though on different paths*. And in the dynamic of different faiths being on similar journeys, Emergents think that there is much to learn from the religious “other”.

Emerging Church discourses often seek to map signs of emergence that are occurring in other faiths. For instance, on emergentvillage.com, there have been several blog postings identifying and discussing an “Emergent Islam”. One particular Emergent Village blog entry picked up on a blog by a Muslim writer, Andrea Useem, who writes of “The Emergent Islam I Want”.<sup>30</sup> Part of the blog post was reproduced, where the author states, “I have also begun to hope for the emergence of a post-modern, post-9/11 Muslim faith life.” The Emerging Church pays attention to this, not as a concern for territory in the way of saying “they are lifting a page from us”, but rather as a way of establishing that people from other faiths are experiencing similar conditions of existence, and are coming face-to-face with the same set of potentially paradigm-shifting questions Emergent Christians are asking.

The same dynamic of navigational affinity can be seen through how the Emerging Church imagines its engagement with Jewish groups. Leaders from

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[http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/07/the\\_emergent\\_islam\\_i\\_want.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/07/the_emergent_islam_i_want.html), “The Emergent Islam I want” by Andrea Useem, published 07/23/2008, accessed 08/07/2010.

Emergent Village had a well-documented and much-publicized meeting with a progressive Jewish group called Synagogue 3000 (or S3K), in 2006. While the significance of these meetings will be discussed in further detail in chapter 7 on bridge-building, how Emergent discourses “talk” about the meaning and significance of these interactions, also contributes to our understanding of the navigational affinity that I am conceptualizing here. A joint press release by Tony Jones and an organizing member of S3K expresses the purpose of the meeting for leaders from both faiths to, “share experiences and exchange ideas about reinventing the meaning and practice of community in their respective faith traditions, *especially for unaffiliated Christians and Jews who are not attracted to conventional congregations.*” This statement voices the orientation toward a navigational affinity based on a shared concern with the future of each faith, particularly toward those who are losing interest with the faith communities. Brian McLaren, who has himself been part of meetings with Synagogue 3000, has noted in his interactions with S3K that, “we (Christians and Jews) face similar problems in the present; we have common hopes for the future, and we draw from shared resources in our heritage”.<sup>31</sup>

By focusing on how other faiths are attempting to “get there” in their own journey, The Emerging Church Movement asks: what questions are people from other faiths asking? What are the common struggles that different faiths share? What contextual and theological issues are other faiths similarly dealing with? How are people of other religions being reflexive about their faith in the same

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<sup>31</sup> [http://www.wnrf.org/cms/emergent\\_jewish\\_christian.shtml](http://www.wnrf.org/cms/emergent_jewish_christian.shtml), “Emergent Jewish and Christian Leaders to meet” by Shawn Landres and Tony Jones, posted 01/03/2006, accessed 27/07/2010.

way that we are? The Emerging Church Movement locates Christianity on a map, which considers what religious others are dealing with as an indication of broader cultural shifts that are not exclusive to what Christian Emergents are facing. As one Emergent blogger, commenting on the Jewish Emergent meeting as an exciting development, attempts to broaden the map by asking:

“I am really interested in whether there are Emergent Muslims too...Anyone out there want to fill us in on some emerging mosques? It’s clear that “emergent” is not just a Christian-fad – but is a much wider and greater phenomenon.”<sup>32</sup>

Emergent Christians adopt the “similar journey” metaphor to map how Muslims and Jews are experiencing the same conditions of existence. The descriptive “postmodern” has been used in talk of both Emergent-style Islam and Judaism. This allows them to say, “We are experiencing very similar cross currents”, and without saying “we are the same”. Hence they identify the *navigational affinity* between Muslims, Christians and Jews, while preserving the distinctive route, path or journey that each faith is attempting to navigate.

### **Theoretical discussion: Towards sociology of the cartographic imagination**

Working on this chapter made me think about the significance of maps and mapping to how religions imagine themselves in relation to religious others. If cartography is generically understood as a “skill” of making maps (which means that one can make “good” or “bad” maps), I would like to use the term to think about “social cartography”, or the good and bad maps that people make to locate themselves and other people. Just as poorly constructed maps can lead to

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<sup>32</sup> <http://pomomusings.com/2006/01/19/christians-jews-discuss-emergent-sacred-communities/>, “Christians & Jews discuss Emergent Sacred Communities”, publishes 01/19/2006, accessed 06/02/2010.

a faulty understand of the physical world, poor social cartography can similarly result in a poor comprehension of the social world. Just as poorly constructed maps will confound the best attempts to navigate and get to places, poor social cartography also disables people from successfully navigating the social world. I am pushing for mapping to be recognized as a type of *cultural competency*, and hence given more serious attention by sociologists and cognitive scientists.

Hence, I would like to argue that as sociologists we need to work toward an understanding of the *cartographic imagination* of religious people. As I conceptualize it, the *cartographic imagination* is the multi-dimensional competency of being able to reasonably categorize and position the self and others. This focus will give us insight into the kinds of relationships they can potentially have with religious others. I believe this conceptualization will contribute to our further understanding of peoples' "non-metric, topological mode of thinking to look at the world" (Zerubavel 1996). My argument is that when people draw maps poorly, or inadequately, this fundamentally impacts the kinds of relationships possible. Conversely when people draw sophisticated and thoughtfully constructed maps of themselves in relation to others, this can bode well for their attempts to have productive relationships with people of other faiths. *Hence, the Cartographic Imagination is a way of discussing mapping as a kind of cultural adequacy or competency*, based on the cultural "toolkit" groups have to engage in the map-making enterprise (Swidler 1986). This can have positive or negative social consequences for people depending on how well they draw their maps.

As a starting point to this theoretical development, I would like to raise two ideal types of cartographic imagination that while being “extreme types”, enable us to think through some important issues related to our theoretical understanding of identity and otherness. The two ideal types are 1) the “simple map” social cartographers” and 2) the “complex map” social cartographers. These two extreme-types are often in conflict with each other over how maps should be drawn.

### 1. *Simple map cartographers*

Simple map social cartographers do not care much for complexity and nuance. They want a simple-to-grasp, omni-map that tells them everything they need to know about the social terrain. Simple map social cartographers, in fact sometimes believe so dogmatically in the maps that they fail to perceive the map as a representation of reality, but in fact may sometimes *mistaken the map for the territory itself* (Jonathan Z. Smith 1978). They believe too dogmatically in their own categories, and those conceptual categories appear to them as self-evident and all-encompassing. Simple map cartographers have already neatly mentally partitioned the world through unproblematically lumping and splitting the world into air-tight categories (Zerubavel 1996). They are also rigid-minded in how they see the mutually exclusive nature of the zones of reality that they have partitioned (Zerubavel 1991, 1995).

Simple map cartographers in the extreme form, may cut themselves off from the world at large and establish a cognitive safe-zone where everything “inside” the boundary is sacred and good, and everything that lies outside the



boundary is profane and bad. Hence the world is drawn in black and white, with no shades of grey in between. This type of dichotomizing map “works” for these people because there is no doubt and no ambiguity. Everything is as crystal clear as it should be. But an offshoot of that is they sometimes become a “cognitive minority” and establish themselves within both a cognitive and physical zone of no contact with the outside world.

For simple map social cartographers, the “other” is defined as both different, and by that difference, needs to be kept at a safe distance to avoid tainting the purity of their own identity. There is no way for them to reduce distances or establish closeness with those they see as categorical others, for fear of contamination (Douglas 1966). With so much vested in a stable order of reality, simple map cartographers may end up engaging in fence-building to enact extra layers of protection to ensure safety (Mullaney 2006:131) , pushing themselves into a safe zone where their sense of boundaries, their accepted categories and their mappings of the world remain pristinely unchallenged and unchanged.

Simple map cartographers are as narrow-minded and as misinformed as people who were reported to have assaulted Sikhs in America as retaliation for 9/11, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, since the first images they saw of Osama Bin Laden were of him wearing a turban, hence mistakenly identifying Sikhs as both “Muslim” and “terrorist”, of which they are neither.

## 2. *Complex map cartographers*

In stark contrast, complex map social cartographers are able to construct broad and inclusive maps that pay attention to the nuances and features of the social terrain, without engaging in a type of reductionism that identifies groups according to any one dominant characteristic. Instead of being concentrated with boundary-markers or absolute lines that mark the contours of distinction, the complex map cartographer entertains definitional uncertainties and categorical ambiguities: grey areas instead of black or white. They are hence fuzzy-minded (Zerubavel 1995) and have a tolerance for ambiguity and hold all knowledge and conceptual categories as necessarily contingent.

People who possess this kind of cartographic imagination understand that categories and labels are still necessary to somehow get a grasp of reality, but they never reify these constructs, or consider them set-in-stone and infallible. The Cartographic Imagination seriously entertains the possibility of “shared territory” or “common ground” instead of discrete islands of meaning where no convergences are possible (Zerubavel 1992). Complex map cartographers imagine borderlands (Anzaldúa 1999), or places of “open territory” for encounters with others, instead of borders and boundary-markers that keep them out. They are much more likely to engage in “fire-walking”: or treading across existing boundaries of separation (Mullaney 2006), and navigate to other territories to encounter the other, since they do not reify boundaries, or see foreign territories as dangerous by default.

For instance, Tony Jones, in his book *The New Christians* (2008), writes of reactions he had to deal with when he issued the press release that announced the meeting between Emergent Christians and Jews from Synagogue 3000 were soon to take place. Jones writes,

In the blogosphere, we began taking heat for even announcing the meeting, especially my quote in the press release that I was excited to meet with the rabbis to “talk about the future and God’s Kingdom.” Some of my Christian friends made it clear that Jews could not possibly be involved in kingdom of God work because they did not profess belief in Jesus. *To emergents, this kind of thinking binds God’s work to the church and implies that outside the lives of professed Christians, God is handicapped.* (2008:155-156)

We see in this reflection by Tony Jones a clash of “cartographic paradigms”, where simple map social cartographers do not map religious “others” on the same conceptual plain as themselves. Hence, “Kingdom of God” cannot possibly be a shared space, but is instead an exclusive one, where access is allowed for by the narrow criteria of “belief in Jesus”. For complex map cartographers, man-made categories are insufficient to enforce any kind of boundary around something they see as broad and as inclusive as “Kingdom of God”. Emergent thinkers critique the ethnocentric perspective of Christians who believe they exhaustively define and contain the whole territory designated by the label “Kingdom of God”. Where the former’s cartographic imagination allows for no ground to give, no possible encounter since difference must be enforced with distance, the latter’s cartographic imagination allows them to envision commonalities and convergences despite difference: *difference + closeness*.

## **Conclusion: thoughtfully imagining encounters in the borderlands**

It is my hope that the chapter has given the reader an understanding of how the Emerging Church Movement engages in mapping as both a cognitive and practical activity that can be done as an exercise in reflexivity, but also as collaborative activity through diverse interactions and open-source mediated mapping platforms. In the more immediate last section, I have sought to engage in a more generalized discussion of the theoretical significance of distinguishing between groups that have the cultural adequacy to draw comprehensive, complex, nuanced and detailed maps, versus groups that merely construct simple, dichotomizing maps where everything is “black or white”, “in or out”, or “us versus them”. The epic difference between the two is the capacity for the former to imagine “borderlands” of encounter with diverse others, while the latter is unable to envision such borderlands since they are dogmatically focused on the border itself: the “fine line” of distinction (Zerubavel 1991). To end this chapter, I leave it to Gloria Anzaldúa to describe for us, both the merits of being able to imagine borderlands, and the perils of the opposite, that of having a poor cartographic imagination:

In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. *Rigidity means death*. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. (Anzaldúa 1999:101)

## *Linkages*

The discussion of mapping, borderlands and the cartographic imagination in this chapter are a necessary pre-cursor to the next two chapters. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on inclusion and bridge-building respectively through practices and culture. These practices are premised on the cognitive orientation toward diverse others, that I have fleshed out in this chapter: that the “other is worth engaging and encounter to pursue *difference + closeness*.

## **Chapter 6 The sweet problem of inclusion and implicit lines of exclusion**

*Developing from the previous chapter on thinking about boundaries and difference, this chapter focuses on culture and looks critically at the ECM's practices of fostering inclusiveness. Data for this chapter comes from observing a variety of interactions, from online sources like blogs and websites, to various meetings and conferences where I observed overt strategies of inclusion. Firstly, I critically analyze their use of the "conversation" metaphor. Subsequently, I focus on practices in discursive social worlds and face-to-face social worlds the movement employs to accomplish inclusivity. Lastly, I look at the struggles and challenges the ECM faces in their quest to be inclusive, and examine implicit lines of exclusion that belie their ideals.*

### **The sweet problem of inclusion**

For most critics of such open Christianity, the problem with inclusiveness is that it allows for truth to be found in other religions. *To emerging Christians, that problem is sweet.* We don't want to just tolerate the godliness of "the other" as if we regret the possibility. The godliness of non-Christians is not an anomaly in our theology... The gospel has taught us to rejoice in goodness we can find in others (Selmanovic 2007:196).

#### *Ideals... versus reality*

From the previous chapter, we have seen the Emerging Church's ideals about drawing broad and inclusive maps. This enables them to imagine "borderlands" (Anzaldúa 1999) where they can encounter and have productive relationships with diverse "others", be they religious others, or groups typically marginalized along lines of race, class, gender or sexual orientation. The movement envisions itself as an inclusive "conversation" that welcomes people who feel left out and disillusioned by institutional Christianity. They do this because they feel that Christianity must change in ways that can accommodate the reality of difference and heterogeneity in the social world.

While the movement generates a discourse on why Christians should practice a broadly inclusive faith, there is a lack of empirical work that details *how* they do this and whether they live up to their ideals and claims. For one, it struggles with being perceived as largely dominated by white, middle-class men, and faces similar structural limitations thwarting other religious groups aiming to transcend boundaries. In this chapter, I will give voice to the many critics who claim that the movement is exclusive, instead of inclusive. I also analyze ways the Emerging Church attempts to counteract these criticisms.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, I analyze the Emerging Church's use of the "conversation" metaphor to describe itself, as well as to designate the kind of relationships it envisions itself having with diverse others. I argue that the movement overinvests itself in this metaphor and is unreflexive about the ways that conversations still exclude. In the second part, I discuss various strategies of inclusion, making a distinction between strategies that are enacted in the discursive social world and the face-to-face social world. In the third and final part of this chapter, I bring to the fore problems and implicit lines of exclusion that the movement faces despite its best efforts to be inclusive.

### **Theoretical underpinnings: inclusion as cultural accomplishment**

As I have articulated in chapter 3 on methods, my approach is to uncover the "culture in action" (Swidler 1986) and the "culture in interaction" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) to accomplish *difference + closeness*. In this chapter, my specific focus is on how the movement culturally accomplishes inclusion. In the previous chapter, I focused on "mapping" as a cultural practice which enables the

Emerging Church Movement to imagine encounters with diverse “others”. In this chapter and the next, I move from “mapping” to “doing”: the actual work of doing inclusion and doing bridge-building.

A range of recent works in the sociology of religion set the precedence on how inclusion is accomplished through culture. For instance, Penny Edgell looked at how congregations fostered racial diversity through “culture work”. She examines how different congregations created “ritual inclusion” through changes in the worship service, and “formal inclusion” through changes in the leadership and decision-making process (Edgell 1998:452). She also examines the “metaphors” used to foster a congregational identity, as well as how symbols and rituals, as well as the use of language enacted inclusion (Edgell 1998:463). In Edgell’s later work on religion and family, she even examines *inclusion rhetorics* of pastors’ “talk” about including more people from a range of family situations, beyond the “Ozzie and Harriet” nuclear family type (Edgell 2006:98).

In their theoretical piece on culture in interaction, Eliasoph and Lichterman similarly observed how groups “talked” about and signaled the inclusive nature of their groups (2003:766), and also how they structured the physical environment at meetings to foster inclusiveness (2003:767). Eliasoph and Lichterman were interested in the particular “group style”, or ways that people imagined themselves as a group, and how that acted as a filter to the things they talked about, and how they functioned as a group. Similarly, in a range of works on religious groups, Lichterman discusses how “talk” features prominently in how groups work through what kinds of identity styles would best work to foster



inclusiveness (Lichterman 2005:242). And failing to engage strategically in “talk” about identity, consequently resulted in passing over opportunities to broaden their social engagement (Lichterman 1999:125).

These works provide the impetus to look at how religious groups accomplish inclusion through culture. Yet, as I have noted in the literature review, the focus has invariably been on face-to-face interactions, and have centered on well-bounded religious groups. I attempt to extend the theoretical works of Edgell and Lichterman, by focusing on non face-to-face interactions, and looking at the Emerging Church as a loosely bounded religious group, as I analyze and assess the practices of the Emerging Church Movement to foster inclusiveness in *both* face-to-face and discursive settings.

In separate sections in the chapter, I will be analyzing a variety of cultural forms I paid specific attention to in my fieldwork, like metaphors, narratives, language, the use of rituals and symbols, and the creation and management of spaces. I focus on the questions: *how do they do it?* What is the Emerging Church practically doing to be inclusive? What strategies are they employing to operationalize inclusiveness? An equally important question that this chapter answers is: does it work? And how successful are they? My analysis features an elaboration of their strategies of inclusion, but I also seek to highlight problematic aspects of these strategies.

## **Critiquing the conversation metaphor**

Ever since I started studying the Emerging Church, I noticed how frequently the word “conversation” appeared in the movement’s discourse. In fact, the ECM prefers to be known as a “conversation” instead of a “movement”. In this section, I take a closer look at how the movement uses the conversation metaphor, and analyze what it means for their interactions. The movement likes to think of itself as a conversation, as a reflection of its open-border inclusiveness. While they tend to use “conversation” rather unproblematically, yet from a sociological perspective, we know that conversations are still governed by rules, and are characterized by inequalities and exclusions. Despite their commitment to being “a conversation”, the Emerging Church is perhaps unreflexive about the ways their own conversation excludes.

In this section, I look at conversation as a type of “group style”, (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Group style refers to the “recurrent patterns of interaction that arises from a group’s shared understanding about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting” (Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2003: 737). Group style refers to the models that people have for “being a group”. Group styles, according to Eliasoph and Lichterman, are not idiosyncratic to particular groups, but can be shared across many groups. This is hence appropriate for studying the Emerging Church, since they hope to engage many religious and denominational “others” in conversation. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, The Emerging Church sees itself as a “borderland” for different groups to encounter each other (chapter 5). “Style” shows that a group’s

togetherness does not have to be based on strongly shared ideology (Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2003: 738). Style is hence a feature of culture that is independent of particular ideologies. In the same way, in her research, Edgell (1999) accounts for how different congregations can have very different group styles *despite* sharing core doctrines. Bender (2003) also shows how diverse people build solidarity through a non-pushy group style where common beliefs or religious ideology are not part of the equation. The emphasis on “style” hence directs an analytical focus on *interaction*, instead of belief.

To better understand why the movement vests so much in the conversation metaphor, we have to understand the cultural significance of metaphor. According to Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphors play “a central role in defining our every day realities” by structuring the way we think, perceive, and socialize. It redefines our individual realities and “helps form social reality” (1980:3). Metaphors in this description, structure, enable and constrain in the way that I have discussed in the theoretical review – it “does things” in ways that are culturally significant. Along this line, in her research on how congregations “turned” multi-racial, sociologist Penny Edgell notes how churches, “mined their traditions for metaphors that framed their new multi-racial mission focus” (Edgell 1998:452). I think it is appropriate to say that for the Emerging Church Movement, the group metaphor “conversation” *is* the group style. The following analysis will flesh out the reality that this “conversation” metaphor creates for the movement even as they use it.

### *Why “conversation” and not “movement”?*

Why does the Emerging Church prefer to describe itself as a conversation instead of a movement? While “movement” emphasizes reaction, where a group defines itself typically against the status quo: as a “departure from”, the idea of “conversation” focuses more on interaction and communication, instead of clearly bounded identities and political positionalities. In a conversation, people listen as mutually interested parties. Conversation connotes a mode of interaction that is respectful, cordial and implies an exchange of viewpoints. This contrasts with the “argument culture” of much American political discourse as highlighted by Tannen (1998), where the metaphors like “fight”, “win/ lose” engenders an aggressive temperament in political discourse. Since the Emerging Church does not have comprehensive organizational structures (chapter 4), “conversation” is the organizing metaphor by which the movement envisions itself. To illustrate, Emergent thinker Samir Selmanovic writes,

*There is a hill on which we are willing to die, and it is called conversation... we see conversation as the teaching, the truth, the doctrine. We confess it. Conversation is deeply biblical, rooted in Christian history and theology, and, importantly, in the life and teachings of Jesus.... This is the linchpin of the Emerging Church. We are as diverse as Christianity, but we hold conversation in common. It is how we pursue justice and beauty, how we hope, where we find comfort. We converse with God and with one another, and our relationships hold us, like prayers.<sup>33</sup>*

Like Selmanovic, Emergents believe that cordial interaction across differences supersedes dogma and beliefs that tend to divide when they are the starting point of encounters. As Selmanovic expresses, conversation *is* the dogma which

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.samirselmanovic.com/2010/03/08/3-thoughts-on-emerging-church/>, posted 03/08/2010, accessed on 04/07/2010.

Emergents stand upon as their foundation. “Conversation” emphasizes that it is the mode of interaction and communication that takes primacy over notions of right or wrong. As a group style, it emphasizes relations instead of propositions.

As Emergent thinker Dwight Friesen notes:

Our hope is to experience and encourage transformation (personal, ecclesial and cultural) through encounter with the “other,” therefore, *we diligently resist self-definition in propositional terms which tend to exclude*. Instead we seek to embody a differentiating curiosity in which our truth claims are submitted to one another as conversation starters (Friesen 2007).

Via the conversation metaphor, Emergents hope to engender an expanding circle of interacting voices. In my fieldwork with the Emerging Church, I have seen them put this principle into practice. For instance, in a Midwest Emergent gathering I observed in Chicago in 2007, some of the session speakers included atheists and self-declared “almost atheists”. There was one particular striking main session where Hemant Mehta, atheist author of *I Sold My Soul on eBay* (2007) spoke of his experiences traveling the nation and visiting different churches. He provided an “outsider-looking-in” perspective on what Christianity looks like to non-Christian. He shared with the audience how he felt as in different Christian institutional settings. The predominantly Christian audience was in a posture of learning from this self-declared atheist. I also noted that nobody was trying to proselytize the author, or argue that atheism were “wrong”. One of the organizers of the gathering, whom I later interviewed, reflected on this attempt to be “other” inclusive:

Of course, it would be impossible to mention all the highlights of the conference, but one of the things I'm most pleased with is the way we were able to include "Outsider" perspectives. Both John Armstrong (a friendly observer/outsider to the emerging church and president of ACT3) and Hemant Mehta (the "eBay Atheist") were invited to do an "Outsider Interview" during a main session. We asked them to give us emerging church Christians some constructive criticism and advice. In my opinion, if we really are serious about being "generous" then this has to include listening to those who disagree with us — inviting them to be a part of the conversation — and I'm so glad we did.<sup>34</sup>

Since this was one of the first Emergent gatherings I attended as my interest in the movement was germinating, it felt strange that an atheist would be given a platform like that at a conference for Christians. It was something I had not experienced before. I realize now that that movement was operationalizing its "conversation" group style to include voices of "others". Also, in its style of presentation, that session was held in a conversation format, with the atheist author sitting next to the moderator and dialoguing, facing an audience who also participated by asking questions. This was just one example of the Emerging Church Movement hearing and highlighting the voice of the "other". I would see this in other occasions during my fieldwork at meetings and interactions that included religious "others".

Besides not wanting to be a "movement", the Emerging Church also resists being framed as a denomination. In fact, the Emerging Church has taken steps away from institutionalization instead of toward it. For instance, in October 2008, Emergent Village announced that Tony Jones was stepping down as National Coordinator after serving in the position for 3 years. A decision had

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/reflections-on-the-midwest-gathering> "Reflections on the Midwest Gathering" by Mike Clawson, posted 08/03/2007, accessed 08/11/2010.

been taken by the Board of Emergent Village “to take a significant step away from institutionalization, “gifting” the organization back to the grass-roots networks that birthed it”.<sup>35</sup> Emergents are far less interested in building an institution, than in generating networks. As Tony Jones express elsewhere,

*The EC is not about growing the EC. It’s about catalyzing an ecclesial and theological conversation and about building a network of friendship in which these conversations can safely take place.*<sup>36</sup>

The conversation metaphor works as a contrast to institutionalization. Emergents like to say that labels are not important. They are not worried about people dropping the label “Emergent” or using other labels. In fact, when I attended a conference in Washington D.C. called the Transform East Coast Gathering in May 2010, the organizer, a person in his thirties by the name of Steve Knight, started talking about “Emergent Village” in his introductory address. Since Transform was unaffiliated with Emergent Village, he jokingly said to the crowd, “did I just say Emergent Village?” Everyone laughed, to which Steve Knight said, “It doesn’t matter really.” Most of the people in attendance would have been at an Emergent Village organized conference too. Many *were* familiar faces that I had seen in previous Emergent gatherings. The fact that “Transform” was a different organizational entity from Emergent Village did not to bother anyone, but represented the Emergent ethos to spawn networks instead of political territories.

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/presskit/emergent-village-makes-significant-changes-in-structure> “Emergent Village Makes Significant Changes in Structure” posted 11/1/2008, accessed 8/20/2010.

<sup>36</sup> <http://blog.tonyj.net/2010/04/is-sojourners-for-straight-only/> “Is Sojourners for straights only?” by Tony Jones, posted 04/06/2010, accessed 08/11/2010.

### *Problematizing “conversation”*

My critique is that the movement tends to use “conversation” unproblematically and unreflexively. “Conversation” is a convenient byword for “open access” and assumes that anyone can join in. Hence by describing itself as a conversation, the movement hopes to draw people into its inclusive circle: as if to say, “we can talk to anyone”, and “anyone can talk to us”, but of course it is not that simple. Conversations are still characterized by inequalities and exclusions. There are still rules that govern conversations. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that there is equality of access and participation in a conversation.

Critics like John Piper, criticize the movement for being mainly a white, upper-middle class phenomenon.<sup>37</sup> I have heard this same criticism echoed by individuals I talked to or interviewed through my fieldwork, even by those who self-identify as Emergent. Whether they intend to or not, the Emerging Church uses a particular kind of specialized language, and people engage with the conversation partake in its particular “genre” of talk. There is hence an Emergent specific lingo that people “in the know” are privy to. It also does take a certain level of education, be it theological, or sociological, to grasp some of the ideas that Emergents play around with. This is particularly so with the movement’s penchant for postmodern philosophy, an issue I will cover in chapter 8 on postmodernism. It is no coincidence that many Emergent identifiers are active bloggers who can competently articulate their thoughts in writing. This critique of

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkGg5A4QEjg>, published 02/29/2010, accessed 08/20/2010.



the movement's in-group tendencies, was expressed by an engaged critic, who observes,

Emergents write books about themselves, interview each other, hold conferences to discuss their movement. They even invent special code language with terms like “cohorts”, the “conversation”, “missional”, “POMO”, “deconstruction” etc. These are shibboleths that help emergents identify one another and separate them from the rest of the church... *drop the special language, drop the pretensions.*<sup>38</sup>

Hence, the Emerging Church still tends to be seen by some as being an exclusive group with strong in-group tendencies despite their best efforts. Also, “conversation” does not account for the reality that certain people have louder or more privileged voices than others. Based on race, gender, socio-economic status, or some combination of those, some people enter the conversation with more power and privilege. An interviewee, who wanted to remain unnamed, noted how in just her first Emerging Church gathering, she could tell that that educated, middle-class white males held the most power in the movement. She said that it was pretty obvious who the most prominent people were. She was rather disappointed that what she saw as the “reality” did not quite match the rhetoric, which was what brought her to the Emerging Church in the first place. I saw this same sentiment being expressed online, by someone I would categorize as an “engaged observer” to the movement. The individual writes,

As an African American male, I can say that the emergent discussion or whatever you want to call it has indeed always seemed closed to me. Furthermore, my internal debate is whether I actually want to be identified with these labels to begin with. Not sure I really want to affirm once again

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “Where does Emergence fit in the Christian tribes”, response 4 by Rick, posted 08/27/2009, accessed 08/20/2010.

a group of white males controlling and dominating the theological discussion.<sup>39</sup>

As a minority, this person is attuned to the inequalities that pre-define the table of conversation. He also voices an unwillingness to adopt the Emergent label since doing so would “affirm” the power imbalance toward white males, which still renders the conversation unequal. These minority perspectives (both gender and racial) show how the conversation metaphor may work for some but not others. By being unreflexive about the way conversations do exclude, the Emerging Church foregoes critical ways that it could address barriers to inclusion. I argue in the following section that “conversation” is a byword for a passive form of inclusion that may not necessarily be suited to what they hope to accomplish, but may be suited to their organizational realities.

#### *Active versus passive inclusion*

To extend my critique, I argue here that the movement over-invests itself in the conversation metaphor by expecting the “other” to *come* to the table, instead of proactively inviting them *to* it. Via the conversation metaphor, the movement commits itself to a *passive* form of inclusion that puts the onus on the “other”, to join in or face exclusion. “Conversation” then becomes a culture structure that legitimizes a passive approach to inclusiveness. Yet voices from within the movement express dissatisfaction with this passive approach to inclusion. In my research, I saw both critics and identifiers express how they

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “Where does Emergence fit in the Christian Tribes” response 8 by Drew Hart, posted 08/27/2009, accessed 08/21/2010.

thought the movement needed to foster a more *active* style of inclusion. Noting this very problem, one Emergent identifier voices,

We absolutely MUST begin to ask the other voices to be represented. The new site was built with the “if you build it they will come” mentality, but “they” have remained conspicuously silent. The female voice, the Asian voice, the Hispanic and Chicana/o and Latina/o voice, the African and African-American voice continue to be absent from the conversation as it is represented here at Emergent Village... more people are out there ready to get involved, but many of them need to be invited, empowered, purposefully included... consider how we move forward in such a way that every voice is both provided a platform and given the proper tools to make use of it.<sup>40</sup>

A more pointed critique of this passive form of inclusion came from an African American male by the name of Drew Hart. Hart was responding directly to a previous post where a white male Emergent identifier wrote, “no one is excluding anyone. There’s no tribunal saying only white Anglo Saxon Protestant males get to participate... Emergent Village has always strived to be inclusive”.<sup>41</sup> To this, Hart replied directly, saying:

I guess the problem with this is the passive explanation of our current state, as though the emergent community has no responsibility for the lack of racial and gender diversity. That passive voice gives the appearance that that these things just somehow came to be... and to say that Emergent Village has always “strived” to be inclusive is patronizing. That is just pc rhetoric, *at the end of the day you either empower those who are underrepresented or you don’t*.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/the-future-of-emergent-village>, “The Future of Emergent Village” response 16 by “Sarah”, posted 04/24/2009, accessed 08/19/2010.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “Where does Emergence fit into the Christian tribes” response 14 by Jonathan Brink, posted 08/28/2009, accessed 08/20/2010.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “Where does Emergence fit into the Christian tribes” response 18 by Drew Hart, posted 08/29/2009, accessed 08/20/2010.

This exchange articulates the tension between competing expectations of passive and proactive inclusion. Passive inclusion via “conversation” seems entirely acceptable to those who are privileged, since their privilege makes it easy for them to take for granted that their voice will be heard. Hart’s response voices how minorities like him experience structures of access that he feels necessitate a more proactive “seeking out and inviting” approach. Hart does not see Emergent Village doing this, and for him, this is a problem. However, for Emergent Village, given their down shift toward less institutionalization, they hardly have the organizational or resource capacity to mobilize for a more proactive inclusion that would require the groundwork of seeking minority voices out and giving them a platform. Hence for practical reasons, the passive, “conversational” style of inclusion is more suited to the movement’s organizational realities. Although later in the chapter, I will discuss how they *have* taken measures to be proactive about inclusiveness. This discussion on the contrast between active and passive forms of inclusion shows how the conversation metaphor structures a reality for Emergents that is geared more to the latter, leaving some wishing that it could be done better.

### *Reframing exclusion through “conversation”*

The conversation group style has other ramifications too. This is nowhere more evident in the way I see the movement talk about exclusion, making it a problem of the “other” not wanting to participate in conversation, rather than focusing on the problem of structures of access that limit participation. To

illustrate this, one Emergent identifier in a contribution to the Emergent Village weblog, notes that in his view, “exclusion is the unwillingness to enter conversation”, and later implores readers to “step over the line of exclusion. Enter into this Conversation”.<sup>43</sup> In this instance, exclusion is reframed as the unwillingness to engage. This is an interesting sleight of hand. When sociologists look to explain exclusion, the focus is typically on people in power who construct barriers to inclusion and hinder access to those they deem as “other”. However, in this reworking of exclusion, it becomes framed as a problem of one’s refusal to engage in interaction. It puts the onus on those “outside” to come “inside”. Doing so draws attention away from problems of systematic structures of exclusion, and displaces the problem of exclusion onto the willingness or unwillingness of human agents to enter into “conversation”. The same author, who is incidentally a white educated male Emergent identifier, further elaborates,

We see the dynamic at work in our blogging: some people are looking to grow, others to shore up their truth, some ask honest questions, and do creative theology, while others hide behind words, unwilling to risk themselves. Most of course just lurk in silence, on the fringes. *Some are moving towards Conversation and other away from it. But by doing so, they are excluding themselves.*<sup>44</sup>

This quote epitomizes my critique that exclusion is reframed as people “excluding themselves” by refusing to engage in conversation. As I have researched the discursive social world of the Emerging Church, I have seen this “you exclude yourself” card being played in different ways. For instance, on Emergent Village,

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/the-line-of-exclusion>, “The line of exclusion” by Nic Paton, posted 05/07/2009, accessed 08/11/2010.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/the-line-of-exclusion>, “The line of exclusion” by Nic Paton, posted 05/07/2009, accessed 08/26/2010.

the blog moderator makes a distinction between people who are interested in engaging in genuine dialogue and those who are what they call a “troll”: someone who is “totally anonymous, using a fake name and email address, posting numerous antagonistic comments, etc”.<sup>45</sup> On the Emergent Village website, this is a designation used to distinguish between those are “included” because they are serious about engaging in proper dialogue, versus those who exclude themselves by being antagonistic. This “troll” designation is one way that the problem of exclusion is displaced onto the individual who by “not interacting properly”, effectively exclude themselves.

I heard this rule of “self-exclusion” being described during my interview with Adele Sakler, founder of the blog Queermergent. I met Adele through Twitter. One day when I was thinking about this issue of exclusion and the Emerging Church, I tweeted, asking if anyone thought the Emerging Church was exclusive in any way. She responded to my tweet by sending me a private message, telling me that she did not feel the Emerging Church was exclusive in any way. When I later got around to interviewing her, I asked her some questions about her blog, Queermergent. It was not surprising to hear that many people opposing homosexuality attempted to post inflammatory comments on the blog. When I asked Adele how she did gatekeeping for comments, she explained to me that she usually deleted posts that were hateful or that engaged in name-calling. *By refusing to engage in a proper code of interaction, haters and*

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/the-circle-of-inclusion>, “The circle of inclusion”, response 51 by Steve Knight (Moderator/ webmaster of the Emergent Village website), posted 05/06/2009, accessed 08/21/2010.

*antagonists were effectively excluding themselves.* After my interview with Adele, I would come across the Queermergent blog's "Commenting Policy", one part of which says, anything unhelpful to furthering the conversation along will be deleted, and that,

Honest questions are welcome but preaching and spewing scripture in an obnoxious way will not be tolerated. If you vehemently disagree, fine, but there are other places for you to express these views. THIS space is a safe place for honest dialogue and conversation between those in the LGBTQ community, our allies, and those seeking to engage us in an honest manner.

What they label as "self-exclusion" is a way the Emerging Church sanctions those who violate the implicit cultural code that governs "conversation". Instead of an exclusion defined by identity (who you are), or positionality (what you believe), exclusion is defined by how one chooses to interact. In the case of the blog Queermergent, an individual enacts self-exclusion by violating the blog's intended purpose to be a "safe place" to ask questions about homosexuality. A civil "code of conduct" consisting of interactional rules and norms govern the blog Queermergent, as it does other Emergent cyberspaces. Instead of political correctness, it would be more appropriate to say that The Emerging Church pursues *interactional correctness*.

The "code" as I am describing it is implicit, in that there is not a set of Emergent-wide rules about how to interact. But I was able to infer some of these codes through observing the patterns of how Emergents define "right" and "wrong" interactional customs. These include, but are not limited to: no name-calling ("you're a heretic"), no condemnation ("you are going to hell"), no

attacking another person's identity ("God hates fags"), full self-disclosure ("use your real name and real email address"), genuine interaction ("I honestly want to hear you out"), and mutual openness ("if you want to comment on our blogs, you have to let us comment on yours"). These implicit interactional codes seek to preserve the movement's conversational ethos by framing exclusion as self-exclusion. People "choose" to exclude themselves either by refusing to enter into conversation, or by violating the interactional customs of good conversation. My criticism is that this conveniently allows the movement to avoid addressing structures of access, focusing instead on how people are complicit in their own exclusion.

### **Strategies of inclusion**

In chapter 4 on the social world of the Emerging Church, I made a core distinction between discursive and face-to-face social worlds. Accordingly, my analysis for the next two sections will look at various strategies of inclusion that the movement undertakes in both these discursive and face-to-face social worlds, as I have seen observed through my fieldwork. Since these sections focus on the "positive" aspects of what they are trying to do, the last section of this chapter will focus more critically on where they fall short, and where exclusions are still evident. Implicit in the following sections is a focus on the "culture work", or the strategic and manipulation of culture to achieve goals (Swidler 1986, Edgell 1998), that is undertaken by the Emerging Church Movement to foster inclusiveness.



## **A. Strategies of inclusion in discursive social worlds**

### *1. Inclusion through open-identification*

As I noted in the previous section, the emphasis on conversation, in its implicit focus on communication and interaction, deemphasizes identity labels and affiliation. This means that the Emerging Church wants people to be engaged with the Emerging Church conversation even if they have no intention of adopting the Emergent label. In my research, I have noted that the Emerging Church imposes no gate-keeping mechanisms or forms of social control on the label Emergent. I have never come across them telling anyone “you cannot call yourself Emergent”, nor have I seen them attempt to gate-keep that identity label in any other way. They intentionally do not police the boundaries of what Emergent is. Hence, people can engage with the movement without personally identifying with it. At the same time, the Emergent identity is openly available to anyone, or any group who desires to take up the label. This has resulted in a host of interesting emergent-style identities. This engenders what I call a *self-styled inclusion* for people to engage the movement on their own terms, and at their own comfort level.

Yet, there are other interesting self-styled Emergent identities. I first caught wind of a “Presbymergent” label that married “Presbyterian” with “Emergent”, and I soon discovered other hybrid-Emergent groups like Luthermergent, Methomergent, Reformergent, Anglimergent, etc, each of which sprouted out spontaneously from within each denomination. Most of these groups were started by people in leadership within their denominations. These

clergy had engaged with the Emerging Church and wanted to bring these ideas into their denomination. There is even an Anabaptist group calling itself “Submergent”. In late 2009, I came across the birth of a blog called “Cathlimergent”, and two Catholic-Emergent conferences have been held since 2009. In March 2010, I got wind of a book that was in print titled *Baptimergent: Baptist Stories from the Emergent Frontier*. It was the first of its kind where Emergent was blended with a denominational label in a publication. The dynamics of how this open-identification works is best illustrated in a quote from the editor of the *Baptimergent* book, who also started the blog for *Baptimergents*,

Sometime around 2007 I began to see a trend in the Emergent discussion where folks from particular traditions began to speak of themselves in blended terms. “Anglimergent” was the first. Then I met some folks who called themselves “Presbymergents.” This struck me as a useful way to speak of my own experience as an emergent Baptist. I went online to see if anyone else was talking about being a “Baptimergent” and found nothing. It was then that I decided to create a space for it on Facebook and eventually in the blogosphere. I was amazed to see how quickly folks began to connect to it, or at least wrestle with it as an identification.<sup>46</sup>

The author notes how he felt the hybrid identity label was a useful way to voice his own experiences as an Emergent-minded Baptist. This spurred him to engender both a “new” identity and a social space where people like himself could converge. This allowed other people who identified as Baptist, to coalesce around the Emergent identity, and form a subgroup within the larger “Emerging Church”. It occurred to me that his experience likely echoed the experiences of

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<sup>46</sup> <http://baptimergent.wordpress.com/2010/03/11/conversation-hub/>, published 03/10/2010, accessed 04/07/2010.

people who were joining their various Emerging Church sub-networks: they were finding likeminded individuals from within their denominational traditions and sharing stories, resources, and finding an Emergent community within their denomination.

My first encounter with the hybrid Emergent identities was at a conference I attended in Kansas City in 2007, it was during that time that I met a white, female clergy in her early thirties, from the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) who explained to me how several people including herself were putting together something called “Presbymergent”. I would later learn that Luthermergent (Lutheran) and Methomergent (Methodist) were 2 of the earliest groups to form. In about 3 years, there has been a spontaneous and uncoordinated springing up of hybrid-Emergent groups, some of which have official standing in their own denomination (like Presbymergent), which includes receiving funding to operate. Taglines that accompany these hybrid-Emergent identities also tell a story. For example, Presbymergent are “loyal radicals” which tells of desire to balance tradition with innovation.

This inclusion through open-identification has not just been successful with denominations. But other identity groups have also found value in adopting the Emergent label. For example, I have previously discussed a blog calling itself Queermergent, whose founder is an identifier that I interviewed and met at Emergent conferences. In 2009, three Asian American men in their twenties published an open letter on the Emergent Village website, calling themselves “AsianAmerGents”, they identified themselves as part of a small, but growing,

contingent within the Asian-American community who “share in the spirit of what Emergent Village is doing” and stated an appreciation for “partners along the way” and a desire to contribute to the broader Emerging Church conversation.<sup>47</sup> This is also accompanied by a similar “Latin-American Emergence”, discussion by 3 Latin Americans, one in the Dominican Republic, one in Canada, and one in Venezuela, who together discussed “how do we in Latin-America and the Caribbean want to shape the emerging church?”<sup>48</sup>

If conversation is its group style (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) who we see being drawn to the movement speaks of some measure of success in the movement’s stated desire to be “radically inclusive”, or to exercise a “generous orthodoxy” (McLaren 2004) . I believe this reflects the success of the Emerging Church in generating an inclusive “conversation” that has drawn various denominational traditions despite there being no concerted or coordinated effort to “sell” the Emergent brand to anyone. The whole point of the movement expressed through the metaphor of a “conversation” is to literally “get people talking” to each other, to those of other denominational and to those of diverse faith traditions. Hybrid-emergent identity labels extend beyond protestant denominational traditions, evidenced by Catholic Emergent groups, Jewish-Emergent, Muslim-Emergent groups and a Queeremergent group. These groups will feature more in latter parts of this chapter and the next chapter on bridge-building (chapter 7).

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/asianamergence>, “AsianAmurgence”, published 05/01/2009, accessed 08/22/2010.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/rivas-disla-frederico-interview>, “Latin-American Emergence”, published 04/10/2010, accessed 08/24/2010.

## 2. *Narratives: generating inclusion through privileging stories*

This section discusses how the Emerging Church Movement uses the cultural power of personal narratives to practice inclusiveness. Much of the theoretical literature on narratives shows particular stories can have strong resonances with people, and create passion and momentum to accomplish social movement objectives. Francesca Polletta (2006) argues that great stories (like the story of Rosa Parks) mobilize protest movements and help advance different political agendas. Narratives then are a vital aspect of the culture of social movements (Johnston and Klandermans 1995) and are an important feature of the “framing processes” that are relevant to a theoretical understanding of how social movements operate (Benford and Snow 2000). For Gary Alan Fine, narratives enable social actors and shows us how, “culture can, at least potentially, be an effective tool by which social movements achieve their instrumental ends, while ostensibly serving expressive needs” (Fine, 1995:141).

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What struck me about the Emerging Church movement was the willingness and frequency that I would see people tell their stories, in conferences, on blogs and even in interviews. One story I heard frequently was how people had transitioned to a “new” Emergent or postmodern rethinking of their faith. There was a similar thematic pattern to this particular kind of story. Individuals described 1) a “before” status, marked by a choice of terms like “orthodox”, “fundamentalist” or “biblical literalist”. Then they would describe 2) a crisis phase filled with doubt and questioning one’s own beliefs. This would be

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<sup>49</sup> Johnston and Klandermans, *Social Movements and Culture* 1995.

followed by a stage of 3) transition to a new way of thinking, typically aided by reading particular books and authors. The last stage 4) would be an “after” description of the current status of their “new” faith. I have heard these personal narratives through a variety of sources. The first time I came across this 4 part narrative structure was in Brian McLaren’s fictional tale *A New Kind of Christian* (2001), which tells of a Pastor’s struggle in coming to terms with a Christian faith that he is finding hard to live with, and through his encounter with a postmodern ideas (through a postmodern-minded friend), he comes to a new chapter in his faith: becoming less concerned with absolute truth and saving souls and being more concerned with truth that is lived out, through a concern for social justice and creation care.

I found this similar narrative pattern when I compared 3 different data sources: 1) an interview I conducted with an individual named Mike Clawson who is active as a cohorts coordinator for Emergent Village, 2) an iTunes podcast of a “postmodern testimony” by an individual named A.J. Stich,<sup>50</sup> and 3) from the personal story of Adele Sakler, the writer and host of a blog called Queermergent.<sup>51</sup>

### *Before*

Mike Clawson and A.J. Stich both describe their conservative evangelical backgrounds. Mike was from the Baptist General Conference (BGC), attended

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<sup>50</sup> Emergent Village Podcast “postmodern testimony – A.J. Stich, published 1/19/2008, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/podcast/postmodern-testimony>, accessed 3/25/2010

<sup>51</sup> <http://queermergent.wordpress.com/2009/01/15/why-queermergent/> published 1/15/2009, accessed 3/25/2010

Wheaton College and even worked for Evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* at one point of time. A.J. called himself as a conservative evangelical from a Christian college, who described how he led a massive crusade on his high school campus and that “winning souls for Jesus was a high that nothing could compare”. He also tells of being featured in a Billy Graham newsletter due to his high school crusading work. Adele describes her charismatic background, and conversion experience of receiving Jesus as “purchasing fire insurance” to avoid hell, and how she attended Pat Robertson’s Regent University for an M.Div., all the while struggling with same-sex attraction.

### *Crisis points*

All three also describe various crisis points: Mike Clawson describes being forced out of his Youth Pastor position in his denomination for being “too liberal, too emergent”, after a period of 2 or 3 years where “everything shifted” in his thinking on Christianity. A.J. voices his spate of depression and how “he was led to the brink of insanity” the more he called his faith into question. A.J. also describes how he became disillusioned with a “sadistic and unloving” god who “punished people for all of eternity because they did not say a magical prayer that could save their souls”. Adele, notes being “shell-shocked and confused” and attempting suicide when reparative therapy and “ex-gay ministries to pray away the gay” never worked.

### *Transition processes*

All three mention postmodernism, postmodern authors and/or prominent Emergent authors as being instrumental in their transition process. All three

noticeably cite reading Brian McLaren. Adele notes, she found McLaren, “writing things I had felt but was very afraid to express outwardly to anyone”, which echoes my interview with Mike Clawson who said, “I felt like he was saying everything I was thinking”. A.J. Stich cites McLaren’s books among others, as shaking, “the fundamentalist foundations of my faith”. Mike Clawson took classes in postmodern philosophy that “got me rethinking my faith, rethinking my epistemology” through reading Derrida, Levinas and Foucault. Both A.J. and Adele mention Emergent author Peter Rollins as being instrumental in influencing their thinking. Adele mentions how “writings on postmodernism and Christianity radically shaped how I viewed my faith”. A.J. mentions Rollins among other authors who “led me to become emergent”.

#### *After*

Adele and A.J. use similar language to express where they are in their faith. Adele expresses how she “could no longer hang onto certainty with regards to interpreting scripture”. A.J. says of himself that “I no longer focus on right doctrine but on right love”. Adele also says that she “finally came to terms with my sexuality” and “found peace with myself and God”, while A.J. says that postmodern Christianity is “the only way I can make sense of things at this point in my life” and the unsettledness of his faith, “is the only way I can be a Christian”. My interview with Mike Clawson went in a different direction as he talked about how he connected with more Emergent-minded folks. But on a blog post I would later come across, he expresses that he “discovered that being a Christian didn’t require one to be an absolutist or hold to Christianity as yet one



more oppressive metanarrative”, and that he was “free to embrace truth wherever I find it, even if it is outside the realm of my own faith”.<sup>52</sup> All three persons had in common that they each had a paradigm shift in their faith that meant a new epistemological orientation toward “truth”.

I found it interesting that narrative form of “before → crisis → transition → after” is very similar to the narrative form of witnessing in traditional churches, or conversion experience testimonies. It seems that while the content of these Emergent narratives differ from traditional conversion narratives, the formal structure is strikingly similar. This shows how the structure of a familiar religious cultural element like a conversion narrative is reconfigured with different contents to represent a new kind of postmodern “conversion narrative”, denoting literally a second conversion. While we can see a pattern of progression in the narratives these people voiced, each experienced it as particular to their own life circumstances. Many readers identified with these personal stories. One commenter said of A.J. Stich’s testimony, “I think you may have a small clue to how many of “us” are out there... I have the same testimony, nearly word for word”, another said, “I had nearly the same story”.<sup>53</sup> On the Queeremergent blog, many thanked Adele for sharing her story, but it was interesting to note another pattern of responses: “kudos to you for taking the initiative and creating a *space* for this very important dialog to happen”, another person said, “Thanks for being willing to put yourself out there like this... and for creating this *space* for this

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<sup>52</sup> <http://emergingpensees.blogspot.com/2006/04/what-is-postmodernism.html> posted 04/28/2006, posted 04/28/2006, accessed 3/25/2010

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/podcast/postmodern-testimony>, responses 3, 4 and 8 all expressed some variation of “I had nearly the same story as you”.

conversation to happen.” Another said “You have opened up a *safe space* for the Spirit to work and all can be truly welcomed”.<sup>54</sup>

The notion of “space” here is crucial in understanding how personal stories and narratives foster inclusion. Gary Alan Fine explain here how the cultural practice of generating narratives, “create social spaces in which audiences are encouraged to identify with the situations, problems, and concerns of others” (Fine 1995: 141) thereby fostering a broader inclusion of diverse people with their own unique stories, who can personally identify with the patterned structure of narratives on offer. Yet, as Polletta (2006) tells us, part of the cultural power of narratives is how it taps on ambiguity, allowing people to identify themselves in stories and slot in their own experiences into particular narrative structures.

While the core arguments of the theoretical literature on narratives talk about how good stories mobilize people to action, I argue that narratives can also be employed in the service of fostering inclusiveness. The movement is a “safe house for stories”, where people feel free to narrate their own stories of faith, doubt and transition to a “new” way of thinking. In doing so, participants to the movement find “their story” resonating in the stories of others. In chapter 8, I will discuss in more detail how the movement deals with postmodernism. But for this section, it is important to note that Emergents take Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives” seriously. By emphasizing individuals and their unique stories, the movement privileges micro-narratives against metanarratives or totalistic “framing stories”. Narratives displace dogmatic big “T” Truth that transcends all

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<sup>54</sup> <http://queermergent.wordpress.com/2009/01/15/why-queermergent/>, responses 3, 5 and 19.

times and places, and refocuses attention on the small “t” truth of people’s experiences in the context of their lived circumstances. Mike Clawson, in his blog *Emerging Pensees* sums up this Emergent ethos by saying:

Being postmodern doesn't mean you don't believe anything is true. What it means is that I don't have to think that every other story is completely false in order for my story to be true... *we want to learn from each other's differences and thereby gain a bigger view of who God really is.*<sup>55</sup>

The Emerging Church tries to operationalize this in practice. Emergents want to hear from a variety of different people, including atheists, Muslims and Jews as well as stories from the queer community. The Emerging Church tries to be reflexive about not being monopolized by one central narrative, but creates a democratized space for a multiplicity of personal narratives. For instance, in my fieldwork, I came across an Emerging Church website that highlighted an atheist’s personal narrative about how “Christianity makes me a better atheist”.<sup>56</sup> He was an active member of an Emerging Church community in Chicago. It is by being inclusive of micro-narratives that the movement also seeks to cultivate the *cultural competency* of listening well. They believe that everyone has localized, contextualized experiences that hold some truth that Christians can identify with and learn from, regardless of differences in beliefs. People’s stories while unique and particular are filled with resonances of similar struggles, similar issues, and similar epiphany and transition moments. Hence ideally, no one’s story should be excluded.

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<sup>55</sup> <http://emergingpensees.blogspot.com/2006/04/what-is-postmodernism.html>, posted 04/28/2006, accessed 03/25/2010.

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.wickerparkgrace.net/communitycategory/19-peace-and-happiness-through-disbelief-and-questioning.html>, date posted unknown, date accessed 03/26/2010

As I have discussed in the chapter on the social world (chapter 4), the nature of discursive social worlds enables a dynamic interaction between “creators” and “receivers”, where the boundary between them is fluid. In the discursive social world of the Emerging Church, communication technology and particularly social media, works hand-in-hand with narrative practices to facilitate people *both* being able to access stories *and* to narrate their own. This gives us an understanding of not just what meanings are conveyed through stories, but also a sense of “the social organization of the capacity to mean effectively” (Polletta 2006:xii). The Emerging Church seeks to accomplish inclusion through affirming a wide variety of narratives. The Emerging Church movement taps on both the “autonomous producer” possibility of the internet, and its networking potential, seeking to add to the pool of “accounts”, while trying not to privilege any based on identity or homogeneity in beliefs.

### 3. *Call for voices*

Related to personal narratives, is another practice of inclusion that I have seen with the movement that can broadly be called a “call for voices” strategy. This “call for voices” strategy is particularly prominent in the discursive social world of the ECM. The strategy attempts to get more people to participate in the Emerging Church Movement, either through getting people to participate in shaping the future of Emergent Village, or in seeking contributions of personal stories that can be shared with the broader Emergent network. I will discuss two specific examples of each.

Much of my research has focused on how Emergent Village functions, since it is the most institutionalized form of the Emerging Church Movement in America. Hence I have interviewed many individuals who are in leadership capacities, and analyzed what roles people in leadership capacities play. While Emergent Village has a board of directors, this board functions not so much as an executive decision-making body, but more to fulfill legal requirements as an officially registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

Instead of centralizing power in the hands of a few, I noted how Emergent Village worked to diffuse power in the broader network of individuals who were personally vested in the Emerging Church. This was particularly noticeable when Emergent Village went through a major transition period in 2008. There was a significant restructuring of the board of directors, where more prominent people like Brian McLaren, Tony Jones and Tim Keel (all white males), gave way to a more diverse and less well-known crop of leaders like Melvin Bray (African American), Eliacin-Rosario Cruz (Puerto Rican American), and Danielle Shroyer (Lebanese American). As I mentioned previously, in this transition, the office of National Coordinator that was held by Tony Jones from 2005 to 2008 was also dismantled.

Through this process, I saw how Emergent Village practiced an *open-sourced strategy of collective decision-making* about the future of the organization. In 2007, I heard Tony Jones speak in a regional Emergent gathering about a way of doing things in Emergent Village he called “wiki-faith”, which open-sourced participation and adhered to the principles of a flattened

hierarchy. At that time, I remember being intrigued by the concept “wiki-faith”, and I wondered if I would see any tangible example from the movement. A year later, in 2008, the new Emergent Village board of directors posted a message on the website, expressing that new goals and a new direction were needed for the future of Emergent Village. They requested for input from a wide range of people, including 1) those committed to Emergent Village, 2) those who value Emergent Village, and 3) friendly critics.<sup>57</sup> There was noticeably no inclusion pre-requisite that “you have to be a Christian” or even “you must publically identify as Emergent”. Even well-meaning critics were asked to be part of the process. Being true again to the self-styled “conversation” metaphor, they de-emphasized identity and beliefs, but simply wanted to hear from people who saw value in what Emergent Village was doing.

On the Emergent Village website, the board put out an online survey, which painted 4 possible scenarios about the future of Emergent Village. One option included closing down the organization altogether, while the other 3 articulated different styles of organizing. The Emergent Village board reported collecting over 2000 survey responses to the “call for voices” within a few days of the survey link being sent out. Reportedly, “hundreds” also made their contact information available for additional follow-up interviews. The board claimed that they had received a wealth of data that was “truly impressive”, even though more detailed information about the data was not made available.<sup>58</sup> But at least I was

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/an-important-request-from-emergent-village>, posted 06/08/2008, accessed 03/26/2010.

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/a-letter-from-the-board-to-friends-of-emergent-village>, “A letter from the board to friends of emergent village”, posted 10/30/2008, accessed 08/23/2010.

able to see a tangible example of the movement putting into practice “wiki-faith”. This inclusive group style of “open-sourced” participation in decision-making was expressed as “one of the unique things that ‘works’ about Emergent”: how “the many practitioners who imagine its future are also given authority to speak that future into being”.<sup>59</sup>

Another example of this call for voices, was in how Emergent Village issued an open call for people to “tell their story” by submitting content to be posted on the website. The person in charge of communications after Emergent Village restructured in 2008, Amy Moffitt, a woman in her thirties whom I had met and talked to at several conferences, issued “A Call for Voices” on the Emergent Village weblog. Part of that message described Emergent Village as “connected by and centered around the stories of the collective”. The post also noted “how few stories filter up and lend their voices on the national and international scale”. As we have seen in the previous section, the movement places a premium on personal and group narratives to generate inclusion. Imploring the readers to participate, Moffitt writes,

The Village is sustained by new stories, by new storytellers. Emergent|C hopes to bring your stories to the wider Village each month. Consider this your invitation to tell, retell, question, prod, report, critique, interpret or celebrate. *You have a story to tell.*<sup>60</sup>

In this spirit of a “call for voices”, I have noted how over the years, many of the postings on Emergent Village have shifted from “opinion pieces” by notable people in the movement like Brian McLaren and Tony Jones, to what you could

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<sup>59</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/the-future-of-emergent-village>, posted 04/15/2009, accessed 03/26/2010.

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/a-call-for-voices>, “A call for voices” by Amy Moffitt, posted 12/09/2009, accessed 08/23/2010.

call more “grassroots” voices of lesser known Emergent practitioners in local settings. This includes relatively recent posts on an interfaith community operating out of Maryland;<sup>61</sup> an Emergent inspired Eucharist centered “dinner church” operating out of New York,<sup>62</sup> and a cohort operating out of Arizona calling itself the “Emerging Desert Cohort” which has no formal hierarchy or worship service.<sup>63</sup> This reflects Emergent Village’s attempt to foreground grassroots voices, over familiar spokesperson voices commonly associated with the movement. These two examples demonstrate the movement’s strategy to practice inclusiveness through generalizing a call for participation and contributions. This “call for voices” strategy echoes Edgell’s conceptualization of how congregations enact “formal inclusion” through decision-making processes (1998:452). I show how this formal inclusion can be accomplished discursively, outside of institutional, face-to-face settings, and how they accomplish it as a loosely-bounded network.

This section has argued that the Emerging Church attempts to be inclusive through a variety of strategies suited to its discursive social world. Shifting gears, I now look at inclusion strategies that I observed in my fieldwork in face-to-face social worlds.

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/howard-story>, “A place to belong. A place to become” by Ken Howard, posted 02/25/2010, accessed 08/23/2010.

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/scott-st-lydias>, “breaking bread together” by Emily MD Scott, posted 02/11/2010, accessed 08/23/2010.

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/schroeder-story>, “Church is here” by Joy Schroeder” posted 01/14/2010, accessed 08/23/2010.



## **B. Strategies of inclusion in face-to-face social worlds**

In chapter 4 on the social world of the Emerging Church, I made a distinction between two types of face-to-face groups: local groups that meet regularly, versus conferences, which have varied participants and typically one-off meetings. In my research, I paid attention to how the movement practiced inclusion in both types of settings.

### *1. Making conferences inclusive spaces*

I saw a concerted attempt at inclusion in my fieldwork with the Christianity 21 conference held in Minneapolis, Minnesota in October 2009. As I discussed previously, the movement is criticized for being a white, male-dominated phenomenon. While the conference was organized by two of the most prominent figures in the movement: Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones; neither featured as speakers during the conference. The conference was advertised online, through Emergent Websites, and even Facebook. It was advertised as 21 speakers each speaking on the “future of Christianity”. It was not pitched as a women’s conference, although it was advertised that all the speakers were women. As I discussed in the previous chapter on mapping, this was the event that Jones and Pagitt wanted to make sure they had an even representation of speakers along the liberal-conservative and theorist-practitioner axes. When males did take the stage, it was usually in the capacity of a supporting role. Males were largely silent during the 3 day conference. There were approximately 300 to 400 people in attendance at the conference. While there were more women, a good 30% of attendees were male. So this was by no means an all women conference.

One of the speakers, Seth Donovan, a self-identified queer woman who attends an Emerging Church in Colorado, was invited to speak on the topic “confession” at the conference. She worked as a community organizer and was by no means a prominent person in the Emergent Church. Her presentation was positively received by the audience. After the conference, I was scouring blogs for reflections on the conference, and came across Seth’s own blog, where she posted a reflection on the event. While it is hard to measure how palpable the movement on the whole has succeeded in being inclusive, for this one individual, being part of this Christianity 21 event did have its intended effect. Donovan writes:

I've been in a pretty reactionary place with "the church" and church communities for the last 10 years or so of my life...being invited to participate in this event shifted that - I no longer had the luxury or role of reacting, but was asked instead to create... I can't imagine what the church would look like if we were more intentional about building our spaces to invite that.

*“I watched two straight, white, men disrupt their privilege. They had access to venues, connections to people, support from sponsors, budgets to watch, and reputations to maintain, and they organized an event that supported the leadership and voices of folks who have been asked to take the backseat in the church (I.E. women), and asked other folks who have similar privilege to show up for it.”*<sup>64</sup>

Seth notes the significance of the “space” engendered which put her in a position to contribute, rather than being just reactionary. The “two straight, white men” she is referring to are Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt, whom she observed disrupting their own privileged structural position. Indeed, the men, including prominent ones like Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, and Spencer Burke, in attendance

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<sup>64</sup> <http://confessingqueer.typepad.com/confessingqueer/2009/10/starting-from-a-new-place.html>, posted 10/14/2009, accessed 04/06/2010.

as audience and “support crew” showed that this was not just a women’s conference. During one of the breaks, I heard from a white male in his 60s of how he got to talking with a few other men in the restroom. None of them had ever been to a Christian conference that featured *this many* women speakers, let alone one which *only* featured women. In the experience of many of the men at the conference, including myself, this was a first.

After the conference, I interviewed different people on how they felt about the conference. Most reactions from attendees were positive. In two separate interviews with female pastors of Emerging Churches, I asked about their thoughts on Christianity 21. Both of them expressed that they thought it was a sincere attempt to include women’s voices in an important discussion. Neither of them felt that it was patronizing or just a token gesture of inclusiveness. One Pastor expressed to me during an interview how she felt that overall the conference really turned out to be what it said it was: a serious discussion about “the future of Christianity” undertaken by a diverse panel of women from different denominational traditions and sexual orientations.

Observing the closing session of Christianity 21 where people shared their feelings about the conference, I could see, was particularly poignant and emotional for attendees. Many spoke of a conference with this many female speakers as “a first” for them. One woman in her 50s even described the conference as “the new Pentecost”. Nanette Sawyer, prominent Emerging Church Pastor of Wicker Park Grace in Chicago, shared her feelings on the event:

“It was amazing for me to be one of twenty-one women speakers, and feel myself part of that amazing scheme of women standing up and sharing their beauty and brilliance and passion, and insights and inspiration. And for me, that gave me courage to do some more, and I hope it gave a lot of women courage to do it too.”<sup>65</sup>

“Courage” was a central theme I saw in the twitter posts on the conference.

Comments like, “there’s so much courage in the room” which came regularly through the conference’s twitter-feed, spoke of the recurring theme of courage that appeared in different ways throughout the conference. During the reflection session, the mood was capped up by an elderly man looking well into his seventies, who shared, “this weekend has been something my heart and soul has been looking for, for 38 years... I wanted to go to heaven when I was 75... I’ve lived 4 more years, and now I know why.” For him, this was a conference where he had finally seen women given a true voice – something he had not witnessed yet in his lifetime. What I observed at Christianity 21 shows how the movement puts into practice inclusiveness that crosses existing lines of structural power and dominance. In this instance, those in the movement who are aware of their structurally advantages position – white men – took a deliberate step back from their privilege, and handed the platform to women.

## 2. *Inclusive symbols and rituals at conferences*

Sociologists, particularly in the Durkheimian tradition have argued for the function of symbols and rituals to produce solidarity in social life, or in Durkheim’s terminology: “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1995). For instance, Kertzer argues that relationships are *produced* and not just expressed through ritual

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<sup>65</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-RwDNECR\\_g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-RwDNECR_g), “Christianity 21” posted 10/16/2009, accessed 08/23/2010.

(Kertzer 1988). Religion Sociologist Stephen Warner argues this point in his most recent co-authored article on Sacred Harp singing (Heider and Warner 2010). How do symbolic and ritual practices generate inclusiveness, or in the case of the Emerging Church: solidarity across differences? My analysis develops in a similar fashion to Edgell's research on how churches seeking to be multicultural enact symbolic and ritual elements explicitly designed to be inclusive in face-to-face settings (1998:463).

Emergent gatherings are often events where people from multiple denominational traditions converge. I met people from the mainline church, evangelical and even Pentecostal and Charismatic backgrounds. A clear strategy of inclusion that I have noted is how the movement acknowledges this diversity and seeks not to diminish or downplay difference. I have seen this being done symbolically in various Emerging Church gatherings. In a 2007 Brian McLaren came to Kansas City to promote his book *Everything Must Change* (2007) as part of a countrywide book tour. Brian McLaren played up stereotypes of different denominations by asking people from different denominations to raise their hands when called. He had a humorous quip for each denomination that played up a characteristic or stereotype of that particular tradition. For instance, when he asked "how many Pentecostals are here?" the Pentecostals in the room stood up and raised their hands. Brian McLaren then asked them to raise *both* hands - a clear reference to the Pentecostal style of expressive worship, something that everyone caught onto and had a good laugh about. Brian McLaren took about 10 minutes simultaneously acknowledging every tradition in the room, even asking

“did I miss any?”, and making good fun of each denomination at the same time. McLaren used this exercise to emphasize the distinctness of each tradition, noting how each one has its own treasures and “has something to bring to the table”.

I pondered this observation, and found it consistent with Emerging Church discourses that seek not to wash over differences by saying “all Christians are the same”, which would deny the reality of distinct histories and characteristics of each faith tradition. They purpose not to simply dwell on similarities, but pursue a “differentiated oneness” (Friesen 2007). In this same spirit, March 2009 saw a groundbreaking Catholic-Emergent conference held in New Mexico, which was organized by the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC), a Catholic organization headed by Father Richard Rohr, who is a Franciscan monk. It was a conference that also featured Brian McLaren as a key speaker. While I was not able to attend the conference in person, I was able to observe all of the sessions, which were webcasted. One of the most significant observations came at the closing worship, which was also included taking communion. There was a mini-ceremony, where a procession of “flag-bearers” representing each of the traditions walked through the conference hall. Each of the bearers held up a pole with a placard that had each denominational tradition printed on it. They entered the room, in symbolic procession, walking down the center aisle, and walking out again. I interpreted this as a ritual of *differentiated solidarity*. I noted with great interest that at the last person in the procession bore a placard that read “all other traditions welcome”. I interpreted this as an attempt to be inclusive beyond

the denominations represented at the conference. This was in fact, a symbolic act of *open-ended inclusiveness* that acknowledged both the breadth and diversity of Christian traditions beyond those that were represented there.

Father Richard Rohr also gave a mini-sermon before the communion, which emphasized how each tradition was uniquely important:

The crown that is Christ is too glorious to be contained by any one tradition. Even the heavens are too great to contain the mystery of God. If the heavens are not great enough to contain the mystery of God, then how could any human institution be great enough to contain God? We each have a history of goodness, but each sin- we Catholics the most. We've been around for a long time. Give yourself time. You'll catch up with us.

The theme of emphasizing distinctiveness in inclusiveness is expressed here.

Father Rohr makes every tradition indispensable to the greater "whole" by emphasizing that no tradition can solely contain that whole. Here, he also restates a common theme I heard throughout the conference: that every tradition comes with a good and bad history bar none. Father Richard Rohr commented on how "the fact that a gathering like this could actually happen" was hugely significant, and how it was a departure from church protocols and procedures. He also talked about how he was aware that people at the conference might incur criticism from their denominations for attending a gathering like this. One interviewee described to me her experience of how worshipping shoulder-to-shoulder with Catholics and people of so many different traditions, was one that she never had before, and opened her mind to a bigger sense of "the Kingdom of God".

The Emerging Church treads and engenders uncharted territory on behalf of the people from diverse traditions that engage with other traditions *through* the movement, negotiating a way to be inclusive, respect differences, and achieve solidarity without diminishing those differences. Similarly emphasizing unity and difference, rituals and symbols that seek to hold the dual goals of *difference + closeness* in balance, produce solidarity in the absence of consensus (Kertzer 1988). My analysis here also fits with Edgell's conceptualization of "ritual inclusion" that she saw congregations engage in by making changes to their worship service, with the purpose of fostering inclusiveness (Edgell 1998:452).

### 3. *Structuring local gatherings for inclusion*

In my fieldwork, I have also noted patterns in how Emergent communities of faith structure the physical environment of their worship gatherings with an eye toward inclusion. Solomon's Porch, an Emerging church led by Doug Pagitt that operates out of Minneapolis, is a good example. Publications by Pagitt himself (2005) and Tony Jones (2008) provide in-depth accounts of how and why Solomon's Porch has chosen to structure the physical environment in a particular way. Pagitt explains that their communal effort on Sunday nights, "is to limit the things that separate those in charge from those who are not; our hope is that all people will be part of this experience" (Pagitt 2005:67). As such, they manage the physical space in ways that neutralize power and downplay hierarchy typically found in such worship settings. For instance, Solomon's Porch removed the stage, and do not use podiums, so that there is no special "place of power".



When they acquired the building (an old Methodist Church built in 1933) they removed front-facing pews from the Sanctuary and put in couches arranged in a roughly concentric fashion (Pagitt 2005:67). As Tony Jones explains,

We sit on couches that are arranged in a roughly concentric fashion. The point of the interior design of couches, floor lamps, and coffee tables is twofold. First, it encourages conversation – those of us who've grown up in church have been socialized to respond to pew-sitting in a certain way: sit down and shut up (Jones 2008:215).

I observed this pattern of “sitting in the round” with all three Emergent groups I visited in Chicago in December 2009 over a month-long period of fieldwork. This included a church called Life on the Vine, which has about 200 plus congregants, and smaller communities like Jacob’s Well Community Church in a suburb of Chicago, and Wicker Park Grace in Chicago itself, both of which have about 20 to 30 attendees. None of these local congregations have a stage or elevated platform. Life on the Vine used fairly uniform chairs, while Jacob’s Well Community Church and Wicker Park Grace used a mixture of couches, and mismatched chairs and even wooden benches. What was common to all three was the concentric arrangement of chairs, where literally everyone was facing everyone else. It was not just the Pastor who was present to everyone. Sitting in a circle, I could see everyone’s faces and felt personally engaged with everyone else in the room. In Wicker Park Grace, I took part in reading liturgy, scripture, and even administered communion. Each person took communion and then were handed the bread and cup and turned to the next person sitting beside them to administer communion to them. In this way, everyone participated in *both* administering and taking communion. In all of the Emerging Churches, both big

and small, that I visited, everyone was welcome to take communion, whether Christian, baptized or not. Communion was inclusively administered, with no criteria of exclusion expressed or implied. It was an all out “open communion”.

Accompanying this structuring of the physical environment is a deliberate choice in the terms they use to describe what they are doing. For instance at Solomon’s Porch, instead of “service” – which connotes people being “served” – they call their worship time a “gathering”. I noted that Wicker Park Grace used “worship gathering” as well. In Wicker Park Grace, instead of being “served a meal”, everyone took part in a “love feast”, which was basically pot luck where everyone ate only what everyone else contributed for the meal that day. Instead of “sanctuary” Solomon’s Porch calls their worship space a “living room”. Instead of “sermon”, they use “discussion” since everyone is encouraged to speak, and the person leading the discussion facilitates instead of “preaches”. Jones explains this style as a deconstruction of the traditional sermon:

The point is to jettison the magisterial sermon that has ruled over much of Protestantism for five hundred years. Here the sermon is deconstructed, turned on its head. The Bible is referred to as a “member of the community” with whom we are in conversation, and the communal interpretation of a text bubbles up from the life of the community (Jones 2008:216).

The way that Tony Jones explains their use of terms, shows that Solomon’s Porch is attuned to the structuring dimension of language to shape reality. As Jones conveys, they practice renaming familiar elements of a church worship because “language doesn’t just point to things; language *does* things. It makes things happen, particularly in the mind of those who are using the language” (Jones 2008:15). Hence, from an analytical perspective, this shows that

Emerging Church leaders like Pagitt and Jones are aware of the structuring character of culture, or “the biasing effects of culture on thought” (DiMaggio 1997:281). Through practices of “renaming” and re-structuring physical spaces, they counteract how physical space and language privilege power and promote exclusiveness.

Many Emerging Church practitioners are creative in how they structure their local gatherings to foster inclusiveness in some radical and even controversial ways. In a section on how Emerging Churches welcome the stranger, Bolger and Gibbs (2005) highlight various strategies undertaken by practitioners in the local settings. For instance, the Ikon collective in Belfast, Ireland has a “reverse evangelism” project, where they visit people of other faiths or invite them to the Ikon gathering, and allow themselves to be evangelized, believing that there is something to be learned from the religious “other”. In the same spirit, an Emergent practitioner and author named Dwight Friesen describes how in one particular service in his community in Seattle, they pulled quotes from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim mystics, and discussed what it meant to be a spiritual person from these traditions, and found many similarities across traditions (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:132). Another practitioner, Spencer Burke in Newport Beach, California, discusses his community’s strategy to “hold true to the Christian tradition” while being inclusive instead of exclusive. Burke describes how they learned from a Buddhist family attending their church, who took them through guided meditation. His community even visited a Buddhist temple. Burke

celebrates the many ways that God is revealed, even through people of other faiths. (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:132).

Another Emergent practitioner, Samir Selmanovic describes how in his community, he invited a Wiccan practitioner, a woman named “Sue”, to say a blessing over a group of Pastors who were struggling with failure in their ministries. In a famous Emergent Village podcast titled “Finding our God in the Other” that generated a lot of controversy, Samir gives this vivid account:

It was Sue’s turn to bless the gathering, with kindness of a person who has no doubt our world is saturated with the spiritual, she approached the pulpit, and she said,

*“Dear Holy Spirit, I am not a Christian, but I and my son are cared for in this church. One day, I might become a believer. These Pastors are worn out in their service to you doing good for people. Please make them see how important their work is. What would the world be like without them? May they walk on, so that I, and people like me, can find a way one day, and come to believe”*

If you have never been blessed by a witch, you missed a lot. The Elder behind me came and whispered behind my ear, “thank you Jesus!”

A hush fell over the crowd, and her words lingered in the air like wonderful heathen scent. We were hoping that if we just stayed quiet, there would be more words coming. We were basking in the love, hope and faith, of this woman interceding to our God on our behalf. Do you have experiences like this? Do you ever experience our God in the “other”?<sup>66</sup>

These various “stories” of practitioners give us a window into how Emergent faith communities practice inclusivity in local settings. Gibbs and Bolger sum up their section on how Emerging Churches welcome the stranger by concluding, “The underlying values that determine their relationships with sincere adherents of other faiths are respect, humility, and inclusivity. Emerging Churches are

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<sup>66</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/podcast/samir-selmanovic-on-finding-our-god-in-the-other>, “Samir Selmanovic on Finding our God in the Other” podcast, posted 02/12/2007, accessed 08/24/2010.

prepared to engage in an open interchange and to leave the outcome to God's hands. *The underlying principle is inclusivity. Therefore, all are welcome.*" (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:133) What I observed and experienced in my own fieldwork settings confirmed Gibbs and Bolger's conclusions.

#### 4. *Engendering non-homogeneous spaces*

From my sample of Emerging congregations in the Midwest, I see how the movement engenders inclusiveness through drawing diverse "others" to these spaces. My point in this section is that Emerging Churches draw people seeking out non-homogenous spaces. They draw blacks who do not necessarily want to go to a black church, gays and lesbians who do not want to go to a "gay church", as well as liberals and conservatives seeking fellowship with each other across their theological differences. I saw one example in a video discussion posted by an Emerging Church Pastor Phil Shepherd, who leads a community called the *Eucatastrophe* in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. He was discussing sexual identity and faith with two self-identified lesbians attending his church.<sup>67</sup> Both of them explained that neither of them was looking for a gay church. They felt that gay churches emphasized sexuality too much. Their gay identity did not encompass their entire person, and so they were drawn to a more differentiated space. They found what they were looking for in this particular Emerging Church. In similar fashion, a lesbian couple who attends Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, posted a blog entry, explaining why they chose Solomon's Porch as their community of faith,

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<sup>67</sup> <http://whiskeypreacher.com/?p=63>, video discussion "sexual identity and faith" posted 02/23/2010, accessed 04/07/2010.

For me, I feel safe *here*. When I say I want a church that will take me just as I am, I don't want to belong to the "gay church" or the church for women, or church for cat owners, or churches that gather around the commonality of their members. I like being amongst a diversity of people who share a common purpose and dream for what God is doing, not necessarily focused on what I am doing. Personally speaking, I do not need a flag or sign, though some people may want that. What I have longed for all along is to break bread, to shake hands, to help out, and to serve and participate in what God is doing in the world—just like you.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, at a conference in Fort Wayne, Indiana, I heard an African-American woman in her early twenties explain why she attended an Emerging Church. She made a choice to come out of her previous black church setting because she felt she was at a different place in her faith, and didn't identify with the issues the black churches were concerned about. She identified more with her Emergent congregation in Chicago, which she described as being predominantly white.

For a self-identified atheist named Nicholas Croston, a white male in his thirties, he feels that being a regular at Chicago's Wicker Park Grace, "helps him be a better atheist". He says that being there helps him clarify why he does not believe in God. In his personal story that was posted on the Wicker Park Grace website, he explains that, "while I don't believe in god, I've learned interesting ideas of how the Bible can be interpreted to be a potent force for humanism".<sup>69</sup>

When I spoke to Nicholas one day after the Wicker Park Grace gathering, he told me that he had been attending Wicker Park Grace for three years. He was indeed a regular presence for each of my five visits there. He explained to me that he saw a "blind dogmatism" in atheist circles that unquestioningly rejected

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<sup>68</sup> <http://sweetbiandbi.wordpress.com/2010/07/19/our-soapbox/>, "Our Soapbox", published 07/19/2010, accessed 08/25/2010.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.wickerparkgrace.net/communitylife.html?start=4>, "peace and happiness through disbelief and questioning" by Nicholas Croston, posted date unknown, accessed 08/25/2010.

everything by way of God or religion. He was drawn to Wicker Park Grace because it afforded him the opportunity to safely explore the possibility that he as an atheist “might be wrong”. In the process, he felt drawn into community with people who believe differently from him. He felt included. In the process, he had become a staple part of this Emergent faith community.

I thought it was interesting that I have heard Emergent practitioners themselves express this “the other helps me be better” sentiment. Emergent author Samir Selmanovic tells of how an Imam supported his decision to convert from Islam to Christianity, despite his parents’ objections (Selmanovic 2007). He attributes his Christian faith to this Imam. Wicker Park Grace Pastor Nanette Sawyer recounts how Hinduism and Eastern practices have helped her faith, and she says that, “I can say I am a Christian today because of a Hindu meditation master (Sawyer 2007:44).

Local Emerging Church gatherings are sites where inclusive social spaces are being created, with people coalescing around them seeking diversity and difference. In the previous chapter on mapping (chapter 5), I introduced the idea that the Emerging Church envisions itself as a “borderland” (Anzaldúa 1999) where diverse people can encounter each other. These examples show how Emerging Churches have created safe spaces for people who are precisely seeking diversity and “encounter” (Tsing 2005) instead of homogeneity and familiarity, where they are amongst people who do not share similar beliefs or identities, but still in the process find community: *difference + closeness*.

## **The problems of inclusion**

In caveat, my analysis thus far might paint an overly rosy picture of how inclusive the movement is. While inclusive strategies in both discursive and face-to-face social worlds have yielded some positive results, there are certainly limits to their success. Despite their best intentions, implicit lines of exclusion remain. This final section of the chapter looks at some problematic aspects of their attempts to be inclusive.

### *The crisis of representation 1: The bane of all-inclusiveness*

The movement has been criticized for being exclusive along lines of race (white), class (middle class) and gender (male). Conservative theologian John Piper says the Emerging Church is mainly a “middle-class, upper middle-class white departure from orthodoxy”, pointing out that it “wasn’t a phenomenon in the black community”.<sup>70</sup> The “white” face of the movement has been the subject of a critical discussion by Korean American seminary professor and author Soong-Chan Rah (2009). This even featured on the front-page of the April 2010 issue of progressive Christian magazine *Sojourners*. The headlining article titled, “Is the “Emerging Church” for White’s Only?” was also accompanied by a provocative cover graphic.

These criticisms also come from minorities themselves. Discursively, I highlighted how an African American man named Drew Hart, who posted on the Emergent Village website felt that the Emerging Church was still dominated by white middle class men. He felt the movement was not doing enough to include

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<sup>70</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkGg5A4QEjg>, published 02/29/2010, accessed 04/06/2010.



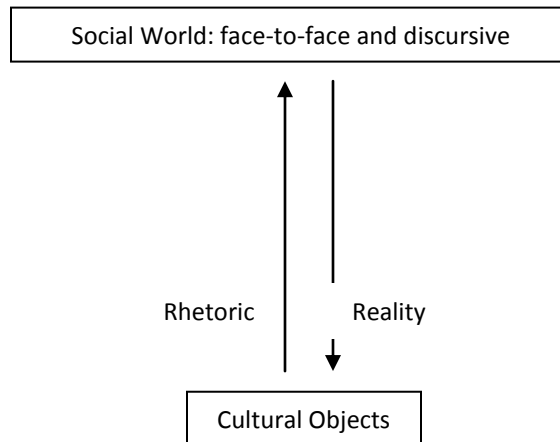
minority voices, and refrained from adopting the “Emergent” label.<sup>71</sup> Lines of criticism exist, and the movement is well aware of this. In another instance, An Asian American male named Dan Ra, who self-identifies as Emergent, expressed, “although I was pleased to see that all of Christianity 21’s speakers were women, I was disheartened to see only one was a minority”.<sup>72</sup> Dan’s response highlights the challenge that the Emerging Church Movement faces, which is in part because it tries to be “all inclusive”. When they structure a face-to-face social world event like Christianity 21 to redress gender inequality, observers like Dan note shortcomings along lines of race. I call this problem “the bane of all-inclusiveness”, which the Emerging Church Movement unfortunately suffers from as a “victim” of its own broad inclusive agenda.

The criticisms I featured above are depicted in the diagram below. This diagram initially featured in chapter 4 on the social world of the Emerging Church. I introduce it here to illustrate how discursively, the “all inclusive” rhetoric perpetuated by the movement faces criticisms that they do not live up to their ideals in *both* discursive and face-to-face social worlds. Hence the “reality” is not reflected (broken arrow) by the ideals that are articulated in cultural objects like books and blogs.

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<sup>71</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “Where does Emergence fit into the Christian tribes” response 18 by Drew Hart, posted 08/29/2009, accessed 08/25/2010.

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/park-pushing-boundaries>, “Pushing the Boundaries Together” by David Park and Dan Ra, posted 03/11/2010, accessed 08/25/2010.



**Figure 2: Rhetoric versus reality**

In response, I have observed Emergent identifiers launching a vigorous defense of the movement, seeking to demonstrate the movement *does* match up to its ideals in *both* discursive and face-to-face social worlds. On the Emergent Village Website, the webmaster Steve Knight, who often responds to critics in defense of the movement, expresses that he is “grateful for the non-American, non-Western voices who’ve offered their thoughts here in this blog”, he implores critics who complain at the lack of diversity, to “look around, you will find them”.<sup>73</sup> As another example, in response to the video where John Piper critiques the Emerging Church for being a white, male, phenomenon, Mike Clawson, who is on leadership with Emergent Village, expressed through his Facebook page: Do folks who complain about the Emerging Church being too “white” or too “male” or too “middle-class” realize how insulting and disempowering that is to all the many

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/where-does-emergence-fit-in-the-christian-tribes>, “Where does Emergence fit in the Christian Tribes” by Gideon Addington, response 10 by Steve Knight, posted 08/27/2009, accessed 08/25/2010.

non-whites, women, and lower-income folk who are already making significant contributions to it?<sup>74</sup> This generated a robust discussion over Facebook over inclusiveness and the Emerging Church. The publication of the Sojourner's article, led to one interesting discursive response worth discussing. Julie Clawson, wife of Mike Clawson, and also an author of a book, initiated a "synchroblog", or synchronized blog, calling for "people from the margins" to write on the topic "what is the Emerging Church"? In her call for voices, she notes that while there is a perception that the emerging church is mostly a white male phenomenon,

In fact, their voices are in truth no longer the dominant voices as those of us who were previously marginalized... are now defining the conversation regarding the church's future. Our gender, our race, our orientation, our theological or socioeconomic background can no longer by any stretch of the imagination be reason to silence us. We are bringing our knowledge and perspectives from the margins to help guide the church forward. It isn't something we hope to achieve someday; it is what is happening now. We are the emerging church. We are the voice of the church.<sup>75</sup>

People were instructed to post their blog entry on the same date, April 19th, 2010, and to provide a link to their blog post. Julie Clawson compiled all the blog posts for everyone who participated, on her own blog.<sup>76</sup> Women's voices slightly outnumbered the men's voices, although from what I could tell just by looking at names, there were only three or four who were minorities, all Asian, none Black or Latino. The participants in the Synchroblog were overwhelmingly white. As far

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<sup>74</sup> Mike Clawson, Facebook status update, posted on 04/06/2010, accessed on 04/06/2010.

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=113483942014464&index=1>, "What is Emerging Synchroblog" by Julie Clawson, date posted unknown, date accessed 08/26/2010/

<sup>76</sup> <http://julieclawson.com/2010/04/19/what-is-emerging/>, "What is Emerging?" by Julie Clawson, posted 04/19/2010, accessed 08/26/2010.

as I could tell, there was only one queer voice.<sup>77</sup> Men played, or rather downplayed their part by posting on their awareness of their own privilege.<sup>78</sup> So although the call for voices was for people from the margins to speak up, it is arguable whether the people who ended up contributing were actually “from the margins”.

In the same way that people from the movement seek discursive proof that the movement is inclusive, defenders similarly point to face-to-face social worlds to argue their case. One individual, who attends Wicker Park Grace in Chicago, posted on the issue of race and the Emerging Church, noting on her blog that:

In the core group of 40 people at my own church, I was able to identify 14 non-white people, 4 of whom were immigrants. That's 35%. And yet the idea persists that the Emergent movement is predominantly white.<sup>79</sup>

My research with Wicker Park Grace confirms this account. I do see diversity when I visit local groups like Wicker Park Grace, but there is no denying that others, like Jacob's Well in Kansas City are resoundingly white. This might be a function of Chicago's more racially diverse population compared to a Midwest City like Kansas City. For instance in Wicker Park Grace, I met with and interacted with people from a host of nationalities and races. Although Wicker Park Grace does not have a stable attendance, over my several site visits with

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<sup>77</sup> <http://mojojules.wordpress.com/2010/04/19/what-is-the-emerging-church/>, “What is the Emerging Church?” by Julie Kennedy, posted 04/19/2010, accessed 08/26/2010.

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.emergingchristian.com/2010/04/emerging-synchroblog-what-is-emerging.html>, “Emerging Synchroblog: “What is the Emerging Church?” by Peter J. Walker, posted 04/19/2010, accessed 08/26/2010.

<sup>79</sup> <http://princessmax.blogspot.com/2010/02/where-things-stand.html>, posted 02/18/2010, accessed 04/06/2010.

the Sunday worship gathering, I met people of many different nationalities, colors and ethnic heritages: African, African-American, Latino, East Asian and South Asian, all in a congregation of about 30 to 40 people.

Emerging Church identifiers point to the relatively short life span of the movement to explain why some ideals, like inclusiveness, have not yet been fully achieved. But they point to accomplishments in face-to-face social worlds, to provide accounts of the ways things *have* changed. In response to the *Sojourners* article on the whiteness of the Emerging Church, Tony Jones writes, “five years ago everyone was saying that we were too male, but people aren’t saying that anymore because women are now leading the movement. So be patient.”<sup>80</sup> Jones is writing this in the aftermath of the Christianity 21 conference, where they had just featured 21 women speakers. This “be patient” comment echoes what other identifiers say in response to criticism that the movement is not inclusive enough along different lines of race, class and gender.

*The crisis of representation 2: the price of discursive success*

In many ways, the Emerging Church is a victim of its own discursive success. Many of the white, middle-class, educated males were the ones who initially propelled the Emerging Church to prominence among Evangelicals and to its broader audience. Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt and Spencer Burke, to name some, all fall under that category. All are also originally from Evangelical traditions. But these individuals are ironically complicit in

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<sup>80</sup> <http://blog.tonyj.net/2010/04/is-sojourners-for-straight-only/>, posted 04/06/2010, accessed 04/09/2010.

perpetuating this crisis of representation since they continue to headline conferences, and speak up publically for the movement, especially when it matters. For instance, in chapters 7 and 8, I discuss examples of how Brian McLaren answers to prominent critics like Chuck Colson, and how this is played out on a discursive platform. Some, like Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Tim Keel and Doug Pagitt have taken steps to reverse this tendency by stepping away from leadership in Emergent Village. But McLaren in particular, still continues to headline conferences, at least in the several that I observed for my fieldwork from 2009 to 2010. Though Tony Jones has stepped down from being National Coordinator of Emergent Village since October of 2008, he still lends his voice to vigorously defend the movement when criticisms (like the Sojourner's article) arise.

The point is that white, educated middle-class men symbolically represent a kind of elitism that the movement wishes to avoid. But yet, there is no escaping the fact that the movement rode on the popularity and reputation of these white men to draw an audience to its message in the first place. In my interview with Eliacin Rosario Cruz, a Puerto Rican American serving on the Board of Directors of Emergent Village, he acknowledge as much, saying that the likes of Brian McLaren and Tony Jones had elevated the Emerging Church Movement to prominence early on in the life of the movement. The purveyors of the discourse of diversity and inclusivity, or – “the ones who got the conversations started in the first place”, in their very personal profiles, are indicators that feed the

contradictory perception that white males dominate the Emerging Church. It was put this way by one comment I came across:

I agree that there is an "emergent" that nobody owns, that is people responding to the voice of God, that isn't any color or age or class. But the "emergent" that has access to power and resources, THAT [emphasis mine] looks more like the color, age, gender, and class of power and money in the USA.<sup>81</sup>

This reveals a contradiction of inclusiveness, where some of these public conversations find minority voices seeking legitimacy in a discourse that is ultimately constructed primarily by elite white men. The significance lies not just in the specific content of what is being said, but in the form of discourse where privileged white men engage the ideas of other equally privileged white men. It is these conversations that hold the most cultural weight, drawing voices of seminary trained white male emergents who speak to those people in their language and in that domain of privilege. In this way, conversations themselves determine particular voices. While perhaps addressing the same issues, other minority non-white, non-male voices in other places might not perhaps carry the same weight or draw the same attention. Minority voices face the contradictory prospect of having to ride on the "coat tails" of white elite male voices.

For example, through events like Christianity 21, white men actively redress those who have traditionally had less of a voice, by disrupting their own privilege and taking a backseat. But even in the instance of Christianity 21, they are still caught in an unenviable conundrum of creating an inclusive space for women, but still ultimately being perceived as controlling the space: Doug Pagitt for instance, held a microphone throughout the conference and used it tell the

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<sup>81</sup> Facebook response, posted 04/06/2010

speakers how much time they had, in what I felt was a pretty intrusive way, interjecting “one minute!” while the person was still speaking. As an observer, and thinking about the power dynamics in the conference, this struck me as a reminder of just who ultimately engendered and controlled the space even though all the speakers were female. I wondered if others might have picked up on this irony or felt the same discomfort I did.

While the Emerging Church struggles with this crisis of representation, it takes measures towards representing the diversity and inclusiveness it preaches. In my interview with Mike Clawson, I asked him if he thought the Emerging Church Movement had succeeded in being inclusive. While acknowledging that there was a lot that could be done, he went on to point out that for the current crop of appointment-holders on Emergent Village, there were a good representative number of non-whites on the team. This included a woman of Lebanese background, who also Pastors an Emerging Church in Dallas, a Latino as well as an African American man. The ratio of women to men, and minorities to whites, was much higher in this crop of new board members. Since the movement is particularly hard to define and quantify, this diversity on the level of leadership in Emergent Village is an important symbolic marker of the diversity and inclusiveness the movement preaches. It represents the “diversity to come” that the movement hopes to see in time.

Eliacin Rosario-Cruz also filled me in on another way they were attempting address this crisis of representation. He told me that for this year’s Emergent Theological Conversation that would be held in Atlanta in October 2010, they



were making a clear departure from previous years by inviting voices from the margins. Emergent Village holds an “Emergent Theological Conversation” conference every year. Compiling data going back to 2004, these theological conversations featured some very prominent theologians the likes of Walter Brueggemann (in 2004) and Jürgen Moltmann (in 2009), and continental philosophers like Jack Caputo and Richard Kearney (in 2007). Without exception, every theological conversation going back to 2004 featured white men. The two invited speakers for the 2010 Theological conversation however, featured an African female Professor of New Testament from the University of Botswana named Musa Dube, author of *A Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (2000). It also featured a Native American from the Rosebud Lakota/Sioux Tribe named Richard Twiss, who was also a published author of a book titled *One Church, Many Tribes* (2000).<sup>82</sup> This was the first concerted attempt in the history of this Emergent event, where non-white voices were invited to headline, directly addressing the crisis of representation.

Yet, it must be said that this very conscious and intentional plan to include marginal voices, contrasts with some of the more haphazard and spur of the moment inclusiveness that I have experienced in my research with the movement.

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<sup>82</sup> <http://events.constantcontact.com/register/event?oeidk=a07e2x12pqm0181b7a6>, “The 2010 Emergent Village Theological Conversation: Creating Liberated Spaces in a Post Colonial World”, accessed 08/27/2010.

*Opportunistic inclusion: the “minority” perspective I didn’t want to represent*

As a non-American Chinese from Singapore, I have experienced how my presence at Emergent gatherings (unwittingly and sometimes unwillingly) represents the symbolic “other” they feel the need to include. I have been filmed, interviewed, and put on speaking panels, all by just showing up. My unique identity has itself produced relevant data. Reactions to my presence at Emergent gatherings showed me how representativeness is an important indicator of diversity. For instance, when I was at the Christianity 21 conference, one individual came up to me and noted that “Postmodernegro” Anthony Smith and I were “representing” since most people at the conference were white. A moment of awkwardness ensued and I did not respond to the person because I did not know what to say. Up to that point, I didn’t see myself as “representing” anyone. But I began to be more aware of what my presence might mean. In another incident, when I was talking to the Pastor at Jacob’s Well about regular fieldwork visits over weekends, he noted that my presence would be a good contribution to the “minority quotient” of the church, and noted that diversity was something that they still struggled with. Again, I did not expect my presence to “count” in that way.

In fact, as I recount my experience at Emerging Church conferences, I realize that I have been filmed, interviewed and put on speaking panels, all just by showing up. As the only Asian in attendance at a Christianity 21 event in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in October 2009, I was pulled aside by Spencer Burke, a prominent figure in the movement, and founder of theooze.com, for an

interview. The interview was relatively short, but the most striking thing about it was when he asked me about what “an Asian perspective on the Emerging Church” was. I was stumped, because it was not something I had ever thought of, and I also felt disconcerted that out of nowhere, I suddenly represented an “Asian” perspective. In the bigger picture of the conference, and me being the only Asian among mostly whites, I look back and see this as *opportunistic inclusion*, spurred by my “minority” presence. I was also featured for all of two seconds, on a post-conference video of Christianity 21, as the token Asian face at the conference.<sup>83</sup>

I experienced a similar scenario in another conference I attended in Fort Wayne Indiana, in January 2010. I was looking forward to an upcoming panel titled: *Why is the Missional-Emergent movement still so pre-dominantly white?* Out of the blue, I was approached by one of the organizers to be on that very panel a few hours before the session. Given that I did not have any connections with anyone there, added to the fact that I was only one of two Asians, I figured again that my unique identity in that context put me in this position. An African-American woman in her early twenties, who was in attendance, was also asked to be on the panel. We were both asked to give our take on why the movement was so “white”. We both talked about how for example, the African-American community was “already doing” some of the things the Emerging Church was talking about, especially in terms of social justice. I tried to represent myself as a sociologist the best I could by saying that we needed to be careful not to

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<sup>83</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-RwDNECR\\_g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-RwDNECR_g), “Christianity 21” by Don Heatley, posted 10/16/2009, accessed 08/26/2010. I featured around minute 2:50.

“essentialize” people based on their race, and that people were more than their race. My comment was also partly in response to my own thoughts on why I had suddenly been invited to sit on the panel.

I found these fieldwork experiences significant because they highlight telling instances where the “excluded” or minority perspective was sought, through what I can only appropriately describe as an “opportunistic” form of inclusion: by exploiting the diversity that was not planned for, but just happened to be there.

### **Conclusion: when “inclusion” is not enough**

It is true that the Emerging Church is a very “educated” conversation. This observation also extends to the non-whites that I have met and interacted with at Emergent gatherings are typically educated, articulate, and many are Pastors and existing clergy in their own denominations. The educated and “heady” nature of the movement could be argued as an implicit line of exclusion that belies the intentions of the Emerging Church to be inclusive across a spectrum of structural variables. This is an issue that people within the movement are aware of and have expressed. One person said it like this:

I don’t think the EC is only for whites, but I do worry that we deal so much in theological elitism that we’re not inclusive for those without MDivs as we can and should be.<sup>84</sup>

For what critics point to as a lack of inclusiveness, might be explained by the fact that the Emerging Church is asking questions other minority-based religious groups might not be engaged with. The *perception* of not being inclusive in this

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<sup>84</sup> <http://blog.tonyj.net/2010/04/is-sojourners-for-straight-only/>, “Is Sojourner’s for Straight’s only?” by Tony Jones, response 6 by Matthew L. Kelley, posted 04/06/2010, accessed 08/25/2010.

instance might simply be a matter of the Emerging Church being interested in a totally different set of questions and concerns related to the Christian faith. This then, is where the issue ceases to be about inclusion, but becomes one of affinity.

Anthony Smith, who goes by the online moniker “Postmoderneegro” in the Emerging Church blogosphere, explained to me that African Americans were not really engaged with the Emerging Church conversation, partly because the black church was already deeply connected with issues like social justice, whereas white Christians were only just coming to consciousness about it. This echoed another African American female I heard speak at a conference, and voiced how she felt the black church was already doing many of the things that the Emergent conversation was talking about, further echoed by another black male named Drew Hart who posted this exact comment on the Emergent Village website.

This point about the Emerging Church being at a “different place” compared to other minority churches was spurred by a personal experience I had while in Chicago which I will briefly reconstruct from my field notes:

During a month long research trip at the end of 2009 and stretching into early 2010, I visited Emerging Churches in the Chicago area extensively, and conducted interviews with several practitioners. On one weekday, feeling particularly tired of being immersed in all things Emergent, I decided to visit an international church led by a Latino Pastor that I found over the internet. This visit had nothing to do with my Emerging Church research – or so I thought. I simply

wanted to take a breather and see what other churches were doing. As I noticed the diversity of Asians, blacks and Latinos in the congregation, the expressive Pentecostal style of worship, and the charismatic style of preaching, I could not help but note the deep contrast as my thoughts turned toward the Emerging Church. I thought about the contrast of language, of concerns – As the Pastor called up people to prophesy over them, I wondered to myself: *where would prophecy and prophetic gifting fit into the Emerging Church conversation?* Similarly I thought of how out of place the ideas of postmodernism and “deconstructing” church hierarchy and institutions would be in this minority church with a diversity that did not extend to whites in their midst. This contrast gave me a window of perception to see how implicit lines of exclusion may operate in the bigger scheme of things. (Field notes, December 2009)

The ideal state of inclusiveness and diversity the movement seeks may perhaps not be so easily accomplished, since it is no longer about whether the movement employs the right strategies. It becomes a problem of mismatched goals and “being at different places”. So the questions and problems with “modern” Christianity that the Emerging Church Movement is addressing, perhaps has little or no resonance with black or other ethnic-based minority churches whose members are not in a postmodern “deconstructive” mode of critiquing their institutions. Emergents realize that not everyone will want to come to the conversation table. Indeed, as I have heard from my interviews, part of the ethic of inclusion that the Emerging Church espouses is precisely that some people may simply have no interest in joining the conversation. While they hope

a diversity of voices will come to the conversation table, part of the Emergent ethic of inclusion is to not expect that everyone will.

A major criticism of the Emerging Church in this section has been their orientation toward a more passive form of inclusion, with “conversation” being a convenient byword for a more hands off approach. In the next chapter on bridge-building, I look at strategies and practices of bridge-building: a distinctly more active form of “reaching out” toward diverse others.

## **Chapter 7 Bridge-building: activating the outward-oriented social spiral**

*How can religious groups socially spiral outwards and foster vibrant, diverse relationships, instead of being insular and inward-oriented? This chapter explores how the ECM builds relational bridges with diverse others to foster relationships across lines of difference. Distinguishing between bridging in face-to-face social worlds and discursive social worlds, I explore their strategies for bridge-building, outline the processes involved, and evaluate their efforts. In this chapter, I also attempt to extend Paul Lichterman's discussion of bridge-building and its relationship to the social spiral. While Lichterman's work primarily focused on face-to-face bridging interactions, I include a discursive dimension to bridging. I also distinguish between bounded and unbounded groups and how that affects their ability to build bridges. These arguments enhance our understanding of how the outwardly-oriented social spiral works.*

### **Theoretical roots of bridge-building: generating outward ties**

While there is no well-defined body of sociological literature on the topic, social bridge-building has been an implicit concern of social scientists as we have pondered social solidarity and the quality of human relationships in the midst of vast social changes. Theorists, like Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Tonnies and Simmel have all been variously concerned with the loss of community and the weakening of face-to-face relationships in industrial society. It is in our DNA as sociologists to be concerned about the nature and quality of social ties, connections and association people have in society. Others, like Tocqueville (1969 [1835]), Dewey (1922, 1927 and 1939) and Addams (1910, 2002 [1902]), looking through a narrower analytical lens upon the American context, have asked: how can people foster diverse, vibrant, broad-based relationships that work for the good of society? What can inspire people to be interested, engaged



and actively participating in the greater social good? How can people care not just for those in their own group, but in the wider community? This discussion of “civic” society, often explores what strengthens democracy. The general consensus among these theorists is that the ability of individuals and groups to generate new ties is good for civic society. According to Lichterman, this strand of thinking is sometimes called the Tocquevillian or neo-Tocquevillian argument about civic life (Lichterman 2005:11).

Sociologists of religion have also been variously concerned with religious groups and their outward oriented relationships. Ammerman (2005) notes that congregations do attempt to create social bonds outside of the institutional context, particularly providing resource support for non-church partners. But this is the exception rather than the norm. Mark Chaves (2004) argues that congregations tend to be principally strong and inward oriented, providing goods and services for members, instead of pursuing social services or justice oriented activities for the good of the broader community.

Both Ammerman and Chaves argue that most typical congregations are more devoted to internal organizational and specifically religious practices rather than to “reaching out” across social distances and forging connections that can bridge a diverse society (Lichterman and Potts: 2009:143). Whether discussing volunteerism (1991), religious diversity and multiculturalism (2005) or civil society participation (1996), widely-published sociologist Robert Wuthnow has also variously argued about the strengths and weaknesses of Christian groups in America to bridge social distances and work across difference. In one of his

latest works, *Boundless Faith* (2009), Wuthnow discusses how the globalized environment has facilitated Christian groups in America to collaborate across national boundaries, and has facilitated transnational ties between religious and secular organizations, hence arguing that from a trans-global perspective, religious groups (particularly Christian) in America are not that insular and inward looking as other research might suggest.

Paul Lichterman's *Elusive Togetherness* (2005) deals directly with how religious groups can successfully build relational bridges. He takes a qualitative-comparative approach on case studies of religious groups attempting to reach out and forge working relationships with community organizations in order to engage in civic participation. Lichterman focuses on culture: the group customs, their interaction and communication within the group setting that influenced whether groups were able to reach out beyond their group boundaries. Lichterman's core concepts prove influential for my own. A number of other concepts related to bridge-building need to be fleshed out, because it sets the theoretical agenda for my arguments in this chapter.

#### *Bridging: definition and significance*

Much of the theoretical development on "bridging" has been developed in relation to the "social capital" concept. Robert Putnam (1995, 2000) has generated much theoretical discussion over his social capital concept across disciplinary fields. Putnam speaks of two main components of the social capital concept: *bonding social capital* and *bridging social capital*. Bonding refers to the

value assigned to homogenous social networks and bridging refers to that of social networks that are socially heterogeneous. Bridging social capital is what Paxton (1999) refers to as “cross-cutting ties”. Bridging social capital seemed to hold some promise for understanding *difference + closeness*. It occurs when members of one group connect with members of other groups for access or support or to gain information. Bridging social capital is argued to have a host of other benefits for societies, governments, individuals, and communities. It is argued that bridging social capital helps a group connect to other individuals and groups across social differences.

Social capital theorists have argued that both kinds of connections are valuable. Bonding social capital is perceived to be more easily accomplished, but bridging social capital is intrinsically less likely to develop automatically than bonding social capital. (Putnam and Feldstein 2003: 279). According to Francis Fukuyama, this is because in-group solidarity is often purchased at the price of hostility towards out-group members. Fukuyama notes a “natural human proclivity for dividing the world into friends and enemies” (Fukuyama 2001:8). As a result, groups often have “a narrow radius of trust”. In-group solidarity produced by bonding social capital reduces the ability of group members to co-operate with outsiders (Fukuyama 2001:9), which makes bridging social capital essential because it broadens the radius of trust that will enable connections across borders of all sorts.

Some theorists have argued that bonding social capital is a necessary antecedent for the development of bridging social capital (Ferguson and Dickens

1999; Warren, Thompson and Saegert 2001; Larsen Et. Al., 2004:65). Bonding and bridging can work together productively if they are in balance, or they may also work against each other: so too much bonding may prevent groups from bridging. Overall, theorists are more certain about their conclusion on the consequences of bonding social capital. It is clear that bonding social capital has both positive and negative effects – building in-group solidarity, but also causing groups to become insular and elitist. But when it comes to bridging the literature seems to be much more slanted toward the positive effects of bridging, without a concomitant emphasis on its negative aspects.

The lack of theoretical clarity on bridging can be attributed to the ambiguity of the term and the variety of usages it has (Lichterman 2005:27). “Bridging” in social capital arguments has been used in at least 3 different ways: 1) It can refer to relationships that cross demographic divides like class, age, ethnicity, etc. (Portes, 1998); (2) it can refer to bridges across “structural gaps” between networks of people who are not necessarily dissimilar, but who are merely disconnected – for example due to geographic distances (Burt, 1992); and (3) it may refer to the ability to access resources like information, knowledge, finance from external source (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). Lichterman provides a working definition of a bridge, which is: a routinized relationship a group has to individuals or groups it perceives as outside the group. (Lichterman 2005:44). Lichterman is much more heavily focused on culture, interaction and communication in his conceptual definition of bridges and bridging. In this chapter, I hold onto this culture-oriented definition of bridging forwarded by

Lichterman, while including the meanings of bridging afforded by the 3 variants of the term discussed above. In my observations of the Emerging Church Movement, I saw an application of “bridging” not just in how Lichterman conceptualized it, but also in terms of these meanings. At this point, it is necessary to lay out how bridge-building relates to Lichterman’s larger argument of the social spiral, which is important to my argument in this chapter.

*Bridge-building and the social spiral argument*

According to Lichterman, “the social spiral engages when groups cultivate bridging social capital” (Lichterman 2005:26) Lichterman condenses different strands of thinking about how groups can generate outward ties into a conceptualization called “the social spiral argument”. According to Lichterman:

When individuals join a civic group, the meanings they develop by talking to one another encourage them to spiral outward, so that they create enduring relationships not only with other group members but with individuals and groups outside the group. As group members, they may create new relationships with sorts of people they would not meet otherwise, people who come from different backgrounds. In the simplest terms, the style of interaction inside civic groups affects the kinds of relationships that members can cultivate outside. (Lichterman 2005:11)

For Lichterman, the social spiral pertains to how groups develop meanings together that shape their possibilities for spiraling outwards (2005:12). It is interactions and communication internal to groups that determine the quality of their relationships with those outside the group. Lichterman also asserts that there is a positive correlation between the ability of groups to spiral outwards, and the extent of their civic contribution. For Lichterman then, groups that are able to spiral outwards make for better citizens who care about the larger society

beyond their own small group. The spiral goes outwards when people “learn to do things with a widening circle of people” (p.13). For Lichterman, this means that groups need to bridge across social divides of many kinds. Importantly, he argues that “any social spiral that does not bridge some social divide is likely to be a short one” (p.14), thus establishing an important link between bridge-building and an outwardly-oriented social spiral.

In this chapter, I seek to further explore and theoretically develop the conceptual link between Lichterman’s social spiral argument and the conceptualization of “bridging” through analyzing my data on the Emerging Church. In this chapter I would like to explore how we can think better sociologically with the social spiral argument. According to Lichterman, when people develop qualitatively different kinds of “bridging” relationships, it produces, “very different social spirals with different potentials for crossing social differences” (Lichterman 2005:27). Lichterman fleshes this out in his analysis of different Christian groups and their attempts to build relationships with those outside their group. Some succeed and some do not, even though all sought to build bridges across difference.

My chapter seeks to illuminate the particular “style” that the Emerging Church employs to bridge social divides, which may differ from how other Christian groups do so. As Lichterman highlights, reaching out means different things in different groups. In his research, he followed the groups’ own definitions, their own ways of defining the “we” on the one side of the bridge and the “they” on the other side. (Lichterman 2005:43) All the groups he studied

wanted to “reach out” and build bridges to categorical “others” or “outsiders” in the larger community, but not all succeeded. Wanting to reach out was not the problem. All of Lichterman’s groups were sincerely reaching out. Good intentions only went so far. It was *how* different groups conceived and operationalized bridge-building that ultimately proved problematic.

### *The Emergent “style” of building bridges*

The Emerging Church style of bridging social distances is an idea that I have referred to throughout this dissertation. This is the style of bridge-building that will background all my analysis of data in this chapter:

#### *Difference + closeness*

Other Christian groups may do Christian outreach with the intention of proselytizing or converting the “other”, which is expressed by a different equation:

#### *Difference + closeness → sameness*

In this instance, this bridge-building project is one that ultimately seeks to assimilate the “other” to the self. So, church groups diminish social distances by proselytizing in order to convert the “other” into their religion. The goal is not to “leave them as they are” or to preserve their identity, but to transform them into something similar. Engendering proximity is a means to a given ends. While the Emerging Church does not set out to accomplish sameness, this does not mean that they are not open to people wanting identify themselves as Emergent. So they *are* open to difference + closeness that leads to sameness. It is just not an

explicit goal. They do not attempt to evangelize people or convert them to Christianity.

On the other extreme, other Christian groups may spiral *inwards* instead of outwards, building moats instead of bridges to the outside world. In this instance, the appropriate equation would either be:

*Sameness + closeness → reinforced sameness*

Or

*Difference + distance → reinforced difference.*

Both produce and reinforce in-group solidarity, and are part of the same “inward spiral” dynamic. Neither of these would be described as an outward spiral or bridge-building. My conceptual interest is in the bridge-building that seeks to spiral social groups outwards. But as I have stated, the Emerging Church has a particular style of bridge-building that seeks to preserve difference *while* seeking closeness with the “other” through bridging social distances, but without an explicit or implicit agenda to assimilate or collapse the identity of the “other” into the Christian “self”.

#### *Bridge-building and cultural practices*

Another distinct character of Lichterman’s approach to studying bridge building is his methodological center-staging of culture, which is precisely my approach to studying the Emerging Church. He looks at 1) customs, 2) talk and 3) reflexivity. Lichterman focuses on a group-building customs: which are routine,



shared, often implicit ways of defining membership in a group (Lichterman 2005:15). Lichterman also focuses on “talk” or the communication within the group, and how through their customary ways of communicating determines whether groups can successfully build bridges or not. He states the crucial element in his analysis of different religious groups’ “talk”, is whether they practice *reflexivity* or not. Lichterman posits that

“it is easier for a group to build the bridges it wants to build if the group can practice social reflexivity... when they talk reflectively, self-critically, about their relations with their wider social context – the people, groups or institutions they see on their horizon” (Lichterman 2005:15).

Reflexivity is also, according to Lichterman, “a collective practice of imagining” that “requires talking about differences and similarities straightforwardly, in the midst of forging relationships beyond the group” (Lichterman 2005:47). Lichterman states that only groups that sustain social reflexivity in their interactions succeeded in bridge-building. He emphasizes the importance of culture in his work by asserting that relationships do not exist outside of communication, but that groups create and sustain social ties *through* communication (Lichterman 2005:16). The combination of group-building customs that allow for reflexive talk to flourish is the essential formula for groups to build bridges and socially spiral outwards. According to Lichterman, religious groups, “need to know how to create settings that allow people to think and talk about spiraling outward without threatening the group’s own togetherness” (Lichterman 2005:18).

In my dissertation thus far, I have demonstrated through the discussion of “mapping” (chapter 5) that the Emerging Church practices a form of reflexivity, that can be categorized as “complex map cartography” according to my theoretical classification of groups and how they construct maps of themselves and the wider social world. My data has demonstrated that they exercise reflexivity in the group context, through their interaction online, and even in their published material. In this chapter, I continue to focus on the reflexive “talk” that propels individuals toward a personal and group orientation to bridge-building across difference.

While Lichterman’s focus on “talk” was limited to face-to-face group settings, I observed this reflexive talk toward bridge-building being practiced by the Emerging Church, both in face-to-face settings, and in online environments. What were their group customs and did they encourage reflexivity or shut it down? To answer this question, both types of data will feature in this chapter.

This chapter is divided into 3 parts. In the first part, I discuss the Emerging Church’s “cultural style of perplexity”. I analyze the way the Emerging Church deals with perplexity or awkward situations involving “otherness”. I argue that working through perplexity is a necessary gateway for the Emerging Church to build relational bridges across difference and spiral outwards. In the second and third parts, I engage in a more substantive analysis of bridge-building in action, and examine how the Emerging Church attempts bridge-building with critics and people of other faiths respectively. While we could possibly analyze the ECM’s bridging attempts with many different groups, like denominations and social

justice or environmental groups, I have chosen specifically to focus on bridge-building with critics and interfaith bridge-building because it represents some of the most intriguing data in my research. I analyze their bridge-building strategies to see if they succeeded in successfully spiraling outwards. I also identify obstacles and challenges to their bridge-building efforts. I also seek to make a theoretical contribution toward understanding the social dynamics of bridge-building and how the social spiral operates.

### **The cultural style of perplexity**

The idea of “perplexity” was a central concept to Lichterman’s thesis about bridge-building and the social spiral. Lichterman primarily engages the concept through Jane Addams use of the term (2002 [1902]). For Addams, perplexity was when people felt discomfort, unease, and a sense of awkwardness toward the “other”. For Lichterman, it was important that groups did not circumvent the possibility of perplexity (2005:259). However, it is crucial to note that perplexity is a double-edged sword. It might not always be a good thing. On the negative side, it might move people to give up on interactions across difference. On the positive side, it might cause people to reflect on their experiences and change *themselves*, rather than “beating the customary path” of thinking about relationships (Lichterman 2005:49). Both Lichterman and Addams show that perplexity can make the customary, taken-for-granted terms of interaction seem inappropriate through a “new” lens. In his research, Lichterman saw how successful groups redefine their relationships from an unequal status “helper” and “receiver”, to one of a non-hierarchical “community partners”. Doing so

helped the group spiral outward and forges relationships in their community that would have otherwise not been possible.

In my observations and interviews with the Emerging Church, I saw that perplexity pervades their discourse, their lingo and even their neologisms. When analyzing my data, I looked out for specific interactions that centered on perplexing questions, especially those that related to discussions of the “other”. I found perplexity in people expressing “how exactly do we do this?” or “how is this possible?” I noted that the Emerging Church purveys a discourse that seeks to bring people to a place of perplexity, and to deal rightly with that perplexity in order that people will open themselves up socially instead of closing themselves down: spiraling *outwards* instead of inwards.

### *Talking through perplexity*

I saw striking examples of perplexity in my field work at the April 2010 Catholic Emergent conference held in New Mexico. This was the last night of the conference. By this point I had struck up a good friendship with Eliacin Rosario-Cruz, a board member of Emergent Village whom I had interviewed earlier in the day. Given Eliacin’s involvement with Emergent Village, it was no surprise that he knew Brian McLaren personally. When we first ran into McLaren on the first day of the conference, the two of them greeted and spoke a few words to each other in Spanish. Eliacin wanted to introduce me, but both McLaren and I indicated that we both knew each other. Eliacin and McLaren made arrangements to go out for drinks the next night, and I was invited to join them.

The next night, McLaren, Eliacin, my Cuban American friend Raul (whom I met at the hostel) and a young man in his mid-twenties named Filipe together headed out to a bar that was opposite the conference hotel: Hotel Albuquerque. It was a place that served both drinks and food. I had gotten to know Filipe a few hours earlier during the last session. Eliacin introduced me to Filipe, as someone who was relatively new to the Emerging Church. A question Filipe posed to McLaren sparked off a conversation that unfolded the workings of perplexity. Filipe verbalized how he was struggling with this issue of being non-dualistic in his thinking – a central theme through the conference – especially in distinguishing between Christians and non-Christians. Filipe asked McLaren, “How can I be a Christian if I can’t draw a clear line between myself and a non-Christian?” Not having absolute boundaries between “us” and “them” was clearly perplexing for this young man. He was not sure how that would “work”. He found it difficult to reconcile that he could learn about God from other religions (something talked about during the conference, and through other things like the reading of poetry from a Sufi mystic named Rumi during prayer times). For Filipe, the thought of being in close relationships with the religious “other” was clearly a difficulty that he did not quite know how to handle. He feared doing so would compromise his own faith.

Over margaritas, McLaren explained to this young man who was sitting to my left that it seemed he only had two options: 1) to have an absolute sense of insider/ outsider boundaries and a strong Christian identity, or 2) to have no absolute boundaries and hence a weak Christian identity. McLaren said, “Neither

of these options is good". He then said to Filipe that even though he did not see it, he had a "third option", which was that he did not have to have strong insider/outsider boundaries, but that did not have to stop him from being deeply committed to his faith and to his identity as a Christian. I remember feeling struck by McLaren's patience, conveying his ideas simply yet effectively. Instead of brushing him off, McLaren walked with this young man through his perplexity and attempted to channel it positively instead of turning it off. McLaren said something to the effect of: we (Christians) don't always have to know the eternal destination of people before we can relate to them. McLaren then told of two stories of people he knew personally who had come to the Christian faith through other religions. I chimed in by talking about what another Emergent author Samir Selmanovic was doing with his project in New York City called Faith House Manhattan, where Christians, Muslims and Jews worshipped together (and observed each other worshipping) under the same roof. I could see that Filipe was visibly perplexed by the idea that such a thing could be possible.

McLaren spoke again to Felipe and said, "this place where you are at... is a good place", indicating that this young man's perplexity was something positive, and not something negative, because of its potential to make him think differently about this question of what to do with "the other". This puzzlement and this wrestling with his own thinking was this young man's path to rethinking how his Christian identity did not have to be dependent on boxing the "other" into an absolute category of "unsaved". Eliacin who was sitting to my right nodded silently but fervently as McLaren spoke.

### *Self-working perplexity*

Eliacin then spoke up and told his story of perplexity as his contribution to our conversation, even as we relaxed into our second round of drinks. Earlier in the day, I had interviewed Eliacin in the hotel lobby. We later spent some time walking around Old Albuquerque and continued our conversation. The experience he was going to recount to the group was the same one he told me earlier that day. He told of his experience working on an interfaith coalition with a black woman who was an ordained minister and had a doctorate in theology. While working with her over the course of several months, he started to notice something about her: she seemed happier and more positive in her general demeanor. He sensed some kind of change within her, and that something new was going on in her life. Knowing that she was a single woman, he wondered if she had recently fallen in love, although he could not tell for sure.

He recounted how months later, this woman minister pulled him aside one day and said that she had something to share with him. Yes, it was love, but it was not at all what he had expected. She told him, "Eliacin, I've been studying the Quran and I think Islam is making me a better Christian". Through this interfaith work, she had felt compelled to read the Quran in greater depth, and felt her Christian faith being strengthened by the teaching of the Prophet Mohammed. When I asked him how he felt, Eliacin described his immediate feeling as "ambivalent", and he told me frankly that, "I did not quite know what to feel". He was now telling us his story of his encounter with perplexity. He described how his immediate thoughts were "this is wrong", and that he'd wanted

to judge her and say something disapproving. But he explained to us that he realized he could not do that. He had seen the change in her life, without knowing the source of that change. He also told us this was no ordinary woman: she had a PhD in theology, so she was not someone uninformed or easily swayed. Taking a step back, he realized that he could not say anything negative or disapproving to her. He explained to us, “who am I to judge someone else’s faith journey?” Ultimately, he told her that he was happy for her, and would stand by whatever decision she made.

Eliacin later told us that she eventually “came out” to her church, and self-identified as both Christian and Muslim. Sadly for this individual, she was censured by her leadership and community. Eliacin recounted how people stood up and faced their back toward her in protest, whenever she took the stage in church. Eliacin told me that she was ultimately defrocked. He clarified that she had not abandoned her Christian faith, but had instead, added to it, and saw herself as *both* Christian *and* Muslim. In telling us his story, Eliacin’s perplexing encounter opened up an understanding of what was “acceptable” or “possible”, challenging the horizons of understanding what affiliation can look like to those who were listening, including the young man Filipe. He faced a perplexing situation where there was no easy answer. Eliacin’s story voiced Lichterman’s own observation that “abstract moral certainties might yield before perplexing contacts with other people’s worlds” (Lichterman 2005:49). Instead of condemning her and telling her she was doing something wrong, Eliacin took a step back and realized that his own understanding of the situation needed to



change, echoing another insight that Lichterman voices through Jane Addams: that perplexing contacts would change their own sense of who they were (Lichterman 2005:137).

*Thinking about spiraling outwards through perplexity*

This talk of perplexity pervades their language and discourse. For example, at the Transform Event that was held in Washington D.C. in April 2010, I attended a break-out session that was conducted by Emergent author Samir Selmanovich. Selmanovich is well known for his interfaith work, especially his work with other monotheistic faiths. He is one of the most prominent voices on the issue of Christians and “otherness”. An Emergent Village podcast in February of 2007 featured Selmanovic preaching on “Finding our God in the other”. This proved to be one of the most controversial of Emergent Village podcasts, due to the comments that followed the podcast on the Emergent Village website. People posted comments both for and against Samir’s idea of being able find the Christian God in the “other”, generating one of the longest series of comments of all Emergent Village podcasts.

I met Samir Selmanovic for the first time at the Transform gathering in Washington D.C., in April 2010. I was able to have several conversations with Samir over the course of the 2 day conference. Once, I ran into him along with Gerardo Marti at the nearby Starbucks when He was preparing for his talk the following afternoon. As with many other people at the conference, Samir recognized me through my Twitter icon as well as my twitter posts. I was very

interested in how his Faith House Manhattan project functioned, with Christians, Muslims and Jews worshipping as a part of the same group, yet holding on to their distinct identities and differences. Given Samir's proximity and involvement at the frontline of *difference + closeness*, I wanted to get his insight on how exactly this happens in Faith House Manhattan. I was curious: how does worship happen in that setting? I was expressing perplexity by asking: how was this possible? Samir explained Faith House Manhattan to me in terms of the metaphor of "warming by the fires of being in the presence of other faiths' worship". This "fireplace" metaphor gave me a window of understanding into how *difference + closeness* can actually "work". It was another expression of how differences are preserved, and how the perplexity of being in the presence of the "other's" worship practices can be experienced positively by those belonging to a different faith. Samir was expressing a form of observance that did not necessitate adherence. Although I had wanted to continue our conversation, Samir was busy preparing for the workshop that I would attend later in the afternoon, and I was heading back to the conference with Gerardo Marti, and Nelson Costa, a man in his mid-thirties from Brazil who was also deeply engaged with the Emerging Church conversation, and who would later speak to me about a Latin-American perspective on the Emerging Church.

I attended Samir's workshop session titled "Learning to Love the Other in God, Self, and Society", which happened on the afternoon of the first day of the worship. There were a good 50 to 60 people in the workshop making it one of the most well attended I had seen in the whole conference. My guess was that like

me, many people were curious about how *difference + closeness* could be accomplished? Samir's talk had very similar points to the central theme in his book *It's Really All About God* (2009). During the talk, Samir introduced an idea that would later resonate on the Emergent blogosphere. This idea was very much in line with the idea of perplexity. He introduced the term "Holy Awkwardness", which he defined as the "discomfort we feel when we stand before someone entirely alien to us, while recognizing in them the image of God." This was an idea that was consistent with Selmanovic's famous 2007 podcast, "Finding our God in the other".

I see Selmanovic and his role in the Emerging Church as an "architect of perplexity". He talks openly about perplexing encounters, and teaches why they are "good". One of the things that Selmanovic emphasizes repeatedly is his view that Christians functionally "need" the other, since in his view Christianity should not have a monopoly over God since God cannot be monopolized. Interviewing several people after the conference, the first two people I interviewed (both within 2 weeks of the conference) who were at Transform, indicated that Samir's talk was eye-opening on the question of what to do with the "other". As with other conferences, scouring the blogs for reactions and reflections yielded pertinent reaction-reflections to Samir's workshop. One blog post I came across, demonstrated how a rethinking of "otherness", can spur someone to imagine possibilities and express intent to build diverse relational bridges:

The test of Christianity comes when “the other” comes into the picture. When this happens - it becomes our time to love... This last week at Transform when Samir Selmanovic made a statement to the effect of “we **\*need\*** the other”... it was the word ‘need’ that really hit me. This word changes the dynamic from simply tolerate - and hits on a real truth for the way we view our Christianity. *It is in this spirit then that I reach out, in a bridge*; to those who are like me, and to those who are not like me.<sup>85</sup>

From this statement, we see this person progressing from perplexity to verbalizing the intent to take action and build bridges across difference “to those who are not like me”.

### *Perplexity and bridge-building*

To sum up this initial discussion on perplexity, it is important to note that Lichterman warned against groups shutting down reflexivity. Lichterman notes that “it is hard to learn about differences if people cannot talk about them” (Lichterman 2005: 157). In his project, he analyzed that groups that failed to spiral outwards appealed to “cultural differences” as a catchall for label for understanding social friction and difficult interactions between the “us” and “them” in Lichterman’s study. Lichterman notes that when some groups faced perplexing interactions with people that were of a lower class or different race, misunderstandings and social friction was dealt with by explaining it as “cultural differences”. This was an ill-management of perplexity, because it *ended* the conversation instead of causing people to talk and think more how they should change their own perspective (2005:157). An easy solution to resolve discomfort prevented groups from spiraling outward.

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<sup>85</sup> <http://p3t3rk3y5.tumblr.com/post/579146018/our-need>, “Our Need”, posted 05/09/10, accessed 05/16/10.

Far from shunning perplexity, the customary modes of interaction in the Emerging Church put perplexity at the forefront. Emergents have made their own set of concepts and a way of thinking positively about these interactions. This culture creates ways for people to contemplate possibilities not previously entertained, especially as it pertains to encounters and relationships with “others”. Perplexity expands their social horizons. Perplexity enables individuals to creatively imagine relationships previously not thought possible. Perplexity teaches people to deal with ambiguity, and causes them to contemplate how the problem with the “us” versus “them” might be with the “us” rather than the “them”: a hallmark of reflexivity.

In the discursive social world of the Emerging Church, I see what I call *perplexity elaboration*: a willingness to talk about awkwardness instead of shunning from it. Similar to my interview with Eliacin, I have observed Emergents giving accounts of negotiating awkward situations and relationships that contributed to a reconfigured understanding of “otherness” and relationships across difference. As with the story that Eliacin told us around Margaritas, perplexity is a way of articulating the trials that come with people stepping outside of their comfort zone of understanding, and relaying their thoughts, feelings and responses. Through blogs and websites like Emergent Village, these become socially available, adding to the pool of available accounts on dealing with “otherness”. This includes “talk” of the awkwardness of dealing with

Quakers and mystics.<sup>86</sup> As well as reflections on interreligious encounters with Jews.<sup>87</sup> In the previous chapter, I also showed how Emergents deal with perplexity by openly responding to critics instead of shutting them down or ignoring them. In discursive worlds, Emergents show a willingness to chew on tensions, and learn from these experiences. By sharing and talking through perplexing encounters Emergents learn from each other how to think and relate positively to the “other”.

In the face-to-face social world of the Emerging Church, I see the dynamics and working out of what I term *perplexity management*. This occurs in both face-to-face contexts of local gatherings and conferences. Later on in this chapter, I will elaborate on how Emergents managed perplexity in face-to-face encounters with a Jewish group, as well as deal with perplexing encounters with critics in their very midst. For local gatherings, in the previous chapter, I raised examples of how Emergent practitioners proactively seek out religious “others” by visiting their places of worship, reading their holy texts, engaging in rituals and even being “evangelized” by them. Samir Selmanovic’s Faith House Manhattan, which houses Christians, Muslims, and Jews, is a prime example of how an Emergent community attempts to manage perplexity by housing different faiths under one roof. In the next section, there are even more examples of how local meeting groups seek to manage perplexity.

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<sup>86</sup> <http://squarenomore.blogspot.com/2010/05/quaking-at-transform-east.html>, “Quaking at Transform” by Phil Wyman, posted 05/08/2010, accessed 08/28/2010

<sup>87</sup> <http://dwrightfriesen.com/2006/01/s3k-jews-christians-in-conversation/>, “s3k: Jews & Christians in conversation” by Dwight Friesen, posted 01/18/2006, accessed 08/28/2010.

Perplexity teaches people to construct a way forward in difficult interactions with religious “others”. My argument is that there is a positive correlation between how the movement deals with perplexity, and their bridging efforts with diverse “others”. Dealing with perplexity rightly allows groups like the Emerging Church to build bridges, spurring them to spiral outwards. Perplexity reconceptualizes *difficulty as relational opportunity*: it is good to be in a situation where you do not always know what to do or say, or when you do not have a complete grasp on the “other”. In fact, during Samir Selmanovic’s workshop at Transform, a related idea that followed his discussion of “holy awkwardness”, Samir Selmanovic suggested a discipline that was a key to loving all of humanity: that Christians practice their ability to *not* understand the “Other”. Samir explained to the attentively listening group: there is a mystery that comes with the otherness of the other that does not have to be resolved. Maintaining a healthy “mystery” toward “otherness” was another way he was saying that Christians could deal with the perplexity of “the other”.

#### *Emerging Churches as sites for perplexing encounters*

My research also uncovered how some Emerging Churches are sites where perplexing encounters take place. This was nowhere clearer to me than when I draw pertinent comparisons from my interviews of Nanette Sawyer of Wicker Park Grace located in Chicago, and my interview with Eliacin Rosario-Cruz, who is part of an Emerging Church in Seattle called Church of the Apostles.

Both Nanette and Eliacin talked about the challenges that come with being set up for inclusiveness and having diversity in their congregations. In my interview with Nanette, she mentioned how the inclusiveness of Wicker Park Grace was uncomfortable for some people, because they were not used to worshiping or relating closely with certain types of people. She raised the example of how Wicker Park Grace is a gay-accepting church, while also welcoming those who read the bible more literally and who are hence more conservative in their outlook on sexuality. She described how certain theologically conservative people had stopped participating in the community because they were not prepared to accept this inclusive set-up. They could not reconcile the openness of the congregation, even though this openness also extended to them. Nanette was conveying to me how certain people could not deal with the perplexity of sharing a worship space with those they perceived to be “outsiders”, or “other”. She expressed this as a puzzle that had no easy resolution, because it rested on the comfort level of people to accept or reject dealing with this perplexity.

My interview with Eliacin about Church of the Apostles in Seattle yielded a similar dynamic. Church of the Apostles too, Eliacin explained to me, was also similarly set up for diversity, having a racially diverse congregation and also being inclusive of queer folks. Similar to my interview with Nanette Sawyer, Eliacin pointed out that the more conservative folks in their community had to learn to accept and get along with the queer folks among them, despite their “differentness”, and even if they could not see eye-to-eye on the issue of



homosexuality. What really struck me was when Eliacin also mentioned the reverse: that the ability to handle perplexing relationships had to “work both ways”. He described how it was also important at Church of the Apostles, for the queer folks to learn how to accept and live with those who were more conservative in their views of sexuality. He said, “When a queer person hears a homophobic remark by someone in church, gets offended, and asks, “what’s going on?” They also need to be understanding and respect the journey that the more traditionally-minded people are on, and learn to love them”. Eliacin highlights the importance of how dealing rightly with perplexity was for *all* parties involved. There was a collective responsibility to learn to live with perplexity and respond rightly to perplexing encounters, whether one was minority, majority, privileged or disadvantaged.

Another Emerging Pastor, of a church located in Maryland, notes of his community that “diversity of opinion – even theological opinion – is not threatening to us. Rather, we welcome it, understanding the diversity held together in unity is evidence of the Holy Spirit working among us to make us a more complete body”.<sup>88</sup> He paints a picture of the kinds of perplexing encounters between people attending his congregation:

- A former CIA officer, self-described as “to the right of Genghis Khan, politically” and an openly gay man, retired on disability, who learned first to accept, then respect, then to love each other in Christ.

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<sup>88</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/howard-story>, “A place to belong, a place to become” by Ken Howard, accessed 02/25/2010, accessed 08/29/2010.

- A husband and wife, she self-described as a “near fundamentalist” and he, jokingly, as “sort of U.C.C. (Unitarian Considering Christ),” who for the first time in their lives have found a church in which they can co-exist openly.
- A young Buddhist who came to our church for almost 3 years, proudly proclaiming himself St. Nick’s “resident heathen,” before he went and “ruined” his nickname by asking to be baptized.
- In the run-up to the Iraq war, when many were avoiding the topic for fear of division among our members, we held a series of discussions in which, after talking through how to speak our truth in love, people on both sides of the issue shared their thoughts and feelings about the impending invasion. There was disagreement and strong emotions were expressed, but we were able to agree on several things: (1) war is always an evil, never a good and (2) we need to pray for all involved in the conflict: our leaders and theirs, our soldiers and theirs, our civilians and theirs.

Emerging Churches are sites where bridge-building across differences can occur. This is due to the diversity that these Emerging Churches seek to engender sets up the possibilities for *difference + closeness*. The inclusive orientation of Emerging Churches like Wicker Park Grace and Church of the Apostles provide opportunities for people to experience perplexing relationships across differences. It is a leadership challenge, as well as a personal challenge for those who choose to be part of Emergent communities, that these perplexing encounters may foster relational bridges across differences. Managing perplexity extends not just to smaller Emergent groups like Wicker Park Grace and Church of the Apostles, who have attendances that range between 30 and 40, but also in larger, more established Emergent congregations like Jacob’s Well in Kansas City, that has a membership of 300 to 400. In my interview with Deth Im, interim Pastor of Jacob’s Well, he explained to me that in their search for a lead teaching pastor to replace founding Pastor Tim Keel (who had left the church in July 2009), it was important that the church find someone who would be able to

manage the theological diversity of the Jacob's Well congregation that ranged from theologically conservative, strict biblical literalists, to those on the other side of the spectrum, who did not necessarily believe the bible was the literal "Word of God". It was important that there was a way for people from these different ends of the spectrum, and everything in between, to feel that they had a place in the church.

Emerging Church groups both big and small attempt to facilitate the bridge-building between people on different sides of the aisle on issues like sexual orientation or even religious beliefs. Churches like Wicker Park Grace and Church of the Apostles attempt to be places where everyone has to deal with the perplexity of "otherness" presented by whoever that "other" may be. In caveat, I am not arguing that Emerging Churches have an edge over congregations attempting to welcome gay people (McQueeny 2009) or accommodate alternative family arrangements (Edgell 2006) or congregations attempting to be more racially inclusive (Edgell 1998, Emerson and Kim 2003, Emerson and Woo 2006, Marti 2005). But because Emergent groups tend to be loosely bounded and "lack the structure of conventional religions" (Neitz 1994:128), there are less institutional costs and constraints associated with the kinds of bridging work they seek to do, compared to churches that may have to tow the institutional line on issues like homosexuality. This difference between bounded and unbounded or loosely bounded religious groups like the Emerging Church will come into relevance again in the next section on the Emerging Church's bridging efforts with critics.

## **Bridging with critics**

In this part of my paper, I would like to analyze the Emerging Church's bridging efforts with their critics. How did they attempt to build relational bridges? What were the results? Were they able to activate the social spiral? While proponents of the Emerging Church have made various attempts to build relational bridges with their critics, accomplishing "togetherness" with their critics has proven to be difficult. But it is worth analyzing their efforts to do so.

The analysis in this section will include 3 data sources: 1) looking at bridging that occurred discursively, 2) bridging that was not directly observed but was recounted through secondary sources, and 3) in bridging I observed during fieldwork. In caveat, most of my data on bridging with critics is discursive material that I gathered through online sources as well as from books. In my on-site fieldwork, I only came across one occasion where I saw an open critic of the movement attend an Emerging Church conference. But other personal meetings that have taken place between people from the movement and critics have also been told of and published (Piper and Taylor 2007, Jones 2008). As I have argued in chapter 4, the movement has a significant discursive presence in American Christianity. I further argued that critics perform an important function of drawing attention to the movement. By doing so, critics ironically give the movement more discursive traction by spurring people to find out more about the Emerging Church *precisely because of the criticisms*. How they build bridges discursively is an important piece to understanding how the Emerging Church Movement attempts to spiral outwards socially. By analyzing these different types

of data, I hope to show how the bridging works discursively as well as on the ground in face-to-face interactions with critics.

Bridge-building with critics is another formulation of *difference + closeness* that needs to be clarified. It represents a different kind of bridge-building than say, in interfaith bridge-building (discussed in the next section). With critics, the “difference” is primarily centered on theology and doctrine. It is not a difference in religious identity, like the difference between Muslims and Christians. Critics here are defined as people who are in disagreement with the Emerging Church and its proponents over question of theology and ecclesiology. Essentially, the Emerging Church attempts to do *difference + closeness* with their critics by espousing the idea that, “our lack of agreement should not hinder our ability to experience togetherness”. As we shall see, Emergents find success in this kind of bridging hard to come by.

#### *Face-to-face bridging with critics*

A much publicized attempt to build a bridge with a critic was Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt’s lunch meeting with Reformed conservative theologian John Piper in 2007. Accounts of how this meeting went have been published by both Tony Jones (Jones 2008) and John Piper (Piper and Taylor 2007). This meeting has also been talked about in various blogs<sup>89</sup>, and has been the subject of a recent Christian book, on the relationship (or lack of) between the Emerging Church and “traditional church” (Belcher 2009).

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<sup>89</sup> <http://thesuburbanchristian.blogspot.com/2008/05/john-piper-meets-tony-jones-two-views.html>, John Piper meets Tony Jones: Two views, Al Hsu, personal blog, published 05/12/2008, accessed 05/19/2010.

Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt invited John Piper, who has been a vocal critic of the movement, out to lunch. They had seen a conference flyer which showed clearly that Piper was targeting the Emerging Church for criticism. Reportedly, Doug Pagitt's Emerging Church Solomon's Porch, is just 5 miles from John Piper's Bethlehem Baptist Church, both located in Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>90</sup> In his book *The New Christians* (2008), Tony describes this meeting as presenting an "olive branch" to Piper. Jones expressed how he had felt "nervous" about the meeting, given Piper's status as a best-selling author who "sits atop a pyramid of conservative Reformed Christians that has been particularly critical of Emergent". Tony Jones framed the initiative as "an invitation to lunch and an assurance that we both share a commitment to proclaiming Christ." They entered into the interaction seeking ways to work with Piper and his church, given the close physical proximity of their churches. Piper told them it was impossible if they did not reach agreement on core theological issues first. Jones notes,

Early in the lunch, Doug said that he's long respected the ministry of the pastor's church and since we're in the same town, perhaps we could minister in partnership with one another. "Regardless of our theological differences," Doug said, "maybe we can find ways to work together." But as the lunch progressed, it became clear that the pastor felt that the beginning of any partnership was necessarily agreement on a particular doctrine, the atonement, a doctrine that he equates with an understanding of the gospel.

Tony Jones described that as the lunch progressed, it became clear that a necessary prerequisite for any partnership was an agreement on the doctrine of

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<sup>90</sup> [http://www.the-next-wave-ezine.info/issue113/index.cfm?id=36&ref=ARTICLES\\_REVIEWS\\_521](http://www.the-next-wave-ezine.info/issue113/index.cfm?id=36&ref=ARTICLES_REVIEWS_521)  
Interaction with Tony Jones' *The New Christians*, Bob Hyatt, published May 2008, accessed 05/19/2010.

atonement. According to Jones', John Piper said that "if you reject his understanding of the gospel, you are rejecting the gospel *in toto*, and so, by logical extension, you are not a Christian." Doug Pagitt would later mention the number of things their churches could work on together without seeing eye-to-eye with the doctrine of atonement, like fighting sex trafficking, but that John Piper was not interested. Piper went on to state that "in this confusing, relativized, and postmodern world, people need "fixed points of doctrine" around which they can orient their lives", and that "a particular doctrine is the beginning of all Christian ministry... if you don't have that... you don't have anything". In reply, Jones explained, "everything we do in the emergent church is surrounded by an envelope of friendship, friendship based on lives of reconciliation... in fact, I'm not sure it's even possible to be an orthodox Christian if you are not living a life of reconciliation". (Jones 2008: 76-78)

In his version of events, John Piper notes how he took a liking to Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt because they were "hot heads" like him. However, his overall evaluation of them was that, "for Tony and Doug, *committed relationships trump truth*". He notes with perplexity that, "I just don't understand the way these guys think." Piper describes the gap he perceives between himself and the two Emergent leaders,

"There are profound epistemological differences – ways of processing reality – that make the conversation almost impossible, as if we were just kind of going by each other... We seemed to differ so much in our worldviews and our ways of knowing that I'm not sure how profitable the conversation was or if we could ever get anywhere." (Piper and Taylor 2007: 154-155)

He expressed not being able to get any definitive statements of belief from either of them, “except for a few strong statements about certain social agendas” saying that their attitude was “That’s not what we do... we don’t try to get agreement on the nature of the atonement. That is alienating to friendships... so we don’t do that”. Because of this, Piper describes not even knowing “where to start” in establishing any sort of relationship with Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt. To sum up this encounter, Piper states that, “I came away from our meeting frustrated and wishing it were different but not knowing how to make it different” (Piper and Taylor 2007:155).

This interaction highlights the challenge faced by the Emerging Church in their attempts to build relational bridges with their critics. There are several analytical points we can come away with from just this one bridge-building scenario. Firstly, it highlights that the Emerging Church’s relational style of seeking *difference + closeness*, applies even to fellow Christians who are critics. For Emergents, doctrinal agreement, or “orthodoxy-alignment” is not a necessary pre-requisite for finding grounds to do something together. The difficulty in this interaction was that *the bridge upon which Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt were attempting build a relationship was one that John Piper was unwilling to tread*. It highlights an important caveat that in bridge-building interactions, no matter how “well” the attempt is executed, success is ultimately dependent on whether the other party in question is willing to “crossing over differences” in the same way.



Jones and Pagitt noticeably tried to build relational bridges to John Piper, firstly by signifying a shared “commitment to proclaiming Christ”. This did not work because John Piper did not even believe they shared the same understanding of what “commitment to Christ” means. They also attempted to push for a new basis of “sameness” despite their differences in theology: that of social justice. The type of bridging they were proposing to do between Doug Pagitt’s Emerging Church and Piper’s Baptist Church was of a “consolidation of resources” for the purpose of doing some social good corporately. As Woolcock and Narayan highlight (2000), bridging can refer to the ability of groups to mutually access each others’ resources. This was clearly what Pagitt was proposing. As Pagitt and Jones were attempting to build bridges and enact the social spiral, Piper was engaged in the reverse dynamic of spiraling inwards and outlining a strict pre-requisite for the possibility of working together. The gap between them was not bridged, and the social spiral failed to set in motion.

With Piper, we see the consequence of groups having a “narrow radius of trust” that hinders them from cooperating with those they perceive as “outsiders” (Fukuyama 2001). Another theoretical point in this scenario as it pertains to Piper’s response is how we see the workings of Lichterman’s description of how groups defer to “differences” during perplexing encounters to shut off reflexivity (Lichterman 2005). By seeking to establish a stable basis of agreement on the doctrine of atonement as a principle criterion for working together, Piper essentially eliminated the possibility of considering any other basis for consensus with the “other”. For Piper, there was no starting point, or even a perceived basis

for establishing a relationship with them. From his statement, he did not perceive how “any good” could come out of this interaction. Lichterman’s discussion of perplexity was to highlight how reflexivity might lead to people changing their own sense of self or their taken-for-granted assumptions. For Piper, the problem was clearly with “them” in their lack of doctrinal absolutes. Neither side was willing to back down from their principles. In fact, both sides had different criteria of what constituted a “bridge”. They could not establish an agreeable “bridge” that both parties could walk across to each other.

Another factor mediating this inability to bridge across differences is the fact that Pagitt was calling for collaboration between two bounded groups – Piper’s congregation and Solomon’s Porch – so, much more was at stake for Piper given his church’s Baptist affiliation. Piper’s considerable status as a renowned author and speaker also comes into play in this interaction. He would be risking his considerable reputation in conservative circles by entering into this proposed collaboration with an Emerging Church. This emphasizes how the costs of bridge-building are higher for bounded groups that involve their institutional obligations and reputations, compared to somewhat “lower” costs of discursive activities of persuasion and talk across difference. This more discursive bridging is the subject of my next section.

#### *Discursive bridging with critics*

While the last case-study focused on a face-to-face bridge-building interaction, the bridging I want to analyze here primarily focuses on bridging that

was attempted through discursive means. My analysis centers around a document titled “A Response to Recent Criticism” This statement was written in 2005 and cosigned by prominent individuals in the movement, namely, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, and Chris Seay. It was published online, most notably in Brian McLaren’s personal blog<sup>91</sup> as well as on The Ooze website in June of 2005.<sup>92</sup>

To provide some background to this document, this letter was issued in the aftermath of the publication of a book titled *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (2005) by New Testament Theologian D.A. Carson. This was the first book published as a direct critique of the Emerging Church movement that gained a lot of traction with Christian conservatives. Conservative bigwig Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and board member of Focus on the Family, endorsed and used Carson’s book as a lynchpin to critique the Emerging Church in an article of his own that was published on his blog and on the Christian Post.<sup>93</sup> Prior to the publication of Carson’s book, he also gave lectures and at various universities and seminaries based on the content of this book. According to my contact in Singapore, he even came to Singapore to conduct a lecture on the Emerging Church. Responding to Carson’s publication, a number of other theologians responded with their own

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<sup>91</sup> “A Response to Recent Criticisms” <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000429.html>, date published unknown, accessed 05/19/2010.

<sup>92</sup> “Response to Recent Criticism” <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=1151&page=1>, by Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones and Chris Say, published 06/02/2005, accessed 05/19/2010.

<sup>93</sup> “What should we think of the Emerging Church? Part 1 and 2” <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/06/29/what-should-we-think-of-the-emerging-church-part-one/> <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/06/30/what-should-we-think-of-the-emerging-church-part-two/>, published 05/29/2005, accessed 05/19/2010.

critiques to Carson's work.<sup>94</sup> This included, Professor Ryan Bolger, Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, who criticized Carson's methodology, analysis as well as his conclusions.<sup>95</sup>

It was about a month after D.A. Carson's book came out in May 2005, that this "A Response to Recent Criticism" statement from voices within Emergent was published. I doubt the timing was a coincidence, although Carson's book was not explicitly mentioned as the source of the "criticism". I felt it was important to analyze this document because it represented a collective statement by the movement about the movement in response to critics. Doing so brought to the fore several dimensions of the bridging that the Emerging Church seeks to accomplish with its critics. The document was constructed in the form of 10 brief responses that were enumerated and developed systematically. This document elucidates various bridging strategies that I call collectively, a *cultural style of discursive bridging*. I observed patterns of features in this response, and constructed conceptual categories. The following presents my analysis of 6 separate conceptual categories that together make up this cultural style of discursive bridging:

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<sup>94</sup> "Review of D.A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*", by Ken Archer, [http://kenarcher.typepad.com/theological\\_thought/2005/06/review\\_of\\_da\\_ca.html](http://kenarcher.typepad.com/theological_thought/2005/06/review_of_da_ca.html), published 06/14/2005, accessed 05/19/2010.

<sup>95</sup> "D.A. Carson: *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*", by Ryan Bolger, [http://thebolgblog.typepad.com/thebolgblog/2005/05/d\\_a\\_carson\\_beco.html](http://thebolgblog.typepad.com/thebolgblog/2005/05/d_a_carson_beco.html), published 05/26/2005, accessed 05/19/2010.

1. *Establishing a posture of humility: “we want to listen, learn and be corrected”*

I noted a definite attempt to frame the letter as one that is marked by humility on the part of the Emerging Church. Given that this was a letter in response to criticisms, I read this as a strategy that set the tone for the readers that this was neither an “offensive” assault on critics, nor a defensively postured “we are right and here’s why”. The letter reads,

“We readily acknowledge that like all human endeavors, our work, even at its best, is still flawed and partial, and at its worst, deserves critique. We are grateful to those who help us see things we may not have seen without the benefit of their perspective. We welcome their input.”

This expresses how the Emerging Church does not claim to have all the answers, or the final, authoritative word on issues. It also expresses a posture of openness to new perspectives. The word “help”, denotes dependence on others who, as the letter says, may see “what we may not have seen”. By saying that they have, “much to learn from every criticism” and that they “pray for the humility to receive all critique with thoughtful consideration”, they project themselves not to be pre-disposed to dismissing any criticism out of hand. Along with humility, there was also an addition tone of contrition, where the letter explicates openness to correction, admitting mistakes, and the willingness to redress mistakes, to buttress this posture of humility:

“We regretfully acknowledge that in our thought, writing, and speech, we have at times been less charitable or wise than we wish we would have been. Whenever possible we will seek to correct past errors in future editions of our books; when that is impossible, we will make other forms of public correction.”

2. *Validation of critics and their criticisms: “your work has value”*

The letter takes deliberate measures to validate both the critics and their work. They thank critics for, “honest feedback on our books, articles, speeches, blogs, events, and churches”. The letter also states that they will, “move forward with gratitude to our critics for their instruction and correction.” It also expresses thanks to, “those who seek to help us through cordial, respectful, face-to-face, brotherly/sisterly dialogue.” By validating critics, the Emerging Church projects that they are taking these critics seriously, and that even the critics’ voice has a place in this conversation, since the letter says the Emerging Church is, “radically open to the possibility that our hermeneutic stance will be greatly enriched in conversation with others.”

3. *Respect for boundaries and difference: “you do it one way, we do it another”*

Thirdly, the letter expresses a respect for the way critics draw boundaries and deal with difference. But simultaneously, the letter also asserts that the Emerging Church wishes to draw its boundaries and deal with difference differently. They express understanding for the boundaries critics draw,

“We respect the desire and responsibility of our critics to warn those under their care about ideas that they consider wrong or dangerous, and to keep clear boundaries to declare who is “in” and “out” of their circles. These boundary-keepers have an important role which we understand and respect.”

But also explain how and why they themselves are choosing to draw boundaries:

*“We pose no threat to these sincere people, nor do we wish to attack or discredit anyone, even though we do not wish to constrict our circle of fellowship to the parameters they propose.”*

The letter expresses how the Emerging Church wishes to draw boundaries in a different way, and further elaborates on this, saying that “we have repeatedly defined emergent as a conversation and friendship, and neither implies unanimity – nor even necessarily consensus – of opinion.” The implication hence is that there is room for disagreement within the Emerging Church; room enough that even accommodates critics.

Elsewhere in the letter, they describe how the Emerging Church does not seek to engage in a tit-for-tat “if others exclude us, we will exclude them” retaliatory boundary-drawing. They seek to build bridges by establishing a wider circle of inclusion, regardless of whether they are included. This was expressed in the part of the letter that highlighted a debate on whether Emergent should be considered “Evangelical”. The letter states that,

[Evangelical] is a cherished part of our heritage, but we understand that some people define this term more narrowly than we and in such a way that it applies to them but not to us. *We will not quarrel over this term*, and we will continue to love and respect evangelical Christians whether or not we are accepted by them as evangelicals ourselves... However others include or exclude us, we will continue to affirm an evangelical spirit and faith... doing so in an irenic spirit of love for all our brothers and sisters.

*4. Construct a common impetus: “despite or differences, we are both...”*

The next strategy I noted in the letter was an attempt to establish that there was a common onus on both the Emerging Church and their critics despite differences. There is an appeal to a “higher cause” neither exclusive to the Emerging Church nor their critics. At the outset, the letter expresses that, “It is

our hope and prayer that even our disagreements can bring us together in respectful dialogue as Christians, resulting *in growth for all concerned.*” This is again expressed in a section that says “we value dialogue very highly, and we are convinced that open and generous dialogue – rather than chilling criticism and censorship – *offers the greatest hope for the future of the church in the world*”. The language seeks to establish that there is a higher purpose that both the Emerging Church and their critics are mutually engaged in regardless of whatever differences separate them.

The “we are both” language style of bridging is again expressed where the letter says that despite how differently both critics and proponents of the Emerging Church see things, they are both ultimately trying to “get it right”:

“We must once more thank both our critics and those who affirm our work because we know that both are trying to help us in their respective ways, *and both are trying to do the right thing before God – as we are.*”

This draws critics, proponents of the Emerging Church and their supporters under a common umbrella of ones who are sincerely seeking to develop the Christian faith, despite differences.

##### *5. Outlining the rules of engagement: “how should we then proceed?”*

The fifth pattern I identified was an attempt to outline a set of rules of engagement between themselves and their critics. The letter itself sidesteps direct criticism of Carson’s methodology (2005), but proposes an alternative method by outlining “this is how we should proceed”. This is an outreach to critics to establish a mutually agreeable way of engaging each other’s ideas. There are



numerous “rules” proposed throughout the letter that I grouped in individual categories. I will attempt to outline each:

i. A commitment to dialogic engagement instead of “one way” criticism:

“As we have always said, we hope to stimulate constructive conversation, which involves point and counterpoint, honest speaking and open-minded listening.”

“Throughout the history of the church, followers of Jesus have come to know what they believe and how they believe it by being open to the honest critique and varied perspectives of others.”

ii. Responsible critique that includes not perpetuating second-hand critique:

“We would only ask, if you accept our critics’ evaluation of our work, that in fairness you abstain from adding your critique to theirs unless you have actually read our books, heard us speak, and engaged with us in dialogue for yourself. Second-hand critique can easily become a kind of gossip that drifts from the truth and causes needless division.”

iii. The necessity of personal encounters, or “get to know us. See for yourself”:

“We would welcome future critics to converse with us directly and to visit our churches as part of their research. But we believe that they would also find much to celebrate and find many of their suspicions relieved when they see our high regard for the Scriptures, for truth, for worship, for evangelism, for spiritual formation, and for our fellow Christians – including our critics themselves.”

iv. Establishing a realistic sense of “scope” in who critiques apply to:

“We ask our critics to remember that we cannot be held responsible for everything said and done by people using the terms “emergent” or “emerging church,” any more than our critics would like to be held responsible for everything said or done by those claiming to be “evangelical” or “born again.”

Of all the elements of this cultural style of discursive bridging, establishing rules for engagement was the most prominent feature of the letter. I read it as a significant attempt to engender conventions for relating across differences in a mutually productive way. This was the most developed part of the relational

bridge because it explicated “practices” that both the Emerging Church and their critics could engage in. These conventions were proposed as the cultural “lubricant” that would enable both critics and the Emerging Church to spiral outwards toward each other *across* their differences, instead of being divided by them.

6. *Furthering the conversation: “this is not the final word”*

This final feature is in line with what the letter states is its primary purpose: to, “suggest ways for the conversation to continue constructively for participants and critics alike”. The letter was carefully crafted as an open-ended call for the further engagement instead of a closed-ended “we have the final word”. The letter expresses a desire to open up the possibility of more dialogue and interaction between the Emerging Church and critics, but also expands the call to more voices, more perspectives, and more angles of critique, in the spirit of acknowledging the ECM’s own inadequacies, and possible flaws in thinking:

“Because most of us write as local church practitioners rather than professional scholars, and because the professional scholars who criticize our work may find it hard to be convinced by people outside their guild, we feel it wisest at this juncture to ask those in the academy to respond to their peers about our work. We hope to generate fruitful conversations at several levels, including both the academic and ecclesial realms. If few in the academy come to our defense in the coming years, then we will have more reason to believe we are mistaken in our thinking and that our critics are correct in their unchallenged analyses.”

In the same spirit, the letter asserts a need to pay attention to what people are saying outside the North American context, seeking further to uncoil the spiral:

“This conversation is increasingly global and cross-cultural, and because North Americans are only a small part of it, we urge people to avoid underestimating the importance of Latin American, African, Asian, European, and First Nations voices among us.”

My research did not uncover any of the Emerging Church’s critics responding directly to this “response to recent criticisms” letter. This void is itself interesting: could it indicate the difficulty critics faced in not knowing how to respond to such an amicable tone? Would an equally amicable response be perceived as “compromise” by their constituents? Was this a style of interaction that critics simply did not have the vocabulary or competency for? The possible explanations are intriguing. A response from Carson or any other critic to this letter would have allowed me to assess how and whether bridges were built, and whether the social spiral coiled outwards. But this letter is worth analysis because it appropriately represents characteristics of the bridging across difference carried out in other scenarios that I came across in my research. While I did not come across responses from critics to this letter, I did however, find in my data interesting ways that the social spiral was activated with observers of this interaction between the Emerging Church and their critics.

*The spiral activates: observers, academics and other critics*

Although the movement may have limited success with bridging relationships with their critics, I have seen how bridging can take place and how the spiral can still be activated in other ways. In this next section, I discuss and analyze these successes. These successes teach us how bridge-building can be successful, and show us how the social spiral *can* spiral outwards.

## Observers

Melvin Bray is an African American man in his mid 30s sporting dreadlocks, who is also on the Emergent Village board of directors. I met him at the first ever Transform East Coast Missional gathering that was held in Washington D.C. in April 2010. He was running a project where he recorded personal stories of people who were attending the conference. I talked with Melvin Bray at the Transform conference, and a month later, formally interviewed him about how he came to the Emerging Church conversation. He explained to me that he came to the conversation about 5 years ago being invited to an Emergent cohort meeting by Troy Bronsink – a Presbyterian Pastor located in Atlanta, GA who is prominent in the Emerging Church. This would put his entry into the conversation about the time when D.A. Carson’s book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (2005) was released, which was followed a month later by the collective “A Response to Recent Criticism” letter.

In our interview, Melvin also explained to me that “A Response to Recent Criticism”, was one of the things he read that had a tremendous impact on him, and that spurred him to find out more about what this “Emerging Church” was all about. He described to me the “grace” and “generous” attitude in this response to the Emerging Church’s critics made a big impression on him. He exclaimed to me in a pretty animated way, “whatever these guys are about... I want to be a part of that!” Witnessing this response between Emergent voices and their critics was a way that the social spiral activated for Melvin Bray, who at that time was not yet involved with the Emerging Church. A discursive bridge addressed to

critics enabled the ECM to spiral outwards with someone observing this interaction. Thereafter, Melvin sought more information about the movement, and eventually attended an Emerging Church cohort meeting, where he experienced a personal encounter of bridging that brought him into deeper personal involvement with the Emerging Church.

He then described to me his first face-to-face Emerging Church meeting, where he met Troy Bronsink. He told of how he came to that first meeting to explore and find out what this “Emerging Church” was all about. Besides reading stuff online, including “A response to recent criticism”, he had never been to an actual Emerging Church meeting before. Melvin Bray described to me the encounter: when he asked Troy Bronsink, “What is the Emerging Church all about?” Troy’s response took him aback, “What is the Emerging Church? The Emerging Church is whatever *you* want it to be!” Melvin explained to me what kind of effect this had on him: “To see a white, educated man, give over power like that was something that I’d never seen before”.

Melvin’s example shows how the discursive spiral can activate for individuals who observe the movement initially through its discourse. He subsequently took steps toward face-to-face encounters with an Emerging Church group. This put him in a position to experience direct interaction with people from the Emerging Church, as well as personal acts of bridging and inclusiveness. In Melvin’s case, his account of his process of involvement with the Emerging Church shows elements of both the discursive and the person-to-person bridging, and how they can be interconnected. Melvin is also an example

of *difference + closeness* that resulted in *sameness*, since he came to identify as an Emergent Christian. This emphasizes that while the Emerging Church does not set out to convert or assimilate people, they are open to the possibility and likelihood that people will become “Emergent”. Melvin’s story is particularly significant, particularly since he, as a black man, now sits at the helm of board of directors of Emergent Village alongside another person named Danielle Shroyer.

### *Academics*

I also saw the spiral being activated with academics and scholars engaged with the Emerging Church. “A response to recent criticism” contains a call to academics to engage their fellow academics who were criticizing the Emerging Church. To recall what was written, the document states: “because the professional scholars who criticize our work may find it hard to be convinced by people outside their guild, *we feel it wisest at this juncture to ask those in the academy to respond to their peers about our work.*” In my research, I uncovered one striking example where this call was responded to, further demonstrating what happens when discursive bridge-building activates the social spiral.

David Mills, an associate professor of Philosophy at Cedarville University in Ohio, published a response letter to D.A. Carson in 2005, who incidentally also lectured on the Emerging Church at the University in 2004. The letter, titled: “The Emergent Church – Another Perspective”<sup>96</sup> shed some light on how the social spiral can uncoil discursively, even as we have previously seen how it uncoiled

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<sup>96</sup> [http://people.cedarville.edu/employee/millsd/mills\\_staley\\_response.pdf](http://people.cedarville.edu/employee/millsd/mills_staley_response.pdf), The Emergent Church – Another Perspective: A Critical Response to D.A. Carson’s Staley Lectures, published 2005, accessed 05/25/2010.

for an individual, like Melvin Bray. In David Mills' response letter, I found him reiterating much of the language of the Emerging Church's cultural style of discursive bridging. I also found that he was implicitly agreeing with and restating many of the "rules of engagement" proposed by the ECM in their response letter.

Firstly, while Mill's states that though he does not identify himself as "Emergent", he finds himself speaking up for them. He goes on to echo the Emerging Church's stance that "togetherness" does not have to be premised on agreement, something he emphasizes in various places throughout his essay. Mill's echoes "A Response to Recent Criticism" by both validating the Emerging Church's work and constructing of a common impetus of differing parties to possibly learn from each other across difference:

"I seem to find myself frequently in the position of defending McLaren's writings or those of the ECM in general. This is not because I agree with everything in them, but because I find them to be very helpful dialogue partners as I and others reflect on our faith."

Mills' explicitly criticizes Carson for misrepresenting many of the ideas of the Emerging church, and deems, "such misrepresentations to be counterproductive to genuine informed dialogue about what it means to be the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." As with others who have subsequently criticized Carson, Mills also levels a critique at Carson's methodology, in particular, his lack of personal encounters with practitioners and localized meeting groups, despite his being a book on the Emerging church.

"He admits that he has only been studying this movement for a short period of time and that he knows no one personally who is involved in the movement... he is not truly talking *to* the ECM, but only *about* them, to

others who already agree with him. This is not conducive to fruitful dialogue.” (pg. 11)

In doing so, Mills echoes one of the Emerging Church’s “rules”, which is to foster actual relationships with people from practicing Emerging Churches, instead of critiquing them from afar. Mills’ additional point is that it is unproductive to just talk with people you already agree with on issues. He does not just critique Carson’s methodology, but also his analysis, which, “misses a chance for legitimate and constructive critical engagement, and instead opts to construct a series of straw men”, and further that, Carson’s “lack of engagement with most of the actual arguments and specifics of the ECM communicated an unwillingness to dialogue.” (pg. 17) Mills is pointing out the pitfalls of a one-way, non-dialogical critique of the Emerging Church, which he sees manifest in Carson’s work, and its ultimate weakness.

It is noticeable that the repeated emphasis on dialogue appears numerous times throughout the letter, as if to suggest that Carson has failed to live up to the conventions of civil dialogue that could prove fruitful if “done” right. This precisely echoes the thrust of the ECM’s “Response to Recent Criticism” letter, in how the Emerging Church and its observers can mutually engage each other on a fair basis. Mills’ also shows that though personal experience and actual encounters with the Emerging Church might be perplexing, sometimes that perplexity is necessary to genuinely engage their ideas:

“Contrary to Carson’s claim that those in the ECM have no passion for the gospel, those that I know in this movement are deeply passionate for the gospel. Some of them may express that passion in ways that are different than what we are used to, but as I said before, *if we are willing to talk to*



*anyone, we must be willing to listen to them first, in order to hear what they are really saying.” (pg. 23)*

Mills' letter reiterates each of the “rules of engagement” that I have discussed in the previous section that includes: i) a commitment to dialogic engagement, ii) responsible critique, iii) the necessity of personal encounters, and iv) a nuanced scope of who “they” are. In this instance, the spiral uncoils through Mills' critique of Carson, and his larger call for theologians, evangelicals and the church to engage the Emerging Church in good faith. In this case, the Emerging Church called for “experts” or academicians to “speak out” as those qualified to speak to their peers about the Emerging Church, and this call was answered. The spiral uncoiled through activating an authoritative institutional voice that called for proper engagement with the Emerging Church and their ideas.

Mills' response letter demonstrates how the “dirty work” of critique was done without the Emerging Church doing it themselves, simultaneously activating the social spiral by stimulating other people to speak up for them. Criticizing Carson's work directly would have made them out to be both defensive toward criticism and confrontational toward their critics. This discursive bridging enabled the movement to leave it up to someone else to do it. The social spiral was activated through drawing on the rhetorical power of “calling for voices” to respond to critics. This is effectively what the movement did through its “A Response to Recent Criticism” open letter. They neither defended themselves nor attacked their critics, but spurred others to speak up for them. Doing so spurred a contribution to the available discourse on the Emerging Church. Their call for civil engagement and open dialogue reverberated outward toward a larger

audience through an observer who spoke up in their defense. Thus a social spiral uncoiling is directly related to how the social world of the Emerging Church expands (chapter 4).

### *Other critics*

While bridge-building with critics is certainly difficult, this is not to say that the Emerging Church has had no success at all. I saw an example of bridging with a vocal critic of the Emerging Church during the 2010 Transform East Coast gathering that I attended. Chris Rosebrough runs an internet radio station called Pirate Christian Radio, for which he is the primary DJ.<sup>97</sup> He is a vocal critic of the Emerging Church Movement. My Puerto-Rican Emergent contact Eliacin Rosario-Cruz told me that Chris attends Emergent Gatherings across the country wherever they happen, and he subsequently reports on these meetings over his radio broadcast.

Chris Rosebrough was at the Transform East Coast gathering in Washington D.C. in April 2010. Throughout the conference, I observed Chris talking very amicably with the more recognized “leaders” of Emergent. None of these interactions looked heated or antagonistic. After the last session, I saw Joy Schroeder, a woman who runs an Emergent cohort in Arizona that I had previously interviewed, talking to Chris Rosebrough outside of the main hall. I joined them briefly for their conversation, and Joy introduced me to Chris. He was explaining to Joy that though he understood that many of people in the

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<sup>97</sup> <http://www.piratechristianradio.com/>

Emerging Church had been hurt by their experiences with the institutional church, he felt there was a “better way”. He said that the Emerging Church’s emphasis on “works” and “trying to get it right” was not dependent on forgiveness and the grace of God, and was hence wrong-headed. Joy listened attentively, while also disagreeing with him on many points, arguing that emphasizing grace has caused many Christians to be salvation-focused, and hence disengaged and passive when it comes to social issues. The tone of their conversation while impassioned was none-the-less good-natured. I saw them giving each other a friendly hug at the end of their conversation.

A particularly significant incident was when I saw Chris Rosebrough at an afternoon breakout session on the second day of the conference. Workshops were being held in different rooms all over the seminary. This session was called “What Context is Your Community Living in?” The Speaker for the session was a Pastor named Phil Shepherd, who led an Emerging church in Fort Worth called *The Eucatastrophe* (or “The Euc” for short). There were approximately 40 to 50 people in the room sitting in a meeting-style where everyone faced each other. During the talk, Chris Rosebrough, the critic, was sitting just beside Phil Shepherd, the Emergent practitioner, to his immediate left.

While Chris did not speak up for the entire workshop, toward the end of the workshop, Phil Shepherd talked about his relationship with Chris Rosebrough to make a point about bridge-building and dealing with perplexing relationships across difference. Earlier on in his talk, Phil Shepherd told everyone, that “when people ask us what we did with the first few years of Eucatastrophe, I tell them:

we taught people how to argue, to agree to disagree and at the end of the night, come to the table”. Phil then pointed to Chris Rosebrough, as a concrete example of what this would look like:

“I pretty much don’t agree with everything this man says, but I love him, and I respect him, because unlike some of the other people who critique this conversation, at least he has the oomph to say “you know what, I’m gonna talk to you”. We don’t have to agree. He doesn’t agree with anything we said just now, I almost guarantee you. But you know what? I’m gonna be able to go have lunch with him. We had dinner last night, and we talked, and it’s ok.”

Following this, there was an incident where someone in the room said they were curious to hear from Chris, since he had been largely silent. However, Phil Shepherd interjected and said that the allotted time for the seminar was already up. A few moments later, an “Emergent sympathizer” at the far end of the room started speaking. He was interrupted by a lady, whom I gathered from the previous times she spoke up, was also an Emergent practitioner. She was sitting about five places away from me. She then called Phil Shepherd out for allowing the “friendly” voice to speak, but not Chris. It was as if she was asking the group to take a step back and “see what is going on in this situation”, highlighting a moment which I thought was significant because an individual was asking the group to exercise reflexivity about who was being given a voice and who was not. Phil Shepherd apologized and tried to explain that they were out of time not because Chris wanted to speak, and that being “out of time” applied to “everyone”. In this brief encounter with the “other” in their midst, I saw people from the ECM practicing reflexivity in the group setting, and attempting to take the voice of a critic seriously, and further, calling out each other for seemingly

shutting a critic down. Lichterman notes that, “It is easier for a group to create bridges if it can practice social reflexivity in members’ normal course of working together” (Lichterman 2005:45) I saw this reflexivity being practiced openly even in the presence of a critic among them.

When I returned from the conference, I was eager to see if Chris had any reflections on his experience at Transform. I was particularly interested if he would say anything that pertained to his experience of relational bridging, since he was probably the only recognized critic at the conference. I found his May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010 radio broadcast online, where he talked about his feelings on the Transform conference.<sup>98</sup> In the broadcast, he criticizes the movement, saying, “Their ideas, their theology is very seductive, very dangerous and very wrong”, but he also gives the movement praise, saying of his experience at the Transform gathering,

“I had no problem whatsoever being able to shake their hands, to spend time conversing with them, sharing ideas, talking with them....these guys are touchable, reachable. If I wanted to, I could call Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones on the phone. I could get Nadia Bolz-Weber on the phone and she could be on the show. Why: because I have all their cell phone numbers. *These are people who are not threatened by critics, by ideas; they are really interested in talking with you, even if you disagree with them.*”

Chris Rosebrough’s reaction shows that he personally experienced different dimensions of relational bridging, despite his status as a vocal critic of the movement. Whether it was in his meals with Phil Shepherd, or in his interactions with other Emergent leaders, his experience was generally positive. He felt both

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<sup>98</sup> <http://podcast.fightingforthefaith.com/fftf/F4F050310.mp3>, Podcast title: Christian Preacher Arrested for Saying Homosexuality is a Sin. Subtitle: Initial Thoughts on the TRANSFORM (Emergent) Conference, published 05/03/2010, accessed 05/25/2010.

welcomed and taken seriously. Later on in the broadcast, he expresses how he does expect to be given a platform for his voice to be heard in the future.

“They claim they are a conversation where all are welcome to speak and have a voice... I fully expect that they will be consistent and allow me to have a voice in their conversation. Because when I am given that voice, I am going to tell them about the forgiveness of sin...”

In saying this, he echoed the thrust of his argument in the discussion I observed between him and Joy Schroeder: that the Emerging Church emphasized “works” instead of “grace and forgiveness”. This example demonstrates the ECM’s success in building relational bridges with at least this one critic. To his credit, Chris Rosebrough has chosen not just to engage them discursively, but also to personally interact with people from the movement. As he expresses in his radio show, “it’s not just about studying ideas or theologies, what’s really critical is that you have to understand these are people who hold theologies... *you need to get to know the people.*” In Chris’ case, the spiral uncoiled because of a mutual willingness on the part of the both the Emerging Church and him to personally engage each other. Hence, there was bridging across difference, with Chris fully expecting to be given a voice in the movement in the future, despite holding a theology that contrasts with the Emerging Church.

### **Interfaith bridge-building**

This section of my paper looks at two interfaith bridge-building interactions. The first was a meeting between Emergent leaders and a Jewish group called Synagogue 3000 that took place in 2006. The second centered on bridging efforts by the ECM with Muslims, firstly in being signatories to an

exchange of letters between Christians and Muslims, and secondly in fasting alongside Muslims during the month of Ramadan in 2009. Lichterman described a bridge as a routinized relationship a group has to individuals or groups it perceives as outside the group (Lichterman 2005:44). Through examining patterns through these interfaith interactions, it will shed light on how the Emerging Church seeks to routinize and *normalize* relationships with people of other religions.

Furthermore, Lichterman also notes that groups are able to spiral outwards when they “learn to do things with a widening circle of people” (Lichterman 2005:13). This section attempts to capture the “how” through what occurred in these uneasy encounters across religions. Interfaith interactions are often purely focused on dialogue, and seek to avoid differences and emphasize sameness, resulting in a non-offensive “lowest common denominator” interaction where everyone is concerned not to offend anyone else. The two cases that I analyze here focuses on the content of “talk” surrounding these bridging efforts, but it also looks at the practices of “doing things together” in solidarity with the “other” across difference.

As with many things Emergent, the discursive dimension interweaves with the personal dimension of bridging. These two examples will further exemplify how and to what effect.

*Face-to-face Interfaith bridge-building: Emergent-Jewish meeting*

The Emergent-Jewish meeting took place in over two days on January 16-17, 2006 at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in Simi Valley, CA. The meeting was held with Synagogue 3000, a nonprofit organization seeking to revitalize Jewish congregational life. It also had a Synagogue studies institute in development at the time. The meeting was coordinated by Emergent National coordinator at the time, Tony Jones, and the Synagogue 3000 director of research Shawn Landres. The meeting brought together some prominent Emergent practitioners along with innovative Jewish leaders who were seeking to create unconventional sacred communities, just like their Christian counterparts in Emergent. The Emergent practitioners who participated were Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt (Pastor of Solomon's Porch in Minnesota, Tim Keel (Pastor of Jacob's Well in KC), Nanette Sawyer (Pastor of Wicker Park Grace in Chicago), Emergent author Dwight Friesen and Troy Bronsink. The meeting also featured several scholars of religion in attendance as speakers. This included Wade Clark Roof, Steven M. Cohen and Ryan Bolger, author of a book on the Emerging Churches in the US and Europe. Journalists and other members of the press who recorded and reported on this meeting were also in attendance. Some highlights of the meeting were edited and made available online through YouTube.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm-05dEUv\\_o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm-05dEUv_o), Synagogue 3000 presents The Emerging Conversation, published and posted 05/08/2008, accessed 06/01/2010.



There were several things about this Jewish-Emergent meeting that the participants themselves thought was unique. Tony Jones expressed how in coordinating the meeting with Synagogue 3000 research director Shawn Landres, there was a mutual desire for the meeting not to be a polite encounter where people were so focused on trying to avoid offending each other that they didn't talk about their differences. As Jones describes in his book *The New Christians* (2008), "we were committed to making this meeting different... we decided that we would ask no one to leave anything at the door – who you were in your synagogue our church is who we wanted you to be at this meeting." (Jones, 2008: 156) A Rabbi Dov Gartenberg, who participated in the meeting, noted that despite all his interfaith gatherings he has experienced throughout his years, this was the first he experienced where "Christians could talk easily and openly about Jesus, and Jews could talk about God and Torah comfortably and unapologetically."<sup>100</sup>

This was not just an interfaith meeting centered on "talk", but on being religious interreligiously (Phan 2004). *Jewish Journal* reported Sarah Price Brown who observed the meeting, wrote in an article that during this meeting, Jews and Christians were "sharing songs and sacred texts".<sup>101</sup> In addition, there was prayer, worship and singing together. Beyond just polite talk they were participating in observance together. As Brown observes, "to the strum of a

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<sup>100</sup> <http://rabbidovblog.blogspot.com/2006/01/unique-gathering-of-innovative-jews-and.html>, published 01/18/2005, accessed 06/01/2010.

<sup>101</sup> [http://www.jewishjournal.com/community\\_briefs/article/emergent\\_jews\\_20060127/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/community_briefs/article/emergent_jews_20060127/), "Emergent Jews: Worshippers create unconventional communities unbound by tradition to reinvigorate Judaism" in *Jewish Journal*, Sarah Price Brown, published 01/26/2006, accessed 06/01/2010.

guitar, the Jews and Christians join in song, repeating the refrain: “how good and pleasant it is for us to dwell together”.<sup>102</sup> The meeting had a “general session” where the more than 2 dozen people involved would meet together in the round. But there were other, more personal interactions between Jewish leaders and their Christian counterparts when they broke off into groups and went for one-on-one walks discussing each others’ different “paths” to God.

*Discursive interfaith bridge-building: solidarity with Muslims*

Although there have been to face-to-face meetings between the Emerging Church and Muslims, like there was with Jews, in my research, I have seen the Emerging Church engage in interfaith bridge-building with Muslims in other ways. Both heavily involved Brian McLaren. The first centered on two Emerging Church leaders participating in an exchange of documents between Muslims and Christians in 2007. The second centered on a decision by Brian McLaren to fast alongside Muslims during the Muslim month of Ramadan in August 2009.

In October 2007, 138 Islamic clerics and scholars penned “A Common Word between Us and You”- an open letter to Christians initiating dialogue and conciliation. This Muslim initiative was unprecedentedly global, given the range of distinguished signatories and countries represented.<sup>103</sup> A month later, 300 Christian leaders and intellectuals issued a reciprocal response- “Loving God and Neighbor Together” as a full page advertisement in the New York Times. The Christian response was spearheaded and authored by Yale Divinity School Prof.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=signatories>, for a list of the 138 original signatories. Accessed 06/01/2010.

Miroslav Volf, an influential thinker for many Emergents. The two statements were followed by efforts from both sides to establish productive interfaith relationships between Muslims, Christians and Jews, which culminated in a meeting that was held in July 2008 at Yale University. The conference brought together Muslim and Christians scholars and clerics. A further conference based on the “A Common Word” document was held in November of 2008, which was held in the Vatican and hosted by Pope Benedict XVI. 2010 saw the publication of a book titled “A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor” that was foreworded by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Reactions to both the Muslim letter and the Christian response garnered much criticism, from Evangelical leaders in America. Both Brian McLaren and Tony Jones were signatories of the original response letter. McLaren has subsequently addressed some of these criticisms. For instance, McLaren issued a point-by-point critique<sup>104</sup> of an article that criticized Evangelical leaders who signed the Christian response document for “pledging common cause with Islam”.<sup>105</sup>

I have also heard Brian McLaren speak explicitly at the 2007 “Everything Must Change conference” in Kansas City about how Christians should treat Muslims. I recall McLaren telling the audience that, “treating your Muslim neighbors with hospitality does *not* go against our faith commitments”. This was a theme he would go back to several times through his talk. He also penned this

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<sup>104</sup> <http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2008/01/a-dialogue-too-friendly-for-fo.html>, “A dialogue too friendly for Focus on the Family” by Brian McLaren, published 01/07/2008, accessed 08/29/2010.

<sup>105</sup> [http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?com\\_mode=flat&com\\_order=0&storyid=7406](http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?com_mode=flat&com_order=0&storyid=7406), “Evangelical leaders pledge common cause with Islam” by Stephen Adams, posted 01/08/2008, accessed 08/29/2010.

same sentiment in his recent book *A New Kind of Christianity* (2010). In 2008, and interviewed Brian McLaren about his decision to sign the letter. I have used some of that data in other chapters. So it really did not surprise to me read from his blog that he would be fasting with Muslims during the month of Ramadan. He called other Christians to similarly do so, and to find a Muslim fasting partner just as he did. McLaren posted his experience and his reflections on his fasting experience, as well as his thoughts on Christianity's relationship with Islam, throughout the month of Ramadan. He also posted and responded to letters of criticism and support for his decision to fast alongside Muslims.

McLaren also featured in a 2008 video where he recounted a personal experience of bridging that he initiated with a Mosque near his house in the aftermath of 9/11. This was when he was still a Pastor of his former church in Maryland, in 2001.

Two days after the attacks, I had this feeling "my Muslims neighbors are in danger". There was a concern that people would turn against Muslims and blame them for the terrible things that happened. And so I just felt, I should write a letter to the leaders of the Muslim mosques where I live, and let them know that I'm a neighbor and that if there's anything I can do to do be of help, and if there's anything my church can do, we want to be of help. And when I introduced myself, and I apologized and said "I'm sorry, I've never been here before". It took this to make me come and want to introduce myself, and I gave him the letter and told him why I was there. I remember he was reading the letter and he just threw his arms around me and he said "thank you so much, this means so much to me, please come in, have some tea".<sup>106</sup>

McLaren uses his personal experience as a rhetorical tool, drawing attention to the problem of how people might perceive Muslims after 9/11, and recounting

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<sup>106</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/brian-mclaren-discusses-911-and-global-crises>, "Brian McLaren discusses 911 and global crises" posted 09/10/2008, accessed 08/29/2010.

how he was propelled to reach out to his Muslim neighbors. He is arguing that this kind of bridging is much needed in today's world where religious intolerance is one of the "global crises". Predictably, these bridge-building attempts with Muslims generate perplexity, as seen through the publicity and controversy in the media as well as the blogosphere. My data comes from these discursive sources, as well as an analysis of Brian McLaren and other Emergent thinkers' response to critics.

### *Managing and generating perplexity*

It is not hard to imagine that both these bridge-building encounters with Muslims and Jews would generate both controversy and perplexity with those observing. Early on in this chapter, I have discussed how perplexity is integral to the style of communication within the Emerging Church that helps them deal with awkward encounters and dilemmas of difference. While the movement seeks to manage perplexity, it also features in the movement in another way. My argument in this section is that perplexity is actively generated and produced by stirring the pots of controversy. This is the second way that the movement uses perplexity to their advantage: by generating controversy and publicity for the movement. This has the effect of drawing attention to the movement and helping it gain discursive significance. In my interpretation, perplexity is a function of the movement's ability to gain discursive currency and spiral outwards to a greater audience. Interfaith relationships represent one case of how the movement spirals outwards by generating perplexity.

Perplexity serves an important function in interactions across difference. It prepares people for what they will see, hear, feel and experience from the “other”. It diffuses the tension of disagreement. It is the “encounter lubricant” that facilitates and smoothes potentially difficult social encounters. Tony Jones recounts in his book *The New Christians* about the “prefacing work” that he and S3K research director Shawn Landres did to prepare both their respective groups for the perplexity of their interfaith encounter. Jones recounts:

We were all sitting in a circle—about two dozen of us—and Shawn said, “To my fellow Jews, I want to let you know that these emergent Christians are going to talk openly about Jesus and the Bible. This may make you uncomfortable at first, but that’s what they believe, so that’s what they’re going to talk about.” I went on to say something similar to my Christian peers about the rabbis talking about the Torah.

Though occasionally awkward, those moments were far outweighed by times of great poignancy. I led a meditation on a story of Jesus, and Troy Bronsink led songs he has written about Jesus. The rabbis taught from Torah, and the cantors led us in songs of Jewish faith. No one held back, which ultimately led to more candor and openness about what we really believe (Jones, 2008:157).

Perplexing talk in this instance anticipates awkwardness, suggesting to people, “you will feel it, but it is ok.” This ensures that experiencing perplexity will not turn them away from awkward encounters, but equips them with the appropriate cognitive equipment or “cultural toolkit” (Swidler 1986) to interpret these encounters positively and hence provide incentive to cross relational bridges despite the difficulties. In this case, perplexity was framed in such a way to prepare each others’ group for what religious differences might surface: *This is who we are and this is who they are. The differences will be apparent, but that’s ok.*

But perplexity is not just something that is managed, but produced for rhetorical utility. The Emerging Church and Brian McLaren in particular have been master purveyors of perplexity to the Emerging Church's audience, which I typologized in chapter 4, as ranging from initial encounter observers, to engaged critics and identifiers. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, perplexity causes people to think about themselves in relation to the "other" and ponder and question "How can this be?" One blogger reflects on this provocateur role of McLaren, saying of his decision to fast with Muslims:

"I both respect and shudder at what Brian is trying to do. He sails very close to the wind on this one... but then, he likes flying close to the sun, it turns up the heat and makes us look and ask the questions, 'will it work?' 'will he burn up?', 'what is he trying to prove?'"<sup>107</sup>

The individual expresses a mixture of admiration and consternation toward McLaren, since he is doing something "dangerous". But he also expresses an awareness that this is not unexpected coming from McLaren, since his persona and his writings often provoke more questions than provide answers. One Pastor who chose to join Brian McLaren in the fast, showed he was attuned to how fasting with Muslims, raised the issue among critics of whether doing so would result in a "slippery slope" of compromise: The fear is that engaging the practices of the "other" would result in a loss of identity. This was a similar dilemma expressed by the young man Felipe to McLaren in my discussion on perplexity earlier in this chapter. The Pastor, named Ben Ries when asked by a reporter why other Christians might be opposed to what he was doing, said: "a major

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<sup>107</sup> <http://www.futurechurch.co.za/graeme-codrington/2009/08/21/brian-mclaren-faces-criticism-for-observing-ramadan-fast>, originally posted, 08/21/2009, comment posted 08/22/2009, accessed 06/01/2010.

factor is fear... if we move the line here, we'll move it further, and this is the beginning of the end".<sup>108</sup> The same *USA Today* article also describes Evangelical leader Albert Mohler's deep reservation about this fasting issue along the same line of reasoning:

"The logic of Islam is obedience and submission... it's by following these practices that a Muslim demonstrates his obedience to the rule of the law through the Quran. For a Christian to do the same automatically implies a submission to the same rule"<sup>109</sup>

The Emerging Church's ability to generate perplexity is a feature of its rhetorical power that elicits responses from Evangelical leaders like Albert Mohler and John Piper, who featured earlier in this chapter. The core concern of critics like Mohler have with the Emerging Church, is its tendency to blur clear boundaries of distinction. The discomfort comes from not being able to imagine how *difference* + *closeness* could be achieved without some measure of "loss" or "compromise". Discursively, it allows the Emerging Church to raise the question to its audience: is this kind of interaction across religious differences really impossible, or is the problem really with Christians who just do not know how to handle it?

#### *A commitment to difference*

To answer this fear, the Emerging Church emphasizes a commitment to difference. This commitment to difference similarly featured in the ECM's bridge-building with critics. It is even more pronounced in interfaith relationships. The commitment to difference is expressed in several ways. Firstly, there is a

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<sup>108</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-09-18-ramadan-christians\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-09-18-ramadan-christians_N.htm), "Muslims find new Ramadan fast partners: Christians", published 09/18/2009, accessed 06/01/2010.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



*commitment to non-assimilation*: that the intention or purpose of the interaction is not to assimilate the “other” into the self. As one report on the Jewish-Emergent gathering notes that,

Some of the Jewish leaders expressed unease about collaborating with a group that, ultimately, might believe that the second coming of Jesus depends on Jews' converting to Christianity. "They have a religious vision that deems my religious expression ultimately secondary... I need to know where they stand." [Tony] Jones, *the Emergent leader, tried to dismiss the concern. "The goal of a dialogue with peers of another faith is surely not to convert them," he said.*<sup>110</sup>

Jones had to state to the Jewish group that their purpose in entering this interfaith interaction was not with the intention to convert them. Doing so releases the suspicion that closeness or proximity to the “other” might imply a possible hidden agenda toward sameness or homogeneity. This is why the Jewish participant expressed a need to “know where they stand”. Jones expressed a commitment to preserve the differences, between them, paving the way for a mutually authentic encounter. In a similar way, When McLaren declared that he was fasting alongside Muslims during Ramadan, he sought to clarify that he was doing so as a committed Christian. He writes:

“We are not doing so in order to become Muslims: we are deeply committed Christians. But as Christians, we want to come close to our Muslim neighbors and to share this important part of life with them.”<sup>111</sup>

In this quote, McLaren expresses a commitment to his identity as a Christian; something he does not intend to compromise. In the same breath, he

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<sup>110</sup> [http://www.jewishjournal.com/community\\_briefs/article/emergent\\_jews\\_20060127/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/community_briefs/article/emergent_jews_20060127/), “Emergent Jews”, by Sarah Price Brown, published 01/26/2006, accessed 05/27/2010.

<sup>111</sup> <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/ramadan-2009-part-1-whats-going.html>, “Ramadan 2009: Part 1 What’s going on?”, accessed 06/02/2010.

simultaneously speaks of a desire to “come close” to the religious “other” through this practice of fasting. McLaren expresses a way forward that makes *difference* + *closeness* doable. Asserting this commitment to difference is part of the “boundary work” that Emergents engage in to preface their bridge-building attempts. McLaren tells his audience that both he and his Muslim fasting partner understood the parameters under which they were fasting together. McLaren writes, “It was clear to both of us that neither of us would want the other to be unfaithful to the faith tradition to which he belongs... but we also want people to develop respectful friendship across traditions whenever possible, as an expression of their own fidelity”<sup>112</sup> They were both guided by a strong impetus to see people develop relationships across difference, demonstrating an awareness of the their own discursive and symbolic power with their constituents.

But for critics like leading Evangelical Church planter Mark Driscoll, the only justifiable basis for this kind of *difference* + *closeness* is to assimilate the “other”, turning the equation into *difference* + *closeness* → *sameness*. In an interview with USA Today, Driscoll is quoted saying, “if Christians want to pray during Ramadan, they should pray not with Muslims but for Muslims — that Muslims would come to know Jesus. To pray with Muslims absolutely dishonors Jesus.”<sup>113</sup> Both the ECM and their critics affirm differences but for different reasons.

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<sup>112</sup> <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/q-r-on-ramadan-relevant-to-today.html>, “Q & R: On Ramadan, relevant to today’s countdown quote”, accessed 06/01/2010.

<sup>113</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-09-18-ramadan-christians\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-09-18-ramadan-christians_N.htm), “Muslims find new Ramadan fast partners: Christians”, published 09/18/2009, accessed 06/02/2010.

Affirming (instead of denying) difference has an important function in bridge-building. As Lichterman notes in his study, “Subordinate groups, potential bridge-building partners, need to be recognized – granted dignity – as “other” before bridges can be built. Bridge-builders need to perceive and honor gaps first.” (Lichterman, 2005:259) According to Lichterman, a false notion of “we are all one” with no distinction of otherness, is highly problematic: there are *not* different social groups, or position, or identities, with which we have relationships that we might discuss (Lichterman 2005:46). A lack of nuance about difference does not resolve the problem of social distances and strained relationships. A commitment to difference, preserving a clear demarcation of the “us” and “them” is a key way that groups practice reflexivity in such a way that preserves the dignity of difference (Sacks 2002), while still enabling them to draw near to the categorical other. How is this difficult dance of balancing strong identities and clear boundaries of “us” and “them”, with a desire to draw near?

*Alongside practices: “joining them, but not being them”*

The answer lies in what I term as “alongside practices”, which I conceptualize as practices that allow people to come alongside an “other” in a way that preserves difference while expressing solidarity across those same differences. Alongside practices develop from what I conceptualized in chapter 5 on mapping as “navigational affinity”: where groups envision themselves in tandem with other religions, each navigating their respective journey of faith. Through navigational affinity people maintain differences, but still learn from each other across those differences. Alongside practices are the specific practices that

come out that common orientation towards navigational affinity. My data on what the Emerging Church has done in its interfaith interactions with Muslims and Jews shows a pattern of commitment toward alongside practices. They engage in practices alongside the “other”, while acknowledging boundaries and difference. One blogger sums up the core purpose of why the Emerging Church engages in these perplexing and controversial alongside practices,

I think there's a simple and profound truth that he is communicating by joining them in their fast: When we ascribe value and show appreciation for the things our neighbors do, we show them that we believe they are valuable.<sup>114</sup>

This sentiment echoes my earlier analysis of the ECM's bridge-building with critics, which includes validating the critics and their work. In this instance, fasting “alongside” similarly validates the practices of the religious other.

As I have discussed in chapter 5, the “journey” metaphor was a means by which the Emerging Church conceptualizes other religions are mapped as different but similar. The journey metaphor, along with accompanying concepts like “road” and “path” repeatedly appeared in my analysis of this data on interfaith interactions. The journey metaphor performs an important function in allowing groups to imagine ways of thinking about being “side-by-side” with the “other” with an important qualifier: the “other” is on a different journey/ path/ road. One blogger commenting on this Jewish-Emergent interaction notes that Christians, “have fundamental theological loci that are not common with the Jewish faith,

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<sup>114</sup> [http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/archives/2009/09/creatively\\_comm.html](http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/archives/2009/09/creatively_comm.html), published 09/2009, accessed 06/03/2010.

specifically the Trinity and the person and work of Christ.”<sup>115</sup> He then elaborates and says that,

While we can learn a great deal about the one true God via interaction with Jewish believers, and while partnership with them can bear fruitful witness to the living God, there are limits, at which point we have to mournfully acknowledge “we can go no further along this same road.” There, we can bless each other, and encourage each other to move forward.<sup>116</sup>

Making this distinction concretizes the identity separation between “us” and “them”. This gives people a way of talking about how similar experiences does not equate to “sameness” when it comes to identity. The journey metaphor enables them to negotiate the “fine line” of distinction (Zerubavel, 1991) between the “us” and “them”, without collapsing into sameness. The journey metaphor appeared repeatedly in my analysis of the Jewish-Emergent interaction. For instance, one of the Jewish participants, named Amichai Lau-Lavie, took a walk with Troy Bronsink, a Christian Emergent from Atlanta. Lau-Lavie reflected on the experiences saying,

...it’s fairly significant, that we can take a walk together and talk about lofty matters. And my grandfather, who was a Rabbi, probably did not take a walk in the afternoon *with a fellow walker on a different path*. (Amichai Lau-Lavie)

He identifies his Christian counterpart as a “fellow walker on a different path” to mark the distinction between them, while allowing room for a togetherness that still acknowledges that fundamental distinction. Another Jewish participant, a

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<sup>115</sup> [http://xphiles.typepad.com/discipleship/2005/12/interreligious\\_.html](http://xphiles.typepad.com/discipleship/2005/12/interreligious_.html), Inter-Religious Emergers? Published 12/09/2005, accessed 05/27/2010.

<sup>116</sup> [http://xphiles.typepad.com/discipleship/2005/12/interreligious\\_.html](http://xphiles.typepad.com/discipleship/2005/12/interreligious_.html), Inter-Religious Emergers? Published 12/09/2005, accessed 05/27/2010.

Rabbi from Phoenix, Arizona, echoed Lau-Lavie's positive evaluation of his own personal interaction with a Christian Emergent,

If someone really believes with deep passion that's their path, but if they can sit in front of me and we can talk, and we can share deep Torah, then I'm going to be ok with that. (Rabbi Darren Kleinberg)

The concept "alongside practices" enables us to understand how groups can engage in practices in concert with the "other" while acknowledging boundaries and difference. Being "alongside" does not mean you subsume yourself under the identity of the other. As McLaren explains, "since the bible teaches us the importance of fasting... we can participate as Christians in fidelity to the Bible as our Muslim friends do so in fidelity to the Quran".<sup>117</sup> Each side still maintains the integrity of being on their own path. Mutual observance, like fasting or praying together does not mean differences are collapsed. This is connectedness across difference without watering down or suppressing differences. Being "alongside" the "other" is a mark of respect and a validation of their life and practices.

#### *Reciprocal learning and finding common ground*

My analysis concurs with Lichterman's findings and suggests that bridge-building can occur precisely *because* differences are laid out and dealt with instead of suppressed and ignored. Differences then, establish a "healthy space" between groups where they conceive being able to draw on and learn from each other. Both sides exploit the space/ gap created by the acknowledgement of difference. Difference becomes reframed as opportunity instead of obstacle. In

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<sup>117</sup> <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/ramadan-2009-part-1-whats-going.html>, "Ramadan 2009: Part 1 What's going on?", accessed 06/02/2010.

my previous section, I also discussed how two components of bridge-building included a posture of humility and a willingness to learn from the “other” that prefaces bridge-building attempts, as well as the ability of groups to establish a “common impetus”. I found precisely these features in my analysis of these interfaith efforts too.

When McLaren issued his statement explaining why he was fasting alongside Muslims, he raised the example, of how “Jesus a devout Jew, overcame religious prejudice and learned from a Syrophonecian woman and was inspired by her faith two thousand years ago” as a launching point to say that in the same way, in the present context Christians can “seek to learn from our Muslim sisters and brothers” through fasting alongside them.<sup>118</sup> In the Emergent interaction with Jews, both sides expressed a desire to learn from each others’ experiences. Tony Jones expressed a sense of “great joy and promise” in partnering with Synagogue 3000 to “talk about the Kingdom of God”, in return, S3K Director of Research Shawn Landres expressed a desire “to learn from their experiences and also to build bridges by engaging and challenging one another.”

The willingness to listen and learn from one another also meant that both groups were able to find significant common ground. During the meeting itself, Emerging Church pastor Doug Pagitt expressed to the entire group, “it felt like we were at very similar places, asking very similar questions that we’re asking that the other people in each of our traditions are not asking”. Shawn Landres echoed this sentiment, saying “I hear a lot of similarities. The language is different, the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

vocabulary is different. But some of the basic questions and concerns I find remarkably similar”. Both groups noted similarities with each other that ironically, showed in some ways they had more in common interreligiously, than to those in their own respective religions who were “not asking the same questions”.

But the commonalities that surfaced extended beyond “finding out what experiences we have in common” and manifested in “finding out what we have a mutual obligation toward”. This is a similar “common impetus” that the ECM sought to establish with its critics for that they both were sincere Christians “trying to get it right”. I found the presence of this “common impetus” here in interfaith relations too. In touting the exchange of letters between Muslim and Christian leaders, McLaren echoes a stated impetus contained within the original “A Common Word” document, where the Muslim signatories express that Christians and Muslims together comprise over 50% of the world’s population, and that “unless Christians and Muslims learn to get along as neighbors, nobody in the world will be secure”.<sup>119</sup> McLaren then goes on to highlight another common impetus in how “the two greatest commandments (the love of God and love of neighbor) are an area of common ground and a link between the Quran, the Torah, and the New Testament”. He then notes that, “This Emerging dialogue represents to me a tremendous opening, a needed alternative to terror and counter-terror, a gesture and counter-gesture of peace”<sup>120</sup> He would later be one

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<sup>119</sup> <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1>, published 2007, accessed 06/03/2010.

<sup>120</sup> <http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2007/10/a-word-of-hope-between-us-and.html>, “A Word of Hope between ‘Us and Them’”, Brian McLaren, published 10/31/2007, accessed 06/01/2010.



of the original signatories of the Christian response letter, that reciprocated this call for peace and conciliation between Christians and Muslims.

In bridge-building, when boundaries are clarified, groups are able to talk about each others' common problems in the present context. Both were trying to figure out "praxis" in response to changing times through learning from each other. The Jewish participants were seeking to learn from their more experienced Christian practitioners who were doing this Emergent thing for a lot longer than they had, while Emergent Christians were finding much to learn from their Jewish counterparts. Both were helping each other ponder practical solutions.

*Mining shared tradition and generating a religious double-voiced discourse*

Committing to differences also enables both groups to tap on what they have in common, or common things that they share, but that does not translate to "we are the same". It allows them to exploit the identified similarities without fear that this will collapse into sameness. This enables them to share common resources for thinking their respective faiths forward. The mining of shared traditions is best exemplified in an instance that both Jewish and Emergent participants echoed as being one of the high points of their interaction. I take Emergent leader Tony Jones' account to represent the collective sentiment of those who recounted this same incident,

In one small group, the question was raised about whether rabbis from older, established synagogues might bless and assist young rabbis who are attempting to start something new. After some discussion among the Jewish members of the small group, Tim Keel, pastor of Jacob's Well in Kansas City, spoke up. He told the story of Eli and Samuel, found at the beginning of 1

Samuel, and of how the very old prophet, Eli, and the young boy and prophet-to-be, Samuel, formed a mutually beneficial and nonhierarchical relationship.

When Tim finished, silence ensued. Then a rabbi quietly said, “Yasher koach.” Shawn told me later that’s a Yiddish version of the Hebrew yishar kochachah, which means, “More strength to you”. He also told me that it’s a traditional expression of appreciation and respect for an interpretation of Torah. (Tony Jones 2008:157)

Shawn Landres, director of Synagogue 3000 reflected on this mining of a common story from both the Torah and the bible as “a moment of beautiful truth.”<sup>121</sup> Certainly, this tapping on a shared tradition or a shared past may pose some problems to groups working across differences that they seek to preserve. As Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us, the problem of “otherness” is not just the simple difference between like-us, and not-like-us. Often the most problematic form of otherness surfaces in the too-much-like-us (Smith, 2004:275). This fits nicely with Lichterman’s insight on perplexity that I have attempted to develop in this chapter (Lichterman, 2005), since too-much-like-us can indeed be a cause for perplexity to groups who find it important to distinguish themselves from each other.

Beyond committing to differences, as I have already discussed, I see another explanation of how groups work through the perplexity of being in a too-much-like-us conundrum when they relate to each other. We can see how this might be a particularly acute problem with Christians, Muslims and Jews, whom some put together under labels like “monotheistic faiths” or “Abrahamic

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<sup>121</sup> <http://synagogue3000.org/synablog/2008/02/04/tony-jones-on-christian-jewish-emergent-conversation/>, “Tony Jones on Christian-Jewish Emergent Conversation”, published 02/04/2008, accessed 05/27/2010.

traditions". This answer can be found in Bakhtin's conceptualization of a "double-voiced discourse" (1981) where different groups engage in a shared language, suspending differences while mutually accommodating different meanings that each side brings to inhabit common terms.

In Courtney Bender's *Heaven's Kitchen* (2003), she employs the term to show how the interactional culture inside of a soup kitchen allows people of different religious or non-religious persuasions to get along and work together despite their differences. Bender notes that in double-voiced discourse, "individuals recognizably draw on others' language or phrasing and turn it toward their own ends... and that double-voiced discourse allows for communicating across difference, without reducing a lack of similarity to a 'new' shared culture" (Bender 2003:108-109).

Bender explains from her project, that "in talking about religion, volunteers from different religious traditions built on their familiarity with common religious speech genres and *on their ability to use what they knew about each others.*" (Bender 2003: 108) This is precisely the dynamic that we see taking place with Emergent Pastor Tim Keel using the story of Eli and Samuel to speak identifiable truth to both Christians and Jews. The same dynamic occurs with Christian Emergents like Brian McLaren and Tony Jones who are willing to converse with other faiths about "God" even though the understanding of "God" might be different from theirs. So whether with Jews or Muslims, Emergents establish a norm of talking about "God" through a double-voiced discourse. Each group uses the term "God" in their interactions, while suspending who or what specifically the

term “God” refers to. By preserving ambiguity, it allows each party to talk about “God” on each of their own terms, making *difference + closeness* doable. The “double-voiced discourse” allows religious others to dialogue across their differences, without having to resolve those differences. Bender herself notes that double-voiced discourse is useful “in a setting where people do not assume shared language or belief”, she elaborates that, “expectations of diversity may therefore situate speakers in such a way that they already expect to have to translate or resituate their own meanings from familiar genres to some other one if they want to communicate.” (Bender 2003:110)

*The spiral activates: personal and discursive spirals*

As I have discussed in the previous section on bridging with critics, bridge-building enables the Emerging Church to spiral outwards in different ways. Throughout my analysis of this chapter, it has been pretty apparent that some of the person-to-person bridging has been fairly successful, particularly in the encounters between Emergents and Jews. Firstly, I saw signs of the spiral through personal accounts from participants themselves, through their own reflections on blogs. A Jewish Rabbi reflects,

This was more than an ecumenical gathering, but a sharing in how we live and work out our respective faith traditions in a complex culture. The differences remained quite pronounced, but I came away with an awareness of common approaches to practice and religious community that are very promising.<sup>122</sup> (Rabbi Dov Gartenberg)

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<sup>122</sup> <http://rabbidovblog.blogspot.com/2006/01/unique-gathering-of-innovative-jews-and.html>, published 01/18/2005, accessed 05/27/2010.

This was a sentiment similarly echoed by Emergent thinker Dwight Friesen who was at the meeting, noted in his own reflections that, he had, “come away with much to consider, and new voices and faces to shape my soul.”<sup>123</sup> Both these responses point to an important indicator that the social spiral uncoiled: when groups learn to work across differences with a widening circle of people (Lichterman 2005:13), where mutual exploration led to discoveries and insights across differences. Bearing in mind that this too fulfills the criteria of bridging that is meant to fill structural gaps and allow groups to resource each other (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000), as both Christians and Jews “draw from each other” for strategies to engage with the social context. Dwight Friesen’s own original concept orthoparadoxy: the paradoxical tension between believing right: orthodoxy, and doing it right: orthopraxy (Friesen, 2007), that he introduced to the Jews during the meeting, would also later come to be used extensively by Synagogue 3000 as they articulated their own mission statement.

In other instances, I found how Emergent experiences, language and categories helped Synagogue 3000 process “sameness” and “difference” struggles that they were experiencing in their own institutions. I noted that in 2008, approximately 2 years after the Jewish-Emergent meeting, S3K direction Shawn Landres was still finding it heuristically useful to chew on and process changes and developments within American Jewish institutions using Emergent idioms and concepts. In this excerpt, he reflects on the how the term “Emergent”

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<sup>123</sup> <http://dwightfriesen.blog.com/2006/01/18/s3k-jews-christians-in-conversation/>, “s3k: Jews & Christians in conversation”, published, 01/18/3006, accessed 06/03/2010.

itself helped him think beyond the differences between Jewish neo-institutional organizing units to something that unites them together. Landres writes:

Certainly there are other metaphors one might use to describe these differences.... among the “independent minyan” vs. the “rabbi-led emergent” vs. something else, are letting internal organizational structure drive the discussion... underlying these organizational differences, however, are significant similarities: commitments to community-based (rather than inner-directed) spiritual expression, deep hospitality, democratic worship, sustained confrontation with tradition, theologically-informed social change, blurring of the sacred/secular divide, and so on.

Perhaps “emergent” is not the ideal term to capture these big ideas...still, for now, “emergent” is serving an important purpose: to capture in a single word or phrase (“Jewish Emergent”), one not dependent on organizational structure, the broad swathe of new spiritual communities that have sprung up over the past decade or so.<sup>124</sup>

In a reciprocal manner, I found data that shows Emergent individuals reflecting on how the experiences of Jewish “Emergents” might help Christian Emergents be further reflexive, and ponders ways that they can further “spiral outwards” and work *with* existing institutions instead of just *outside* them. An Emergent thinker penning his thoughts on the encounter writes: “if Jewish Emergents can operate within the institution, why can’t Christian Emergents? Can institutional churches and emergent ones benefit from a collegial relationship with one another?”<sup>125</sup>

This comment was prior to hybrid Emergent groups from denominations appearing on the scene. Both Christians and Jews were spiraling outwards through realizing how the “other” sheds lights on their own inadequacies, blind spots and possible opportunities to “do things differently”.

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<sup>124</sup> <http://synagogue3000.org/synablog/2008/01/09/whats-in-a-name/>, “What’s in a name?”, published 01/09/2008, accessed 05/27/2010.

<sup>125</sup> [http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/05/the\\_emerging\\_sy.html](http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/05/the_emerging_sy.html), “The Emerging Synagogue? Apparently Christians aren’t the only one feeling the urge to emerge”, published 05/09/2008, accessed 05/27/2010.

The spiral also can be seen through expressions of *mutual validation*: in a way that these faiths are finding out that, “our experiences, our questions, our struggles, our frustrations are legitimate” because they are echoed in the experience of the religious “other”. It gives them a way of saying that their experiences are not unique, even though those common experiences are happening to an “other”. Reflecting this, the same Emergent thinker notes:

Does the development of Jewish Emergent movement indicate that the Christian Emergents are on to something? That is, does an analogous response from adherents from another religion validate the emergent impulse?<sup>126</sup>

I also found clear evidence that this mutual validation stimulates people to consider spiraling further outwards to explore unexplored relational horizons. The question being asked is, “who else is out there that we can talk to and learn from”? And “what other potential partnerships can we form with other “others”? One Emergent practitioner’s reaction to the Christian-Jewish meeting demonstrates this link between mutual validation and the incentive to further spiral outwards and establish relationships with even more “others”. Adam Walker Cleveland writes,

I’m very excited by this opportunity to meet and discuss with progressive Jews about community formation and spirituality. I hope this is just the beginning of future times of dialogue and joint-endeavors between emergent Christians, Jews and hopefully those from other faiths. *I am really interested in whether there are Emergent Muslims too...Anyone out there want to fill us in on some emerging mosques? It’s*

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<sup>126</sup> [http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/05/the\\_emerging\\_sy.html](http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/05/the_emerging_sy.html), “The Emerging Synagogue? Apparently Christians aren’t the only one feeling the urge to emerge”, published 05/09/2008, accessed 05/27/2010.

*clear that “emergent” is not just a Christian-fad – but is a much wider and greater phenomenon....*<sup>127</sup>

Adam Walker-Cleveland expresses a desire to push the relational frontier, seeking out uncharted borderlands (Anzaldúa 1999) of relationships that are “yet to be”. Similarly, the spiral activates through people expressing for a desire for different kind of status quo that is similarly “yet to be”. Eboo Patel, Brian McLaren’s Muslim fasting partner reflects on the fast and says,

I hope this interfaith solidarity during Ramadan is a sign of the times. I pray that we are moving towards a world in which people are rooted in their own traditions but find dimensions to admire and learn from in others, that Ramadan is a time during which people from a variety of backgrounds come together in the common purpose of growing closer to God and one another. That is the heart of Islam, of all of our faiths and traditions. (Eboo Patel)<sup>128</sup>

Previously, I have also shown how the spiral can activate with observers to a bridging interaction. This shows how a discursive spiral can uncoil with individuals who are observing as an outside party to these interfaith interactions. To demonstrate this, Brian McLaren published an email that he received from an atheist who had recently read about his decision to fast during Ramadan. The email reads,

I am a devoted doubter... I may not agree with your religion or your personal beliefs, however, your decision to participate in another person’s religious practice, such as fasting during Ramadan, gives me a new and hopeful perspective on some religious leaders.

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<sup>127</sup> <http://pomomusings.com/2006/01/19/christians-jews-discuss-emergent-sacred-communities/>, “Christians & Jews discuss Emergent Sacred Communities”, publishes 01/19/2006, accessed 05/27/2010.

<sup>128</sup> [http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/eboo\\_patel/2009/08/interfaith\\_solidarity\\_during\\_r.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/eboo_patel/2009/08/interfaith_solidarity_during_r.html), “Interfaith Solidarity During Ramadan”, by Eboo Patel, published 08/28/2009, accessed 06/01/2010.



Who knows maybe because of your generous sharing of your faith to people like me, you may just get a couple of new converts....not me of course, but you never know.....I do so agree with your apparent practice of respecting other religious dogmas and trying to see the best in other people.<sup>129</sup>

Signs of the spiral were also apparent through responses from some prominent and vocal Muslim's about Christians fasting alongside Muslims, spearheaded by McLaren. One American Muslim named Rahim Snow writes directly to Brian McLaren, saying:

Thank you for your bold leadership in observing the Ramadan fast. I know that you do it in the Abrahamic spirit of friendship and seeing oneself in the other. It's a marvelous thing. So many of us who grew up Muslim in this country have been attending Christmas Mass and Easter services and various other functions with our Christian friends at their Christian churches for ages. We feel right at home there because Jesus is within our spiritual family and Christians are nothing less than our brothers. *But the reverse doesn't always play out, as you well know. That is why it's so heart-warming and a powerful gesture of solidarity for you to embark on the practice of Ramadan.* ... God bless you, your family, and every effort you make to build bridges, Rahim.<sup>130</sup>

This particular individual, Rahim Snow, would later on come to be talked about in Emergent circles as an "Emergent Muslim". When I was in the Transform Gathering in D.C., the Atlanta cohort coordinator, a female by the name of Rebekah Berndt, told me how they had invited Rahim Snow to speak at their cohort meeting. This was a further sign of the spiral uncoiling beyond the discursive, into the realm of the face-to-face. I also noted other signs of the discursive spiral. In a newspaper article published in *USA Today*, premier

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<sup>129</sup> <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/heres-an-accurate-report-on-my-p.html>, Ramadan: Day 10, accessed 06/01/2010.

<sup>130</sup> <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/heres-an-accurate-report-on-my-p.html>, Ramadan: Day 10, accessed 06/01/2010.

Muslims scholar and professor Akbar Ahmed, chairman of the Islamic studies department at American University in Washington D.C. notes,

“There is a high level of anti-Americanism in the Muslim world... now they are going to say this propaganda that America hates us is not true. Here is a pastor who wants to understand us, who does not want to convert us, and who is even prepared to walk with us, to fast with us. This is a big gesture.”<sup>131</sup>

Brian McLaren himself notes that through people who have emailed him, he has also seen evidence of this outwardly-oriented social spiral uncoiling. Showing how acts of bridge-building have the rhetorical power to spur others into action. McLaren himself has been pretty explicit about this goal of moving and inspiring others to “take action”. In his first post on the fast, he expresses how the main purpose of the fast was for “spiritual growth, health, learning, and maturity”, but goes on to say that “we also hope that our experience will inspire others to pray and work for peace and the common good, together with people of other faith traditions.”<sup>132</sup> In the aftermath of the fast, this goal of hopefully inspiring others to spiral outwards seems to have been accomplished.

McLaren writes,

Interestingly, during and since the fast, I’ve heard from an amazing array of people – Christians and Muslims, and other – who feel God calling them to build respectful relationships with the other, not as a compromise of their deepest faith commitments, but as an expression of them.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-09-18-ramadan-christians\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-09-18-ramadan-christians_N.htm), “Muslims find new Ramadan fast partners: Christians”, published 09/18/2009, accessed 06/01/2010.

<sup>132</sup> <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/ramadan-2009-part-1-whats-going.html>, “Ramadan 2009: Part 1 What’s going on?”, accessed 06/04/2010.

<sup>133</sup> <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/q-r-on-ramadan-relevant-to-today.html>, “Q & R: On Ramadan, relevant to today’s countdown quote”, accessed 06/01/2010.

Thus McLaren has succeeded in using the rhetorical power of publically doing bridge-building to inspire different kinds of people (not just Emergents, and not just Christians) to spiral outwards. McLaren is not just a master provocateur. He knows how to employ his discursive clout to good effect, exploiting the opportunities of negative criticism to make a point to a larger audience. In response to receiving several emails where he was called names like “son of Satan”, “false teacher” and “apostate”, McLaren writes on his blog:

Suffice it to say that the attitudes of anger, superiority, hostility, disdain, and perhaps even fear that are discernable in these messages help explain why some of us feel, in faithfulness to Christ and his gospel of the kingdom of God, that it is a great honor to seek to humbly differ, and to cross bridges, overcome barriers, identify with, and build relationships with people of different backgrounds.

We don't do this to make anyone mad, but we understand that responses like these often go with the territory. Sometimes, bringing less-than-ideal attitudes to the surface is part of God's work in this world. When things are out in the open, they often can be dealt with more effectively than when they remain hidden.<sup>134</sup>

McLaren uses these negative reactions to his own good rhetorical effect: bridge-building across difference then becomes vitally important and even more necessary in light of the antagonistic discourse that is out there, as represented by the name-calling and condemnation of these comments. McLaren is indirectly pointing out to his audience, “If we do not do it, nobody will”, laying the impetus on them to engage in bridge-building and spiraling outwards toward religious “others”.

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<sup>134</sup> <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/ramadan-2009-part-3-1.html>, “Ramadan 2009: Part 4”, accessed 06/01/2010.

## **Conclusion: developing the social-spiral argument**

In this chapter, I have discussed the successes and struggles of the Emerging Church Movement in their attempts to build relational bridges. Early in the chapter, I utilized Lichterman's concept of perplexity (2005) for my analysis and built on it. Lichterman, building on Addams (2002 [1902]), was primarily interested in how perplexity might cause people to be reflexive about themselves in relation to the "other". I was able to confirm Lichterman's findings about the importance of dealing with perplexity rightly in order to spur people to spiral outwards instead of inwards. I showed how much talk of perplexity features in the movement, coining the term *perplexity elaboration*, which conceptualizes the movement's willingness to lean into awkwardness and talk about these experiences. I also showed how they engender concepts like "holy awkwardness" for thinking positively about perplexity. Later in the chapter, I also argued that the ECM does not just manage perplexity, but through provocateur figures like Brian McLaren, generate perplexity on a discursive level because of its rhetorical utility.

From there, I showed how the ECM achieved limited success in their bridging efforts with critics, while experiencing some success in doing the work of interfaith bridging. My analysis modeled Lichterman's which demonstrates bridge-building in face-to-face interactions. But I also distinguished between a personal or face-to-face level of bridging, and a discursive level that I felt was particularly evident with the ECM. Lichterman neither discussed nor referred to this discursive level. Hence his discussion of the social spiral is limited to these

face-to-face interactions. He was only able to ascertain if the social spiral activated in these localized interactional contexts.

My analysis shows that being able to distinguish different levels of bridging has theoretical utility because it enables us to see how failure on one level of bridging might facilitate bridging on a different level. As I demonstrated, even though bridging with critics was difficult to accomplish, they found success in other ways: by drawing in observers who were only engaging the movement on the discursive level. Observing the movement trying to engage amicably with critics, spurred one individual into finding out more about the Emerging Church, and this led to face-to-face encounters with an Emergent cohort, where he then experienced bridging on a personal level. Failure to build a bridge on one level led to bridging on another level. I also showed signs of the spiral from a variety of observers, from academics, to atheists, to people of other religions. Critics and detractors ironically contribute to the movement's rhetorical power by speaking up against the ECM. This supports my conclusions in chapter 4, where I argued that critics contribute to the social world of the Emerging Church by the very act of critiquing the movement.

My analysis showed the set of practices and customs that the Emerging Church Movement engages in to make *difference + closeness* doable, despite the perplexity of closeness that might conflate with sameness. As my analysis has shown in concurrence with Lichterman, that drawing distinct boundaries and accentuating difference is actually key to making groups feel comfortable about coming together across their differences. Cultural elements like the journey

metaphor to talk about different “paths” and “roads”, and utilizing a double-voiced discourse by using common terms while mutually suspending agreement of meaning, are all part of the cultural toolkit that the Emerging Church uses to accomplish *difference + closeness*, without fear of collapsing into sameness.

As a final note, I have also noted that another factor that mediates whether groups can build bridges and spiral outwards is explained by a useful distinction between “bounded” and “unbounded” groups. The Emerging Church is able to do the kinds of bridging work particularly because it is more of a loosely bounded network rather than a tightly bounded institution. Hence the costs entailed in establishing relationships with people of different faiths, are very different compared to bounded religious groups that have the structure and organization of conventional religious groups (Neitz 1994:128). As we saw in the attempts to bridge-build with critic John Piper, bounded groups with institutional affiliations and denominational commitments, have more costs to consider in terms of the reputation of the denomination they represent, and possible sanctions they might incur by working with Muslims or Jewish groups. Another good example would be when National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) President Leith Anderson and Vice-President Richard Cizik penned their names to a reply document to the Muslim “A Common Word” document, and faced severe censure from Focus on the Family and other Evangelical leaders like Albert Mohler.<sup>135</sup> McLaren subsequently published a response in defense of

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[http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?com\\_mode=flat&com\\_order=0&storyid=](http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?com_mode=flat&com_order=0&storyid=)

Anderson and Cizik. However for individuals like Brian McLaren, Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt, they do not experience the costs and constraints of bridge-building in the same way, since none of them have prohibitive broader institutional commitments. Hence, the Emerging Church, and Emergent Village, given their more loosely bounded organizing structure have an interest in less institutionalization instead of more, since this preserves their autonomy to have diverse relationships and build bridges. Lichterman (2005), and other theorists analyzing bridge-building, should also consider how the boundedness of groups affects their chances of success in spiraling outwards.

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[7406](#), "Evangelical leaders pledge common cause with Islam" by Stephen Adams, published 1/3/2008, accessed 08/29/2010.

## **Chapter 8 Constructing the postmodern: narrative & rhetoric in a critique of big stories**

*From theology to ecclesiology, the ECM perceives the “postmodern world” as real, and that postmodern conditions mandate a fundamental rethinking of the Christian faith. In this chapter, I analyze the various ways the Emerging Church Movement rhetorically constructs postmodernism through their discourse. I look at where postmodernism appears in the movement’s literature, in online interactions, and how the movement interprets its practices as postmodern. I look at the narrative and rhetorical usefulness of claiming postmodernity is “here and now”, and critique their claims that things are different and new. I note that despite the critique of metanarratives, the Emerging Church invokes postmodernism as an explanatory metanarrative. This chapter also brings in observations and interviews from my fieldwork, to reveal contradictions and ironies resulting from the ECM’s attempts to put postmodernism into practice. To conclude, I discuss how insights from this chapter contribute to a theoretical understanding of culture as a “tool commons”, instead of Ann Swidler’s popular concept of culture as a “tool kit”.*

### **The Emerging Church: a postmodern movement**

In the West, postmodernism is an alternate story that is being told in the wake of modernity’s sweeping and mythical narrative. Around the world there are others. We truly live in a liminal, or transitional, time. (Keel 2008:42)

If there is one idea that sums up the ethos of the Emerging Church, many would say that it is self-consciously “postmodern”. Unsurprisingly, many of the most influential Emergent thinkers write about postmodernism. Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Tim Keel and Doug Pagitt all do so. Brian McLaren’s first book, *The Church on the Other Side* (2000), discusses the significance of “the postmodern matrix” for how churches should operate. McLaren’s best selling *A New Kind of Christian* (2001), is a part fiction, part epochal diagnosis of the transition from “modernity” to “postmodernity”. This book has been an entrée into the movement



for many of my interview respondents (chapter 6). Emergent authors have published books with different themes, but with a common postmodern backdrop, whether it is on youth ministry (*Postmodern Youth Ministry*, Jones 2001), leadership (*Intuitive Leadership*, Keel 2008) preaching (*Preaching Re-imagined*, Pagitt 2005), or biblical hermeneutics (*Free For All: Rediscovering the Bible in Community*, Condor and Rhodes 2009). In one form or another, all of these books work on the premise that Christians live in a very different postmodern world. McLaren himself frequently cites his credentials as an English literature college professor, who experienced the postmodern shift in the educational setting first-hand. Influential Irish Emergent writer Peter Rollins, whose books are widely read in Emergent circles, touts a doctorate in postmodern Philosophy. His works take ideas from philosophers like Derrida and Levinas and apply them to Christian theology. His *Ikona* collective in Belfast, Ireland, has been exemplary to many American Emergents of a postmodern church (Rollins 2006).

Postmodernism also features prominently on personal and group blogs that are associated with the movement. Emergent websites like theooze.com and emergentvillage.com feature an abundance of articles that discuss Christianity and postmodernism. My extensive research on the personal blogs of Emergents uncovered a wealth of discussions on postmodernism. “Postmodern” is also an identity modifier that is commonly used by people from the movement. For instance, “postmodern Christian” is a common way they describe themselves. Shawn Anthony, an Emergent who writes on the blog Lo-Fi Tribe<sup>136</sup>, describes

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<sup>136</sup> <http://lofitribe.com/>, accessed 072910

himself as writing “from a vantage point that could be considered progressive or postmodern”. Another individual, Adam Walker Cleveland, who also spearheaded the Presbymergent effort, explains his blog pomomusings.com as “a musing on all things pomo”. Emergents are also active on websites like “The Church and postmodern culture: conversation”<sup>137</sup>, and ginkworld.net which host many articles and discussion on postmodern Christianity.

During my onsite fieldwork at Emergent meetings, I have heard postmodernism being talked about in lectures, in seminars, and conferences. I have also had many conversations with people from the movement about postmodernism. I recall talking with a student from a theological college in Kansas City at an Emergent event in 2008, who explained to me how the postmodern context was taken-for-granted in his theological training. In almost all my interviews with Emergent practitioners, talk of postmodern surfaced in expected and unexpected ways, without me bringing the term up. Others, who have researched the Emerging Church, similarly note the centrality of postmodernism to the movement. Anthropologist Philip Harrold, in his article on de-conversion and the Emerging Church, notes how the movement’s postmodern outlook “makes insiders and outsiders alike wrestle with over the movement’s tentative definitions of identity, meaning, and purpose” (Harrold 2006:80).

All of this is to say that postmodernism is an integral part of the ideological world of the Emerging Church. It is important to make a distinction between 1) how they take the postmodern world seriously, and 2) how they take postmodern

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<sup>137</sup> <http://churchandpomo.typepad.com/>, accessed 06/29/10

philosophy and concepts with equal seriousness. Firstly, they assume that the postmodern world is real, and ask: what does this mean for the Christian faith? Hence much of what the movement says and does is grounded in taking-for-granted the postmodern context, or at least an ongoing transition to it. Secondly, Emergents reinterpret their Christian faith through the lens of postmodernism.. In fact “Emergent” itself has come to be so closely identified with postmodernism that many writers, from within the movement as well as observers of the movement, use the descriptive the “emerging/ postmodern” or “emergent/ postmodern” church, highlighting the perception of some that “postmodern” and “emerging/ emergent” are interchangeable.<sup>138</sup>

The relationship between postmodernism and The Emerging Church is a complicated one, not least because they do not want postmodernism to become another means of accentuating privilege or reinforcing boundaries of “us” and “them”. Emergents do not want to “sell out” to postmodernism in the same way they see that modern Christians have sold out to modernism. Yet postmodernism continues to pervade their discourse. This chapter analyzes the Emerging Church’s uneasy dance with postmodernism. It finds itself intertwined with postmodernism without wanting to be dogmatically committed to it. Emergent thinker Peter Rollins expresses well this difficult dance that Emergents have with postmodernism, saying,

The existentialists didn’t like to be called existentialists; postmodern philosophers didn’t like to be called postmodern thinkers, but we need labels and we need to try to loosely define things. Actually, Lyotard...

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<sup>138</sup> <http://ginkworld.net/?p=1653>, “Se7en questions” posted 05/17/2010, accessed 07/05/2010.

didn't call it the postmodern position, he said "condition". It's something you catch, something you feel, sometimes you can't articulate it, but you know you sense something differently. It's about a different kind of mood and feel. And so the whole Emerging scene is more a condition than a position... first and foremost it's felt here.<sup>139</sup>

With postmodernism being so central to the movement, I wanted to analyze what they were "doing" with postmodernism as cultural agents. Hence, I took my starting point from Griswold again, seeing the Emerging Church Movement as "creators" of a discourse on postmodernism, through cultural objects (blogs and books for example). These cultural objects are then received by an audience, which sometimes results in a interaction between "creators" and "receivers". The sum of this cultural production, and interactions between The Emerging Church and its audience, contributes to the discursive construction of the social world of the Emerging Church Movement.

*Theoretical underpinnings: "Postmodern" as a cultural construct*

In looking at postmodernism as a cultural construct, I both analyze and critique the movement's use of the concept. This is a cultural sociology approach associated with Jeffrey Alexander and the "strong program", which views culture as 1) autonomous: it is a reality in its own right and is not an "effect" or byproduct of social structures, and 2) as an independent variable: cultural is an explanatory variable in its own right. It "causes" and is not merely "caused". This is a theoretical perspective that views culture's role not just as "constitutive" but also "causal" (Jacobs and Spillman 2005:11) Hence, I look at "postmodernism" as an interpretive category that human beings apply and "do things with" (Beckford

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<sup>139</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sRsOhy\\_WWA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sRsOhy_WWA), Part 1 Phyllis Tickle and Peter Rollins discuss Emergence Christianity, accessed 06/29/2010.

2003). I look at postmodernism as a process of social representation. How does the notion of postmodernism spread common understandings and structures of feeling? (Alexander 2005:82) I look at postmodernism as rhetoric, since rhetorics are cultural structures which are “deeply constraining but also enabling at the same time” (Alexander 2003:3). Sociologists of culture are concerned with rhetorics because “knowledge about social reality is not viewed merely as objective product, but also as *symbolic process that is inherently persuasive*”. (Brown, 1990:189)

Instead of taking postmodernism for granted, my goal is to make visible the way the meaning of postmodernism is structured and socially produced as myth, as narrative that instead of reflecting “how things really are”, reflects the collective representation that has constituted it (Alexander 2003:6). What are people doing practically with this idea of postmodernism? What are the patterns of how this term is used, and where it appears in their discourse? How are “selves and societies... constructed and deconstructed through rhetorical practices” centering on this idea “postmodern”? (Brown 1990:191) This perspective pays attention to the symbolic and meaningful dimensions of culture, and also acknowledges along with Foucault that culture is about power, but not power centralized in particular institutions, instead “diffusely distributed in the myriad of discourses through which people act in their social worlds” and it is in this way that “culture mediates social life” (Hall, Neitz and Battani 2003:141).

The theoretical works centering on framing processes initially spurred by Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) are an example of this approach. This body of work has been generally associated with social movement theories. According to Snow et al, the concept "frame" denotes "schemata of interpretation" that enables individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their life space and the world at large. (Snow et. al. 1986:464) Frames are important because they render events and occurrences meaningful by organizing experience and guiding both individual and collective action. The emphasis then, is on interpretive processes as causal, which fits the cultural sociology "strong" program approach. According to Benford and Snow, framing "denotes an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction." And it involves social actors actively generating interpretive frameworks that may differ from existing ones and challenge them. (Benford and Snow 2000:614)

This cultural approach takes for granted that reality is constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966). It assumes a fundamental sociological principle: that if people define situations as real, they are real in the consequences (Thomas 1928). Besides explaining how social movements are mobilized, this perspective also provides insight into how moral panics are constructed in society (Thompson 1998). A constructionist approach that empirically focuses on religion can be found in Stephen Ellingson's award-winning *The Megachurch and the Mainline* (2007), where he analyzes religious change as a social construction, in looking at how internal dynamics of meaning making turn particular external

religious changes and trends into catalysts for change (2007:77). Ellingson is focused on the “interpretive work” that goes into how religious groups construct crises of meaning, identity, decline, relevance, etc, completely independent of whether these crises really existed or not. This approach is interested in how groups define a problem, engage in claims-making to legitimize and sell their message to a wider audience, while also positioning themselves as those “in the know” who have the necessary expertise and are able to offer solutions and remedies to these problems.

In Ellingson’s analysis, he shows the impact of causal stories, which are mechanisms by which conditions, events, or issues are transformed into problems and framed as amenable to corrective human action (Ellingson 2007:48). Narratives tropes like “change or die” can have tremendous mobilizing impact on those who buy into these narratives, and are subsequently reproduced and rearticulated as personal or organizational narratives. In what way does the Emerging Church utilize “postmodernism” as a claims-making and rhetorical device? (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, Best 1987) In what ways have they set themselves up to be the “experts” on postmodernism? In what way do their claims of “newness” in postmodernity create the very conditions and effects that it supposedly describes? This chapter will hence focus on the interpretive work that goes into the making of “postmodernism”.

### *Tracking the discourse on postmodernism*

In this chapter, I look at how postmodern features in the movement's writings. This includes books by the movement's prominent figures like Brian McLaren, Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt. This also included books from Emergent Village's "Emersion" line of books that are published by Christian books publisher Baker Books. I also included my fieldwork observations of Emergent events between 2007 and 2010, where I heard "talk" of postmodernism and postmodernity and recorded these in my field notes. There was also pertinent data from online sources. This included articles published in popular Emerging Church websites like [emergentvillage.com](http://emergentvillage.com) and [theooze.com](http://theooze.com). The good thing about these websites is they are a publishing platform for multiple voices on a variety of topics. These websites also had word search functions, which I used to search for articles with the word "postmodern". In the website [theooze.com](http://theooze.com) alone, there were 29 articles dating back to 2002, with the word "postmodern" in its title, and 240 articles with the word "postmodern" in its content. A word search on "postmodern" in [emergentvillage.com](http://emergentvillage.com) produced 110 articles. Additionally, I listened to, and transcribed Podcasts by Emerging Church websites which I thought were relevant to the topic postmodern or postmodernism. Personal and group blogs also provided relevant data. These generally provide a different type of data from websites and podcasts. The type of data included personal narratives of how an individual had been affected by postmodernism, and how Emergent related groups describe themselves and their practices as postmodern.



My approach, following cultural sociologists, was to analyze these discourses as “symbolic representations” of a particular social group. Jeffrey Alexander explains how members of a social group broadcast symbolic representations – characterizations – of ongoing social events, past, present, and future. And that these group representations can be seen as “claims” about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply (Alexander, 2003:93). My fieldwork for this chapter involved what Benford and Snow referred to as “access to and retrieval of the discourse” on postmodernism as a cultural frame (Benford and Snow 2000:624).

### **The postmodern metanarrative**

This section looks at how the Emerging Church constructs a narrative centered on postmodernism that ironically has features of a metanarrative. I firstly explore how they situate the postmodern in what I call a “meta-modernisms” trifecta of premodern, modern and postmodern. I argue that in order for their claims to make sense, the Emerging Church constructs and exaggerates the distinctions between the premodern, modern and postmodern. The section following that will argue that Emerging Church forwards a double discourse about postmodernity being both a transitional stage, and simultaneously as a historical present. The section after that will show how the Emerging Church argues that “all things are new” in postmodernity, even though the reality belies this claim. But it is forwarded anyway to good rhetorical effect. These three discussions represent the overall “postmodern metanarrative” discussion of this first part of the chapter.

## *Meta-modernisms*

I argue that The Emerging Church Movement situates the postmodern within the trifecta of premodern, modern and postmodern, which is itself a form of metanarrative. They construct by exaggerating the different modernisms as discrete categories that have distinct characteristics. This strategy fits their narrative angle that things have fundamentally changed in postmodernity. In Emergent books, the division between premodern, modern and postmodern is also accompanied by categories that characterize each of these epochs. In *A New Kind of Christian* (McLaren 2001), this kind of distinction and characterization between the different time periods are tabled and fleshed out through the running narrative of the text. There is a linear structure to this argument between the pre, modern and post. The Emerging Church frequently frames its ideas within this periodizing discourse, and it can be found not just in McLaren's work, but also in erudite Emergent writer Phyllis Tickle's *The Great Emergence* (2008), where she argues that there is a pattern in history where every 500 years, Christianity goes through a "rummage sale", or a great upheaval, which transforms the faith, and poses the question, "where then in our authority"? In her book, Tickle argues that Christians are entering "The Great Emergence", which 500 years before was preceded by the Great Reformation. Preceding that was the Great Schism, and prior to that, the Axial Age. Tickle argues that in the period of The Great Emergence, "as a whole culture, as a social unit, we had at last become truly post-modern" (Tickle, 2008:136).

This meta-modernism structure has both neat packaging and resonance as an established “frame” (Benford et al 1986) of various progressions that the world has gone through leading up to postmodernity. This is the overarching framework that many in the Emerging Church work with. In much the same way, Mirchandani (2005) and others have noted how “postmodern” has developed in similar ways as an academic construct. Jameson calls postmodernity a “periodizing concept” created so that intellectuals and their audience could make sense of new times (Jameson 1988:15). There is an implicit totalism in this meta-modernism that compartmentalizes history into neat boxes of reality, which is characteristically modernistic. Premodern, modern and postmodern forms a cohesive and coherent trifecta of how the long view of history is coded. Jeffrey Alexander has noted that this form of coding is not just descriptive, but has rhetorical effects within academia. He describes how in the binary coding between modernity and postmodernity, “modernity remains on the polluted side, representing “the other” in postmodernism’s narrative tales” (Alexander 2003:210). This same dynamic is manifest in how the Emerging Church discusses the postmodern situated within this meta-modernism framework. It gives their arguments a semblance of holism, while also begging their audiences to see a clear contrast between the eras.

There is both a binary coding, between modern and postmodern, as well as a trinary coding. In this trinary coding, postmodernity is the “answer” to the shortcomings of the previous two epochs. So for instance, through the lens of Hegelian synthesis, McLaren and his co-authors see “premodernity as the thesis,

modernity as the antithesis, and postmodernity as an attempt at synthesis” (Sweet, McLaren and Haselmayer 2003:242). Postmodernity is hence cast as the “answer” to the shortcomings of the premodern and modern era. But Emergents do this cautiously. They forward a narrative of *contingency*: ultimately, since every era has had its own shortcomings and blind spots, postmodernity could have its own. McLaren himself has said that he prefers to use the word “confidence” instead of certainty,<sup>140</sup> and I have heard him speak of how perhaps after postmodernity, a new epoch will produce new perspectives that will enable humans to see things in a way they have not previously seen before.

The off-shoot of this epochal-narrative-as-rhetoric is that some critics perceive a lack of nuance in their arguments. Critics argue that this way of thinking is itself modernistic. There are also elements of a linear mode of arguing a progression from modern to postmodern; as if to say that history will unfold this way. To some, this is a problematic characteristic of their claims. As one Christianity Today article notes:

"The great irony is that by giving us these sharp categories of 'modern' and 'postmodern' ways of thinking, McLaren is doing the very sort of categorization he describes, and implicitly condemns, as modern."<sup>141</sup>

McLaren and others have clarified that postmodernism is not necessarily antagonistic of antithetical to modernism. As Emergent leader Tim Keel says: “to be postmodern is not to be against modernity but simply to exist in the time, age, or era that follows modernity” (Keel 2007:104). McLaren argues that the prefix

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<sup>140</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week846/cover.html>, “The Emerging Church, Part Two” published 07/15/2005, accessed 08/05/2010.

<sup>141</sup> [http://www.culture-making.com/articles/the\\_emergent\\_mystique](http://www.culture-making.com/articles/the_emergent_mystique), This article originally appeared in *Christianity Today*, November 2004 (Vol. 48, No. 11), pp. 36ff

post- does not mean “anti”, but it means, “coming through and coming after” (Sweet, McLaren and Haselmayer 2003:241). This “softening” language can be found with other Emergent thinkers, like Doug Pagitt who explains postmodernity is simply “after” modernity (Pagitt 2005:45). Other critics have argued that the Emerging Church’s form of postmodernism is itself native to the modern ethos:

If the emerging church is really “postmodern,” then it’s at least had the chance to be modern; or in other words, the “new kind of Christian” sketched by McLaren has had the chance to grapple with skepticism only because she’s had the opportunity and privilege to ask the questions. Skepticism is a luxury. In this respect, the new postmodern kind of Christian is not as different from Descartes—that paragon of modernity—as she might think. (James K.A. Smith 2003)

McLaren, and others within the movement, have had to clarify their use of terms as well as the way they polarize the modern from the postmodern. McLaren had noted how he has been careful to acknowledge that modern and postmodern “are not sharp categories” and that, “these terms make some things clear and can make other things less clear.”<sup>142</sup> He has also clarified that “postmodern is not antimodern. Modern isn’t inherently bad; it’s just not the only option.”<sup>143</sup> Despite these occasional qualifiers and aside caveats, Emergent discourses on postmodernity are deeply slanted towards arguing for a fundamental shift from modernity to postmodernity, and that things “have truly changed” in this shift, arguing for postmodernity through a modernistic discourse based on reason and rationality. As Rekha Mirchandani notes, “It is no surprise that the postmodern

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<sup>142</sup> <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/resources-archive/brians-annotati.html>

<sup>143</sup> <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/resources-archive/brians-annotati.html>

partakes of the modern as the modern has always partaken of what we now call postmodern. (Mirchandani 2005:96).

*Deep Shift: “The world that is” and “the world that we are transitioning to”*

Expectedly, the language of “shift” is very present in the movement. I recall the first time I heard Brian McLaren speak. It was at a one-off lecture he was giving in St. Paul’s School of Theology in Kansas City, sometime in late 2007. In his lecture, he showed a slide of an aerial view of meandering river, with a bridge that no longer had water under it. Due to erosion, the river had shifted over time. The bridge stayed put and hence became redundant: it no longer fulfilled its purpose. McLaren used this image to illustrate “when culture shifts, the church can become redundant”. Later on in my research, when Brian McLaren’s “Everything Must Change” multi-city book tour brought him to Kansas City again in April 2008, it was hardly surprising the website that promoted the tour was: [deepshift.org/site](http://deepshift.org/site). The homepage proclaims that, “WE ARE IN A DEEP SHIFT: A time of transition, rethinking, re-imagining, and re-envisioning”. Some critics half joke that the right spelling should actually be “deep shift” without the “f”. McLaren was also named by *Time Magazine* as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America, labeling him unsurprisingly a “paradigm shifter”.

My study of Emerging Church discourses surrounding the postmodern reveals that they forward a dual argument of “shift” and “already shifted”: that the world is *both* in a transitional phase between modern and postmodern and that the world is already postmodern. In his first published book McLaren declares, “If

you have a new world, you need a new church. You have a new world” (McLaren 2000:11), yet in the next instance he argues the postmodern world is “the uncharted world ahead of us...’the new world on the other side” (McLaren 2000:12), exemplifying one expression of this dual discourse of postmodernity as both approaching/ arrived.

The language of “transition” is expressed in the rhetorical form of “modernity was... postmodernity is...” where they proceed to flesh out and juxtapose the characteristics of each. Conversely the language of “already here” is often expressed through the word “new”, for example in how McLaren declares, “You have a new world”. I will elaborate in the next section how the movement argues “all things are new” in postmodernity. This dual language that conflates postmodernity as “the world that is” and the “world that we are transitioning to” provides a frame of comprehension of postmodernity as both here and now *and* something that we are heading toward: it is in the rhetorical present, as well as the rhetorical “to be”. The “performative force” (Alexander 2005:89) of this dual-pronged postmodern diagnosis has an effect of constructing a perception of a fundamental shift in culture, epistemology, in worldview that is both coming and in some ways already here. It creates anticipation toward what is “not yet”, while also casting a sense of urgency toward “what already is”.

McLaren warns his reader in *The Church on the Other Side*,

“You and I happen to have been born at an “edge,” at a time of high “tectonic activity” in history – *the end of one age and the beginning of another*. It’s a time of shaking. Yesterday’s maps are already outdated, and today’s soon will be, too. (McLaren 2000:8)

This kind of rhetoric is not just exclusive to Brian McLaren. Doing so challenges the Emerging Church's audience to not be left behind by this big shift, while also contemplating praxis: what can be done "before it's too late". The Emerging Church discourse on postmodernity oscillates between these two positions. Furthermore, the Emerging Church often uses postmodernity as what I would call an "omni-context". It gives weight to their claims that it is the *world* in toto that has shifted. More often than not, they do not specify a local or regional or continental context to their claims of where "postmodernity" has arrived to. Some writers on Emergent have situated their claims about the movement in the US and Europe context (Gibbs and Bolger 2005), but specifying context is often a convenient slippage that broadens the horizons of the Emerging Church's claims. The rhetorical activities of the Emerging Church echo how constructionist theorists observer claims-makers' push for "*interpretive change*... they want their audience to acknowledge a problem's existence, or to adopt a new orientation toward it." (Best 1987:115)

*The "everything is new" narrative of postmodernity*

Whether postmodernity is here or soon to be here, an accompanying "all things are different" or "all things are new" discourse is also articulated by the movement. A look at various book titles from Emergent writers reveals how "new" is often tactically employed: Tony Jones' *The New Christians* (2008), McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (2001), and *A New Kind of Christianity* (2010). Other titles like Doug Pagitt's *Church Re-imagined* (2000), or *Preaching Re-imagined* (2000) all imply a "new" rethinking of Christian institutions and practices. To this, Jeffrey



Alexander provides a pertinent sociological insight: that “it may well be that the sense of newness is in the name, in the signifier and not the signified” (Alexander 2005:85). Indeed, the Emerging Church’s rhetoric of things being new has also been subject to critique. Scot McKnight, a Professor of theology at North Park University in Chicago, and one who has personally identified with the movement, levels this critique at McLaren’s latest book:

Alas, *A New Kind of Christianity* shows us that Brian, though he is now thinking more systemically, has fallen for an old school of thought. I read this book carefully, and I found nothing new. It may be new for Brian, but it's a rehash of ideas that grew into fruition with Adolf von Harnack and now find iterations in folks like Harvey Cox and Marcus Borg. For me, Brian's new kind of Christianity is quite old. And the problem is that it's not old enough.<sup>144</sup>

McKnight argues a central insight I myself have come to in my reading of Emerging Church claims: that often what they tag as “new” in postmodernity, is actually not really that new. To elaborate, the Emerging Church has argued that a modern captivity of the Christian faith has meant that Christians have traditionally been focused on personal salvation and soul-saving to the exclusion of other important issues. One example I saw through my fieldwork, is in McLaren recounting a story of “two lists”, one where he asks teenagers from a youth group to shout out things that they thought were the biggest problems of the world. He wrote down on the list things like “Nuclear holocaust, genocide, famine, AIDS pandemic, environmental disasters, and child-labor”. He then asked the students to shout out things for a separate list – of things that they felt their church was most concerned about, the list came up to be: “saving souls,

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<sup>144</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/march/3.59.html>, “Review: Brian McLaren’s ‘A New Kind of Christianity’ in *Christianity Today*, by Scot McKnight, published 2/26/2010, accessed 07/07/2010.

pre-marital sex, abortion, gay marriage, ordination of women, evolution versus creationism”. McLaren recounts how both he and the students looked back and forth at both lists and pondered how both lists were completely unrelated.

This is instructive of how McLaren, and other Emergent voices commonly argue as the disconnect between the concerns of the church, and the concerns of the world. For instance, when it comes to creation care, the charge from Emergent circles is that Christians in America have typically not cared about environmental conservation since going along with their eschatological stance, “it’s all going to burn anyway”, taking care of the environment does not make much sense.

In fact, the Emerging Church repackages the “rethinking” of modernist thinkers under the veneer of a new “postmodernism” sensibility. Many of the criticisms they have of modern Christianity are precisely the issues that modernists were challenging the fundamentalists over, in the modernism versus fundamentalism controversy of the 1920s, which started with the Presbyterian denomination but soon spread to other Protestant denominations. Although the difference is that the modernists came first, and the fundamentalists were a reaction to them. To the charge that modern Christians have not been interested in social justice issues, the truth is that the social gospel movement of the 1900s was a concerted attempt of Christian groups to address social justice issues related to inequality, exploitation, and poor hygiene (Hopkins 1940, White Jr. and Hopkins, 1976).

The same can be said of the Emerging Church's indictment of modern Christianity's tendency to read the scriptures literally. In his recent book *A New Kind of Christianity* (2010), McLaren labels this kind of reading and comprehension of scripture as a "constitution" reading of the bible as an instruction manual. This echoes the modernist era's rise of higher criticism, which advocated a non-literal reading of scriptures, as well as a rethinking of theological absolutes and scriptural inerrancy (Ehrman 2009). James Bielo, an Anthropologist studying the Emerging Church, makes a similar observation of how in critiquing systematic theology, "they return to frameworks and vocabularies introduced by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and others who were dissatisfied with their Christianities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries (Bielo 2009:223). It is also the same situation with the Emerging Church's discourse that the "new" world in postmodernity requires openness toward difference, and a fundamental shift in how Christians relate to the "other". This idea of unity across differences too, was one that was pursued in the modernist era, with the move toward ecumenism, which saw the push of modernist groups to establish a broad unity across denominations.

The point of this section's critique is that the "all things are new" narrative of postmodernity that the Emerging Church forwards is in many aspects not as new as their rhetoric sets it up to be. But to "explain the seeming newness" in postmodernity I have sought to highlight "the rhetorical strategies of postmodernists and their commentators... who make postmodernism stand out as different and as attractive" (Alexander 1992 in Mirchandani 2005:98).

Emergent thinkers forward a rhetoric of believing that, “we are in a time of spiritual reformation” (Shroyer, 2009: xi), leading one Emergent writer to even formulate “95 Postmodern Theses”, “in the hopes of waking people to the coming changes in the church”.<sup>145</sup> As Emergent critic Chuck Colson notes, while he understand that the movement is “seeking to challenge the church to go beyond static orthodoxy”, he asks: “what's new? I've (Colson) been trying to get people out of pews to live their faith in prisons for 30 years.”<sup>146</sup> This emphasizes just how much the Emerging Church vests in the postmodern as ushering “all things new” in the church. For Christians not to understand the magnitude of the newness this postmodern world ushers in, would be a fatal mistake. As thesis 66 states: *Churches that have no understanding of this world have no future.* My critique in this section echoes Judith Butler’s caution that the postmodern should not be confused with the new, because “the pursuit of the “new” is fundamentally a preoccupation of what she calls “high modernism”. If anything, Butler says, “the postmodern casts doubt on the possibility of a “new” that is not in some way already implicated in the “old” (Butler, 1991:153). What I see with the Emerging Church is a persistent trend in how they fail to qualify just how much they proclaim as new, is indeed in essence “old”.

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<sup>145</sup> <http://ginkworld.net/?p=1115>, “95 Postmodern thesis”, by John O’Keefe, posted 08/23/2009 (originally 1997), accessed 07/08/2010.

<sup>146</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/june/17.72.html?start=1>, “Emerging Confusion” by Charles Colson in *Christianity Today*, published 06/01/2006, accessed 07/13/2010.

## *Constructing crises*

In this next section, I will discuss how The Emerging Church constructs a series of crises through this discourse on postmodernity, juxtaposing it with modernity. The process of constructing crises can be likened to how Alexander accounts for the social production of cultural trauma (Alexander 2003), which involves 3 elements of a speech act: 1) speaker, 2) audience and 3) situation (Austin, 1962). As Alexander explains, the goal of the speaker is to persuade an audience-public of its claims. To that end, the carrier group makes characterizes the historical situation, uses symbolic resources at hand, and references constraints and opportunities of existing institutions (Alexander 2003: 94). I will outline a series of crises centering on postmodernity that I will unpack individually:

### *1. A crisis of capitulation to modernity*

The first crisis is couched in the assertion that modernity is inherently problematic, and is a fading structure. For McLaren, modernity has become “the one-size-fits-all way of seeing and thinking that we have to squeeze into”.<sup>147</sup> One writer on theooze.com asserts that continuing to hold on to the “collapsing structure of modernism” means that Christian Churches will be “lacking the necessary complexity to survive”.

Where the Protestant church has hitched its wagon to modernity it has done so at the cost of its regenerative capacity. In short, it has exhausted itself. The program has terminated in upon itself... that part of the church that has hitched itself to modernity is in entropy. (Matthew Mirabile 2005)

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<sup>147</sup> <http://ginkworld.net/?p=1012>, “Brian McLaren answers se7en questions” published 08/16/2009, accessed 07/05/2010.

“The church” is experiencing entropy because it has over-adapted to modernism, which according to Emerging Church discourses, is already “on its way out”. Modernity and modernism, is hence a “weakened foundation”. As Emergent author Tim Keel expresses: the story of modernity “is moving on.” (Keel 2008:43) A continued unreflective adherence to principles of modernity can only result in decline. The argument here is for readers to perceive a need for “frame-breaking”, to argue for a necessary departure from an outmoded frame: that modernity as a framework ceases to be useful in a new day and age, and hence a new “frame” is needed. To continue to hold on to this frame has its consequences: *entropy*, a coded word for institutional decline. The crisis that Emerging Church discourses attribute to modernity fit the conceptualization of what Stephen Ellingson calls *causal stories*: mechanisms by which conditions, events, or issues are transformed into problems and framed as amenable to corrective human action. (Ellingson 2007:48) Here, capitulation of modernity is constructed as the church’s problem, the antidote being postmodernism.

## 2. *A crisis of generalized institutional inadequacy*

Emerging Church discourses generalize current Christian institutions as inept, or unprepared for the new contingencies of postmodernity. They regularly cite statistics that indicate decline in religious institutions across the US (Jones 2008). The general picture they construct is of one where Christianity is not doing well. Why? The explanation they forward is that Christian institutions are fundamentally modern, and the world is postmodern. One Emergent thinker, hence calls for something he coins “Apomogetics”: a hybrid between

“postmodern” or “pomo”, and “apologetics”, or simply put: a postmodern apologetic.

*Apomogetics* doesn't exist as of yet, but I'm realizing daily that it should, must, and will. Today modern apologists attack the philosophy of postmodernism on the grounds that it dissolves their absolute truths of science and mathematical certainty, but they fail to see the need to translate our defense of Christ into the new social era. Postmodernism is not a philosophy up for debate, it *is a new wave of culture that is sweeping the world*, and America is one of the last stops left on the tour.<sup>148</sup>

*Apomogetics* must begin to make a home in the terra nova of postmodernism, not continue in the pointless trend of trying to deny its currency. The body of Christ can survive the postmodern scalpel, and will perhaps even be the better for it. Maybe postmodernism removes the tumors that came with modern hyper-confidence, and the idolatry of human attainment of absolute truth. Maybe the church will find sand in its enlightenment foundation after it has been deconstructed. Whatever the case, the water is turning to wine, and new skins must be made ready to receive it.<sup>149</sup>

The author forwards an urgent appeal for an apologetic suited for postmodern times. Instead of denial, facing up to the reality of the postmodern terra nova will stand religious institutions in good stead to be “new wine skins” for a new era. Benford et al (1986) conceptualize this rhetorical process as “frame alignment”: a persuasive technique employed to bring an audience into personal alignment with the frame being proposed. *Apomogetics* is the right Christian apologetic for a new postmodern world.

### 3. *A crisis of “relevance”*

The failure of the Christian Church to acknowledge postmodernity and postmodernism, according to these Emergent claims-makers, does not negate

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<sup>148</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/apomogetics>, published 08/30/2008, accessed 07/05/2010.

<sup>149</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/apomogetics>, published 08/30/2008, accessed 07/05/2010.

the fact that most of the world is already postmodern. As I will address later in this chapter, Emerging Church discourses are geared toward countering the “postmodern-as-bad” discourse coming particularly from conservative evangelicals:

Many church people and “church experts” blame the decline on the culture, and a cultural shift – we have become a “postmodern” people (where the word “postmodern” is some kind of curse word). To some degree they may be right, but not in the way they think. You see, they think people are leaving because culture is pulling them out. But that is not true. People are leaving, not because the culture is dragging them in, it is because the church is pushing them out. *The reality is that church has not kept-up with the culture and is simply being left behind in the minds of many people – church has become irrelevant.*<sup>150</sup>

According to this line of rhetoric, the postmodern world is not the problem. It is the church’s inability to adapt to postmodern culture that has rendered the church irrelevant. This is expressed in other ways, by saying that the church as a modern institution is an anachronism in postmodern times.

“The church is a modern institution in a postmodern world, a fact that is often widely overlooked. The church must embody the gospel within the culture of postmodernity for the Western church to survive the twenty-first century” (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005:17)

This stance has resonance with the “change or die” discourse noted by in Megachurch and Mainline (2007) that was perpetuated within the institutional structures of the Lutheran Church, largely from a discourse borrowed from Evangelical Megachurches. Even churches that were experiencing numerical growth believed they had to “change or die”. Ellingson highlights how this “change or die” mantra constructed catalyst of change for the mainline churches

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<sup>150</sup> <http://ginkworld.net/?p=1216>, “Why are people leaving?” published 09/04/2009, accessed 07/05/2010.



he studied. With the Emerging Church, the extent of the claims here are even broader than those of denominational decline, since both “Christendom and Modernity Are in Rapid Decline” (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005:17). At stake in postmodernity are not just churches or denominations, but the Christian faith itself. In a sense, Christianity must “change or die” to survive in the postmodern world.

#### *4. A crisis of opportunity*

The Emerging Church also constructs postmodernity as an epoch of opportunity that was not previously available in earlier eras. They argue that there is a genuine opportunity in postmodernity that never existed before. This is particularly argued when it comes to the question of relationships across difference. Alexander observes rightly that, “In the impassioned and simplified rhetorics of postmodernism/ postmodernity, more is involved than just empirical claims. There are moral assertions about togetherness across difference being possible like never before and possibly never again” (Alexander, 2005:83). This is precisely how the Emerging Church argues that Christians need to take the opportunities afforded by postmodernism to do build relational bridges across difference. McLaren himself is a vocal advocate of interfaith dialogues particularly between Christians, Muslims and Jews. He says in his article on “Three Postmodernisms” that with, “so much being at stake at this critical moment of history, those willing to get out into the fields and do the hard work of seizing the

moment are too few.<sup>151</sup> Another contributor to an ooze.com article uses much of the same language of opportunity, but adds that this window of opportunity will not last forever:

This is the greatest moment in the history of the church. But the window of opportunity closes quickly. The faithful must learn now to speak this new language. (Thomas Hohstadt 2002)

The analysis in this section shows different components of a constructed “postmodern” crisis. It presents strategies of linking arguments about a fundamental epochal shift, implicating them in relation to existing institutional configurations of faith, and elucidates consequences of these institutions being unprepared and unattuned for these shifts. Guiding this analysis has been a cautionary word from Hall, Neitz and Battani (2003) that,

“We should be suspicious of any “essentialist” argument that the advent of the postmodern transforms everything. Such an argument, decidedly idealist, can only be advanced by averting one’s gaze from the concrete, sensuous activities of people at work, attempting to control the production and “spin” on culture. (Hall, Neitz and Battani 2003:162)

My analysis has focused on precisely the “spin” that the Emerging Church movement puts on postmodernity as a cultural construct. Unknowingly, their methods put them at odds with postmodernism. According to postmodern sociologist Daniel Agger, Lyotard (1984) “rejects totalizing perspectives on history and society, what he calls grand narratives... that attempt to explain the world in terms of patterned interrelationships”. (Agger 1991:116) I have argued that the Emerging Church couches its arguments about postmodernity precisely within a narrative structure of “patterned interrelationships”. Hence the Emerging

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<sup>151</sup> <http://www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000071.html>, “The Three Postmodernisms: a short explanation”

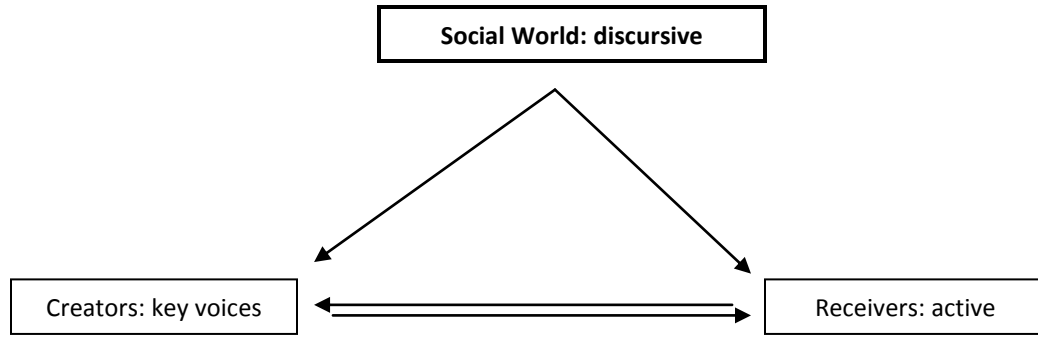
Church's rhetorical treatment of postmodernism/ postmodernity ironically, has the makings of a metanarrative, whether it is in the meta-modernistic framing of the postmodern within a trifecta of premodern, modern and postmodern, or arguing for a "deep shift" with postmodernity has both arriving and arrived, or in how they advance the argument that "all things are new" in postmodernity. Judith Butler calls this treatment of postmodernism a "gesture of conceptual mastery...

That groups together a set of positions under the postmodern, that makes the postmodern into an epoch or a synthetic whole, and that claims that the part can stand for this artificially constructed whole, enacts a certain self-congratulatory ruse of power. It is paradoxical, at best, that the act of conceptual mastery that effects this dismissive grouping of positions under the postmodern wants to ward off the peril of political authoritarianism." (Butler 1991:152)

As Butler notes, this metanarrative rendering of postmodernism produces certain paradoxes and ironies of being postmodern that makes the Emerging Church political in ways that they themselves may not be attuned to. Hence, in a later section, I will discuss some of the paradoxes or ironies of postmodern praxis related to the Emerging Church.

### **Postmodernism as a site of discursive interaction and production**

While my previous discussion, I have argued that "the postmodern" is a construct narratively created and rhetorically argued by the Emerging Church, this section analyzes how "the postmodern" is a site of discursive interaction and cultural production that engages the Emerging Church's critics, observers, and a broader audience. As I discussed in chapter 4, the discursive social world of the Emerging Church affords the opportunity for creators and receivers to interact:



**Figure 1: The Emerging Church’s discursive social world**

This part of my chapter discusses how the Emerging Church is “doing things together” interactionally with different groups and individuals over the issue of postmodernism/ postmodernity. In this chapter, I reaffirm some of my findings in the previous chapter on bridge-building (chapter 7) and show how the Emerging Church spirals outward discursively through generating and participating in discussions of postmodernism/ postmodernity with its audience.

This section will discuss the postmodern as a discursive location of convergence for people who are trying to figure out “postmodern” and its implications. I will firstly discuss the how the movement has helped contribute and generate a discourse of what I call *typologizing postmodernism*, secondly I will discuss how they engage in claims-making toward a *positive postmodernism*. Lastly, I will use these discussions as a launching-point to develop a theoretical discussion on culture, drawing on insights from my research.

*Typologizing postmodernisms*

As I traced the discourse on postmodernism, I saw a consistent pattern of different people attempting to forward frameworks for different “types” of

postmodernism. I wanted to make sense of this sociologically. As a researcher, I noted with irony that this typologizing activity: that involved categorizing, demarcating, pigeon-holing, putting into discrete categories, etc, seemed like a very modernistic treatment of postmodernism. I wondered if people from the movement were aware of such an irony. It challenged me to think, “What kind of concept is postmodernism? Why so much fuss over it?” “Postmodern” in a lot of ways is a concept like “culture”: it is conceptually so broad and ambiguous that it can be meaningless to some. But people still find it useful. I wanted to observe patterns of how people were “doing things” with the notion of the postmodern. I realized that this collective grasping of postmodernism was an attempt to make it less abstract and more useable. These attempts to classify and categorize postmodernism were expressions of a collective attempt to bring postmodernism down from its lofty conceptual heights, to a grounded, comprehensible level. For lack of a better way to put it, this section discusses “types of typologies” of postmodernism, and their functions: what they “do”, and what is accomplished by this typologizing activity.

#### *Different ways of being postmodernism*

The first and most common typologizing I saw were the various ways people elaborated on how to be postmodern. The emphasis is that there is not just one type of postmodernism. Postmodernism is not monolithic. It has ideological complexities that need to be elaborated. One ooze.com contributor distinguishes between 4 types of postmodernism and elaborates their

characteristics, in a two part series of an article he titles, “Defining Postmodernism for the Emerging Church” (Thomas Jay Oord, 2006):

1. The problem with words: *Deconstructive postmodernism*

It questions modern assumptions about reality. It identifies inconsistencies in our language use to describe reality. The (modernistic) use of reason and language involves a power play to dominate. Deconstructive postmodernism also affirms difference and diversity and promotes tolerance. It steers clear of word idolatry and does not assume that theologies can fully capture God.

2. A story to orient our lives: *Narrative postmodernism*

Meaning and truth are found in stories. The stories we tell and the way in which we tell them arise from particular points of view. And our particular points of view are only intelligible as part of a larger story. Meaning is found in, and arises out of particular communities. Truth is communal, not individualistic. There is no objective all-encompassing standard to judge truth.

3. Breaking free: *Liberationist postmodernism*

The ideology of modernism is intrinsically oppressive and has led to systems of inequality. There are feminist, ethnic, and ecological strands of liberationist postmodernism, each with its own liberationist slant, each with a stance against modernism.

4. Reclaiming to move ahead: *Revisionary postmodernism*

This postmodernism seeks to revision reality by drawing from a wide spectrum of resources. The loss of a holistic perspective on reality is a modern failure. It seeks to account for a variety of sensibilities, including religious, scientific, ecological, liberationist, economic and aesthetic. Revisionists are critical about their own constructions and aware of the contingency of their own claims.

The author here creates nuances between the different types of postmodernisms. With each characteristic, the author argues how each has a critique and a counterpoint to modernism, and signals a “better way forward”. More significantly the author presents how different strands of postmodern critique each other. For instance, in how some liberationist postmodernists are

attracted to deconstructive postmodernism for its “critique of power”, but on the other hand, some are repelled from it because it is not constructive enough and “provides no solid ground for the freedom liberationists desperately desire” (Oord 2006). Another important feature of the article is how the author weaves in theological implications for each of the postmodernism. For instance in how deconstructive postmodernism “undercuts theologies that have been assumed to capture fully who God is and what god wants”, and for liberationist postmodernism “God is essentially neither male nor female... and we should use genderless language to express this” (Oord 2006).

This kind of typologizing activity is patterned in others that I have found in Emergent discourses. It creates room for nuance between various postmodernisms, and it provides “allowances” for various theological configurations with postmodernism. Often, these theological configurations are put on a continuum/ gradation between “more extreme” and “non-extreme”, or distinguish between “soft” and “hard” forms of postmodern theological expressions. As an example of this, Emergent practitioner, Adam Walker Cleveland, provides his own typologies of postmodernisms in his presentation to his Presbyterian denomination audience, titled “What is the Emerging Church?”<sup>152</sup>; accompanied by a diagnosis of where each fits in with along a spectrum of “conservative, moderate and liberal”:

1. Aesthetically Postmodern: Candles & Coffee
  - *Theologically Conservative*

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<sup>152</sup> <http://www.presbymergent.org/wp-content/files/EmergingChurches.ppt>, published undated, accessed 07/1202010.

2. Methodologically Postmodern: Dialogue focused, shared/ communal leadership
  - *Theologically Conservative/ Moderate*
3. Theologically Postmodern: Engaging in new aesthetics and methods, they also engage in new theology, rethinking everything
  - *Theologically Moderate/ Liberal*

For Cleveland, to be aesthetically postmodern means more of a style of presentation. Being methodologically postmodern means innovation in leadership and communal structures, and is the “middle ground” of a moderate type of postmodernism that seeks new methods without questioning theology, which contrasts with the third “most extreme” type, which is willing to question everything. By distinguishing between different ways to be postmodern, Emerging Church discourses elucidate nuances and complexity in postmodern thought, projecting that there is no one simple “postmodernism”, but in fact, there are many different types of postmodernism strands each with differing agendas. The effect here is to show how postmodernism can be variously useful for Christians whatever their theological disposition. These typologies show the spectrum of how various groups are already attempting to “be” postmodern. What I feel is the most important feature of this typologizing activity for the Emerging Church is ultimately to create a distinction between “good” and “bad” postmodernisms. This will be left for discussion a little later.

#### *Identity configurations of postmodern*

The second type of typologizing activity that I noted was what I call “identity configurations” related to postmodernism. The core discussion here, is



about situating “who am I?” in relation to postmodernism and postmodern people. The best example of this type of typologizing was best expressed in Scot McKnight’s *Christianity Today* article on the Emerging Church (2007) that distinguished between ministering 1) *to* postmoderns, 2) *with* postmoderns, and 3) *as* postmoderns.

McKnight elaborates that those who minister *to* postmoderns, see postmodern people “trapped in moral relativism and epistemological bankruptcy out of which they must be rescued”. Those who minister *with* postmoderns accept postmodernity “as a fact of life in our world...as a present condition into which we are called.” While those who minister *as* postmoderns “embrace the idea that we cannot know absolute truth, or at least, that we cannot know truth absolutely... they speak of the end of the metanarratives and the importance of social location in shaping one’s view of truth”.<sup>153</sup> All three types accept that postmodern conditions are real, but only the last accepts postmodern epistemology.

In the same way as the previous section showed how typologizing produces various strands of postmodernism, this typologizing activity makes available various identity positionalities in relation to postmodernism: whether one rejects the label, accepts it as native to the context, or makes a deliberate commitment to the “postmodern” identity. What is accomplished is the making available of a repertoire of possibilities that grants agency to people, that enables

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<sup>153</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/11.35.html?start=2>, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church” in *Christianity Today* published 1/19/2007, accessed 07/05/2010.

them to define their own relationship to postmodernism. They have “identity options” related to postmodernism, and it is not an “all or nothing” end game of “you are” or “you are not” postmodern.

Something else is also accomplished by this typologizing. Further on in the article, McKnight writes that, “Although the third kind of emerging postmodernity attracts all the attention”, being the most controversial kind, he states that in fact “the vast majority of emerging Christians and churches fit these first two categories. They don’t deny truth, they don’t deny that Jesus Christ is truth, and they don’t deny the Bible is truth”. What is rhetorically accomplished by McKnight here is to state that not all Emergent expressions take the most extreme or what people regard as the most deconstructive form of postmodernism which questions everything and has no working conception of truth. McKnight effectively argues without outrightly saying so, that most Emerging Churches fit into a more “palatable postmodernism”.

#### *Identifying stages in the postmodern transition*

A third typology I uncovered articulates a “transition” from one stage of postmodernism to another. Although this might seem similar to the first typologizing of postmodernism on “different ways of being postmodern”, this typologizing activity connects different types of postmodernism into interrelated “stages”. Each is connected and represents a “development” from one to the other. Andrew Jones, well known in Emergent circles by the moniker “Tall Skinny Kiwi”, who has famously disaffiliated himself from the Emerging Church

Movement<sup>154</sup>, provides his own typology of postmodernism that expresses this “transition” between stages of postmodernism. In a 2002 article published on theooze.com, titled “The Skinny on Postmodernity Series” (Jones 2002a), discusses three metaphors that represents for him three phases of postmodernism:

1. *Barn-Burning* - a sometimes angry or resentful deconstruction to delete what should not be there.
2. *Dumpster-Diving* - an inquisitive exploration to discover and restore what was missing, hidden or forbidden.
3. *Lego-Land* - this final stage of the transitional process represents a creative remixing of the new and old elements to construct a new and better way.

Andrew Jones uses these three metaphors to good effect. Essentially he is providing easy-to-grasp metaphors for people to think about how they transition from deconstruction (phase 1) to exploration (phase 2) to reconstruction (phase 3).

Deconstruction → Exploration → Reconstruction

As with other “transition” typologies, the central insight is *the ability to develop in your postmodern thinking*: being deconstructive is well and good, but you cannot stay there. Postmodern Christians cannot just be deconstructive, because being purely deconstructive is incompatible with the Christian message. In interviews,

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<sup>154</sup> <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2010/01/goodbyes-to-emergent-village.html>, “Goodbyes to Emergent Village”, posted 01/07/2010, accessed 07/20/2010.

as well as through analyzing the discourses, I have repeatedly seen how particularly the deconstruction component of postmodernism has been the subject of the most external as well as internal (to the Emerging Church) criticism of postmodernism. Going beyond deconstruction into other phases is an important part of developing a more mature postmodern-thinking. In Brian McLaren's own typology of postmodernisms that I will discuss in the next section, he too makes a distinction between an "adolescent postmodernism" or immature postmodernism, and a more developed, mature and "positive" postmodernism. In sum, typologizing transitional phases provides a way for people to think "where can we go next?" and connect the dots between different phases of postmodern thinking. This provides tools for people to contemplate praxis: beyond critiquing modernism and tearing down religious institutions as products of modernity, what can Emergents do to create, contribute and develop faith communities as an expression of "positive postmodern praxis"? Yet this typologizing, neatly packaging and pronouncing discrete "postmodernisms", is itself ironically very modern in form.

### *Good and bad postmodernisms*

In many ways, the discussion of the last three typologies contribute to what I think is ultimately the most rhetorically significant typology of postmodernism: that there are "good" and "bad" postmodernisms. This is most evident in Brian McLaren's own typologizing of postmodernisms, in an article he

wrote titled, “The Three Postmodernisms: A Short Explanation”<sup>155</sup> McLaren’s explanation of the three postmodernisms are rather long, but they are worth elaborating in order to make an important analytical point. McLaren’s three postmodernisms are: 1) nihilistic/ relativistic postmodernism, 2) adolescent postmodernism and 3) emerging postmodernism.

*Type 1:* McLaren explains the first type of postmodernism as “a big scary monster of nihilism and relativism and self-destruction that seeks to undo all that is good in modern Western civilizations”. It is a postmodernism that denies truth, denies reality and denies morality. According to McLaren, this postmodernism is used “to scare people so they’ll stay loyal to their modern institutions, which, they are told, are the last bulwarks against the chaos at the gates”. It is obvious that for McLaren, this kind of postmodernism is “bad” in so much as it is a fiction that “doesn’t exist outside of the imagination of frightened modern people”, or that it exists as a rhetorical construction of modern-minded religious leaders.

*Type 2:* McLaren’s second type of postmodernism, is what some people consider “extreme postmodernism” or “deconstructive postmodernism”. For McLaren, he prefers to use the term “adolescent postmodernism”, because “it is an early phase that must give way to other phases. McLaren explains that this kind of postmodernism is “bad” in its own way because it represents a dangerous type of postmodernism. According to McLaren, this “adolescent postmodernism” is associated with 4 characteristics, i) “relativist pluralism”, ii) “consumerism”, iii)

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<sup>155</sup> <http://www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000071.html>, “The Three Postmodernisms: A Short Explanation”, published undated, accessed 07/12/2010.

“alienated European intellectuals” and iv) “political correctness”. But if it argues that “any point of view is valid” (i), becomes another form of consumerism (ii), remains Eurocentric (iii), and asserts that it is politically incorrect to say anything is wrong or destructive (iv), then according to McLaren, this adolescent postmodernism is “a recipe for a really bad future”. This type of postmodernism is also categorically “bad” because it is not yet fully developed into maturity.

Type 3: McLaren calls this third type of postmodernism “emerging postmodernism”. McLaren is not using “emerging” as a reference to the “Emerging Church”, but rather, as something that is not “fully defined yet” and “may be decades away from mature definition”. But from a rhetorical angle, the use of “emerging” effectively aligns this “good” postmodernism to the movement by the same name: Emerging/ Emergent Church. McLaren describes how it moves beyond the 4 characteristics of “adolescent postmodernism” described above.

- i. *Relativist pluralism*: deconstruction is a kind of chemotherapy to stop the growth of modern reductionistic rationalism. It “worked” as a chemotherapeutic agent but is itself a short term medical necessity and not a long-term regimen for health.
- ii. *Consumerism*: sees consumerism as another modern malignancy that wreaks havoc upon the individual, cultures, and upon the planet as a whole. Emerging postmodernism needs to articulate a better alternative to consumerism.
- iii. *Alienated European intellectuals*: While these are the ones who have popularized postmodern thought, there is a need to go beyond these voices to make emerging postmodernism “a truly global endeavor”. Emerging postmodernism “seeks to listen to diverse voices, especially the voices of women, the poor, the oppressed, native people, nonwesterners, and the uneducated”.

- iv. *Political correctness*: While this has been a tool to bring marginalized voices to the table, it is a tool and not the goal. According to McLaren, the goal is “the pursuit of truth and justice”.

McLaren is arguing that “good” postmodernism has all the characteristics that develop on and go beyond the characteristics of “adolescent postmodernism”. McLaren uses the medical metaphor to good effect, showing that deconstruction or “relativist pluralism” has a limited function that should be mistaken for a “long term health regime”. This is why the “transitions” in postmodern thinking is such an important element in typologizing postmodernisms for the Emerging Church. The distinction between the “bad” and “good” rests on its ability to develop beyond itself into a more mature expression of postmodernism. There is also a contrast of “good” postmodernism to the “bad” postmodernism that is nihilistic, relativistic and that denies truth, morality and goodness. According to McLaren, and many Emerging Church practitioners, this “bad” postmodernism is a fiction that does not really exist, but is rather a convenient straw man constructed by conservative Christians to attack postmodernism *in toto*.

Emergent thinker Andrew Jones, who goes by the moniker “Tall Skinny Kiwi” (2002a), has a similar classification of postmodernists that echoes McLaren’s. His 3 typologies are 1) skeptical postmodernists, 2) affirmative postmodernists, and 3) intuitive postmoderns. It is interesting to note that he too critiques how skeptical postmodernism, which is “pessimistic and gloomy” and “focused on the chaos, death, and impossibility of truth” has been unfairly “picked up by Christian teachers as representative of postmodernism in general”.

Affirmative postmodernists “affirm ethical systems” and are actively figuring out “truth” and what it means to live in a postmodern world, while intuitive postmoderns are not postmodern as a reaction to modernism but that the postmodern world is something that they are native to and live out of, these intuitive postmoderns are likely to even reject the label “postmodern” because “it promotes a single view of reality and denies complexity”. Rhetorically, Jones is showing that intuitive postmoderns are reflexive enough not to reify a categorical construct like “postmodern”, distinguishing them from moderns who have themselves unwittingly “sold out” to modernity.

Ultimately, I think the most important product or effect of the typologizing activity of the Emerging Church Movement is to offer a distinction between a “good” and “bad” postmodernism, and conceptualize ways to grasp the former, as well as to discredit and diminish the latter. To summarize this section again, typologizing postmodernisms performs an important function in breaking down postmodernism into different, more manageable categories of comprehension. Although space does not allow me to feature more voices, typologizing is a collective activity of “coming to grasps with” the conceptually amorphous “postmodern”, ultimately providing a way for people to envision a good postmodernism, distinct from a bad postmodernism that either does not exist, or simply reduces postmodernism to nothing more than an extreme form of deconstruction.



*Rhetorically co-constructing postmodernism: engaging social world and building bridges*

In this section, I discuss how the Emerging Church discursively renders a “positive postmodernism”, by engaging critics, supporters and observers. In doing so, I reiterate theoretical insights on bridge-building (chapter 7) and on how critics are integral to the social world of the Emerging Church (chapter 4) by the very act of offering their critique of postmodernism or opposition to the Emerging Church.

In my research on the movement’s postmodernism discourse, I saw that this was a broad ongoing discussion with many voices: many of those “typologizing” postmodernism were by no means prominent individuals like McLaren or Jones. Yet I also saw how even critics and observers were integral to this discussion. In the same way that prominent evangelicals Albert Mohler and John Piper have publically criticized the Emerging Church, another prominent Christian leader, Charles Colson, has also done so. More popularly known as “Chuck” Colson, he is famous for his non-profit Prison Fellowship ministry, and as a former Nixon aide, he served time in prison for his involvement in Watergate. He has also authored many widely-read Christian books.

Colson wrote an article, “The Postmodern Crackup” that was published in *Christianity Today* magazine in 2003.<sup>156</sup> Colson declared postmodernism was “dying” and on its last leg. McLaren responded directly to Colson through an open letter. Colson responded back. The exchange was published online and

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<sup>156</sup><http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/december/24.72.html?start=1>, “The Postmodern Crackup” in *Christianity Today* by Charles Colson, published 12/024/2003, accessed 07/13/2010.

was widely read, leading Colson to publish again in *Christianity Today* about his exchange with McLaren.<sup>157</sup> This was the most prominent instance of the ECM engaging a critic over a discussion of postmodernism, but it was not the only example. In a similar fashion, Tony Jones engaged in a “blogologue” or a *blog dialogue* on the Emerging Church with respected Christian futurist, author and consultant Bill Easum. Jones and Easum dialogued over concerns Bill had about the Emerging Church and their postmodern slant in particular. Tony Jones responded to and clarified some of these concerns. Readers contributed to the discussion by posting comments and questions, to which both Tony Jones and Bill Easum responded to. The result was a robust discussion of the Emerging Church’s postmodern approach to theology. Easum saw much in the Emerging Church he agreed with, but he also expressed consternation about their questioning of what to him were theological non-negotiables.

Engaging these prominent critics and observers has afforded the Emerging Church an opportunity to argue for a positive postmodernism to a larger audience. They do this by riding on the reputation of people like Mohler, Piper and in this case Charles Colson, who do not merely bring their opinions into play. Inadvertently, whether they intend to or not, they bring their reputations into play and contribute to making prominent the claims-making platform of the Emerging Church. That such distinguished Christian leaders would even respond to the Emerging Church itself elevates the Emerging Church in the spotlight.

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<sup>157</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/june/17.72.html?start=1>, “Emerging Confusion” by Charles Colson in *Christianity Today*, published 06/01/2006, accessed 07/13/2010.

McLaren says to Colson that he was right in his claim that the “postmodernism” he was pronouncing was dead, “because the kind of postmodernism you describe – ‘the philosophy that claims there is no transcendent truth’ - was never really alive. It’s a straw man, Chuck”. McLaren then goes on to describe that kind of postmodernism as, at most, “an early, reactionary phase in a yet-embryonic movement that has much more mature, constructive, and positive voices emerging.” Part of the performative impact (Alexander 2005:89) of this is being able to publically rebuke critics and their views, and proffer counter perspectives to a watching wider audience. McLaren is not just countering ideas about postmodernism and the Emerging Church; he is countering and discrediting authoritative voices that purvey these ideas. He publically corrects this authoritative voice about his views on postmodernism, thereby gaining legitimacy for his own. McLaren calls Colson’s dealing with postmodernism “simplistic” and adds that, Colson must be,

...unaware of the rest of the story of what’s going on in the postmodern transition. I’m hoping that by writing this response, you’ll begin to realize that there’s more going on than you’ve realized, so in the future, your engagement can be more responsible and helpful. (Brian McLaren)

In caveat, it must be noted that McLaren’s response to Colson, also contains all the bridge-building characteristics of how Emergents have responded to other critics (chapter 7). For instance, in how McLaren shows appreciations for Colson’s ministry, applauds his desire to “get it right” and highlights areas of agreement, and plays up similarities between Colson’s ministry and the ECM. Doing so accomplishes something else rhetorically: showing that McLaren’s

engagement, though critical, is not mean-spirited. Notwithstanding this, McLaren's rebuttal of Colson allows him to flesh out in detail many features of postmodernism that are positive and compatible with the Christian faith. McLaren's response is lengthy, but he takes the opportunity to argue that a "positive" postmodernism is characterized by a concern about truth, morality and reality; a concern for the excluded "other"; a deconstructive impulse rooted in a concern for justice; and a concern for the excesses of modern metanarratives that have proven harmful.

Another rhetorical strategy he uses is to argue that postmodernism/postmoderns are "precisely the opposite" of what is being claimed by Christian leaders like Chuck Colson. For instance, to the claims that postmoderns "dumb down" their thinking on issues, McLaren says to Colson:

You suggest that Christians who don't share your views are "dumbing down" and moving from a "Word-driven message" to an "image and emotion-driven message." True, there's plenty of dumbing down out there, but I'm sorry, that blanket assessment is not worthy of a person of your stature. *Rather, many of us are trying to escape the dumbed-down understandings of current issues that you and too many others unintentionally purvey.*

To the claim that postmoderns do not care about truth, McLaren states that *it is precisely because they care so much about truth that they deconstruct it.*

McLaren's rhetorical strategy, hence, is not just to argue for a good postmodernism, but to turn a critical lens toward the state of Christianity that spurs many Christians to *be* postmodern, in search for a better alternative. He turns the tables on Colson by saying that many Christians, like Colson himself, instead of being "sold out" to postmodernism (as they accuse the Emerging

Church of being), are unreflexive about the many ways that they themselves are unknowingly “sold out” to modernism. McLaren says to Colson:

Your column concluded like this: “It would be the supreme irony – and a terrible tragedy – if we found ourselves slipping into postmodernity just when the broader culture has figured out it’s a dead end.” I’m tempted to point out the irony that some Christians like yourself seem to be more deeply entrenching themselves in “modernity just when the broader culture has figured out it’s a dead end.”

Hence, McLaren uses the opportunity afforded by Colson’s speaking of postmodernity’s demise, to argue the opposite: that of modernity’s demise, and the church’s inability to come to grips with this reality. Colson subsequently responded to McLaren. While Colson still did not budge in his opinion of postmodernism being bad (a lack of transcendental authority leading to nihilism), and argued counter to McLaren that modernity, and in particular Christian modernity ushered in social progress instead of harm. What was significant in terms of the rhetorical effect of his reply was that he took McLaren’s ideas seriously and formulated a comprehensive response. *By responding, he legitimized McLaren’s critique.* In public discourse, Colson elevated McLaren’s status to that of a “peer”, though on different sides of the postmodern issue. While there was no agreement between the two, there was still a mutual clarifying of ideas, a mutual critique and a cordial spirit of disagreement. At the end of his response, Colson signed off calling McLaren “brother” and thanked him for the opportunity to dialogue. McLaren posted Colson’s response on his blog, and did not offer another reply, but he did express a desire that this dialogue would spur other people to continue the dialogue with their friends who held similar positions as Colson. This is yet another example of how the

Emerging Church engages in discursive bridge-building that transposes to personal bridge-building (chapter 7).

Equally productive was Tony Jones' blogologue with Christian futurist Bill Easum. Easum is a well-known author and consultant about Christian futures. In fact, Tony Jones notes that Bill Easum was "among the early influences of folks like me, Doug Pagitt, Andrew Jones, and Chris Seay" even before Emergent Village had come into being. Bill Easum expressed how some of his initial misgivings about the movement had been allayed by reading some Emergent authors for himself. He also states that the Emerging Church is asking good questions about the state of the Christian faith in postmodernity. But he also expresses worry that it is calling for a fundamental shift in the "unchanging gospel".

Emergents believe that it is no longer possible to hold on to the tenets and practices of modern-day Christianity for two reasons: 1) they are flawed, and they don't relate to today's world. 2) The postmodern world requires a new view of faith and new kind of Christian—a postmodern faith and a postmodern Christian. (Easum)

What was interesting about this exchange was that while it was set up as a blog dialogue between Bill Easum and Tony Jones, it turned out to be a dialogue that involved many more people. Bill Easum was receiving clarification about postmodernity/ postmodernism from not just Tony Jones, but also people who were chiming in on the dialogue. Through this blogologue, Easum was able to clarify some queries he had about the Emerging Church, and how they were engaging postmodernism. Along the way, he also found significant convergences with how Emergents were critiquing the institutional church in the same way that

he himself was doing so. In several instances, he declared himself as “kissing cousins” with Tony Jones, because he had always been critiquing his own denomination “for its old world culture and was denouncing most of the tenets of Modernity.”<sup>158</sup>

Significant differences also did surface in the interchange. It was by no means a completely rosy “kumbaya” interaction. For instance, Bill Easum’s biggest misgiving with the Emerging Church was in how, “they are rethinking how theology changes in culture, a very dangerous approach to ministry”. Easum’s stand is that, “I don’t feel as if we have to adopt a postmodern faith in order to reach the postmodern world. That’s far too much compromise.” Easum believed in being innovative in methodology, but not in theology. In particular, he took issue with Tony Jones’ statement that in the postmodern situation, “theology will be just as innovative as methodology.”<sup>159</sup> In reply to Jones, Easum states,

“I’m not willing to even come close to saying the Gospel has to change in order to reach postmoderns... Perhaps this is where we stake different claims. *I’m not willing to say that theology has to be as innovative as methodology... [If] you are seeking to rewrite the Gospel or innovate it so far as to change it substantively, then I pray for Emergents quick demise.*<sup>160</sup>

Jones and other Emergent-leaning individuals chimed in to explain their position, and in the process, clarified some paradigmatic differences in Easum’s view of the gospel and Emergents’. As opposed to Easum’s “gospel and truth as

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<sup>158</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-3-bill-easum-response-to-tony-jones>, posted 09/15/2008, accessed 07/14/2010.

<sup>159</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-2-tony-jones-response-to-bill-easum>, posted 09/08/2008, accessed 07/14/2010.

<sup>160</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-3-bill-easum-response-to-tony-jones>, posted 09/15/2008, accessed 07/14/2010.

unchanging” view, Jones and others articulate how postmoderns approach the gospel. One commenter explains:

I think EVERY generation should rewrite the Gospel. It is possible that the Church has struggled lately because it has not done a good job of rewriting the story through a current understanding of the universe. *I think that the best way to preserve a story (keep it alive) is to keep rewriting it.* The story must take into account all the lessons and mistakes of modernity, or else it is an incomplete and dead story. Emergent is giving the story life.<sup>161</sup>

Another commenter writes:

As we understand more about ourselves and the world around us, we find new ways that the gospel should be applied. This is where some people misunderstand the Emergent conversation. *In my mind, the conversation doesn't exist to change the gospel, substantively or otherwise.* Rather, the conversation is about discussing the trajectory of the NT writings and early church community, and carrying that forward as we consider the implications of God's restoration plan, and our role within that plan as followers of Jesus.<sup>162</sup>

Following these comments, Tony Jones responds to Easum:

To think that we can “get” the gospel as it was originally meant is, I think, either naiveté or hubris. Instead, I think the emergent movement is calling all followers of Jesus to move into the future with the gospel. That may seem like a nuance or a tricky turn-of-phrase, but let me try to explain. Instead of going backward-in-time (which is impossible) or moving into the future with the intention of pure innovation (which is foolhardy), I say that we step boldly ahead, into the future, being bolstered by the gospel as it has been read, proclaimed, enacted, and lived for millennia.<sup>163</sup>

Easum is unable to grasp this more processual, organic, developing and “growing” view of the gospel that these postmodern thinkers articulate. It is a paradigmatic “leap” that he cannot take, or even grasp. For Easum, the gospel is

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<sup>161</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-3-bill-easum-response-to-tony-jones>, response 6, posted 09/16/2008, accessed 07/14/2010.

<sup>162</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-3-bill-easum-response-to-tony-jones>, response 12,

<sup>163</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-4-tony-jones-response-to-bill-easum>, posted 09/22/2008, accessed 07/14/2010.



an unchanging ontology beyond interpretation and human agency. For Emergents, postmodern thinking implies that it's impossible for the gospel *not* to be about interpretation. And that a static, unchanging gospel for postmoderns is one is not alive: a living gospel *requires* human agency to creatively carry it forward. Easum notes,

I find the last section of your response an example of how hard it is to get ones head around Emergent theology. What does it mean to “step boldly ahead, into the future, being bolstered by the gospel as it has been read, proclaimed, enacted, and lived for millennia?”... I still am not convinced we have to adopt a postmodern faith in order to reach a postmodern world. I do believe we have to change our methodology. I guess we will leave that for another conversation.<sup>164</sup>

This interaction, however, was not just defined by an inability to find consensus or mutual understanding. In fact, Easum makes a contribution of his own that articulates his understanding of the difference between modernity and postmodernity, and what that transition entails:

Modernity: a “National Parks” world (prior to the 1980s)

- An either/ or world.<sup>165</sup> Everything is neatly laid out in a controlled environment... where there is little or no grayness, much less chaos. It is a world where you are safe if you follow the rules. It is a predictable and nicely ordered world.<sup>166</sup>

Postmodernity: a “jungle” world

- It's a both/ and, concert-driven, jungle-oriented, pagan-filled world without any rules. In such a world, the line between heresy and innovation could

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<sup>164</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-4-tony-jones-response-to-bill-easum>, posted 09/22/2008, accessed 07/14/2010.

<sup>165</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-1-bill-easum>, posted 09/01/2008, accessed 07/15/2010.

<sup>166</sup> <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=2694>, “The Implications of the National Park World and the Jungle, by Bill Easum, posted undated, accessed 07/15/2010.

easily be so blurred as to not be detectable. Like vines crisscrossing through the jungle, it is sometimes impossible to see the path forward because the paths are indistinguishable.<sup>167</sup>

Several people expressed thanks to Easum for the metaphor, while taking issue with his use of the word “pagan”, saying that they appreciated the usefulness of the National Parks/ jungle metaphor to think with. Easum hence made a positive contribution to the discussion, providing a metaphor for comprehension, to grasp the difference between the modern and postmodern world. I also noted other instances where Easum was able to “talk through” initial differences and find common ground with postmodern thinkers. For instance, Easum personally addresses one commenter, named Tim,

Tim, you said ‘You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.’ In a Modern/propositional mindset, that comes through as “You shall actually have access in your mind (know) the correct information (truth) and that information will set you free.” But in an embodied truth reading (as we find in Jesus’ words “I am the truth”) the passage leaps out at us with a very different sense: “You shall come into relationship (know) with me (the truth) and I will set you free.” *I totally agree with this. So now I understand what you were saying earlier and we have found a basic agreement.*<sup>168</sup>

In this instance, Easum has found some common ground with a postmodern, non-propositional, “embodied” reading of a very contentious biblical passage. To Emergent thinkers, many Christians take it to mean a cognitive assent to truth. Both Easum and the commenter note that they are on the same wave length and have found some agreement. Both mutually express thanks for the opportunity to dialogue. Despite differences and disagreements, Easum, Jones and their

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<sup>167</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-3-bill-easum-response-to-tony-jones>, posted 09/15/2008, accessed 07/14/2010.

<sup>168</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/blogologue-part-1-bill-easum>, post 20, Posted 09/08/2008, accessed 07/15/2010.

commenters engaged in a public interaction of “clarifying” a postmodern theological outlook. Beyond “modern” and “postmodern”, Easum was able to find convergences across “the line” beyond these labels, implicitly showing that in the postmodern “jungle” (to use his metaphor), when vines “crisscross”, sometimes good can result.

In this section, I have shown how the Emerging Church engages their critics and observers to rhetorically co-construct a positive postmodernism through these critical interactions across difference. Both Chuck Colson and Bill Easum bring their significant reputations to bear on the conversation, hence implicitly lending discursive currency to the Emerging Church’s claims-making activities of arguing for a “positive postmodernism”.

### **The ironies of postmodern praxis**

*How would you define “postmodern culture?”*

*I wouldn’t. Maybe YOU would.*

*That’s fine... 4 YOU.*

*I’m in solidarity with where, like, you’re at on this...*

*So, you go boy! Don’t fight the karma! Define anything you like...*

*But I’d rather not. I mean, come on?*

*DEFINE? Rootword = de-finire. = TO SET BOUNDS = a thinly guised will to power!<sup>169</sup>*

While much has been said about what the Emerging Church says about postmodernism, in this section I focus on different ways they interpret their practices as postmodern, and critique these practices and their claims of being “postmodern”. I discuss what I see as three ironies of postmodern praxis in 1) leadership, 2) organizational structure, and 3) being gatekeepers. This section

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<sup>169</sup> <http://ginkworld.net/?p=1632>, “Karen Ward”, accessed 07/05/2010.

discusses praxis, or how I see the Emerging Church putting postmodern ideas into practice beyond discourse.

### *Leadership*

Leadership in the Emerging Church has always been a rather tricky issue. On the one hand, they espouse a discourse of a “flattened hierarchy” and envision Christianity within the metaphor of a vast network, instead a bureaucracy or hierarchy. This is best exemplified in Emergent thinker Dwight Friesen’s Emergent Village sponsored book, titled *Thy Kingdom Connected* (Friesen 2009). As Christian authors on the Emergent phenomena write, that Emergent is a shift from “powerful group leaders to leaderless groups”, which “was simply the postmodern critique of modern forms of control... and postmodern philosophy’s deconstruction of power structures”. (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:196) For instance, from an early Emergent Village podcast, Tony Jones explained how when he was the National Coordinator of Emergent Village, his initial title was “National Director”, but it seemed contradictory that a “conversation” would be controlled by a “Director”. Other Emergent folks did not really like the idea. So the title “coordinator” was chosen instead, to set the tone for Emergent Village to be a leaderless organization.

In one of the first Emerging Church conferences I attended in Chicago, I remember Tony Jones describing how Emerging Churches work based on a flattened hierarchy. He introduced to the audience a term “wiki-faith”, which he said was how Christianity needed to operate in the postmodern world, where

faith was a “collective endeavor” and that the gospel was something, “we’re all writing together”. In that same conference, Spencer Burke, social media guru and founder of theooze.com, implored the audience to forget about the Willow Creek model of Churches, saying outright, “don’t even go there”. While I have heard and read this articulation of postmodern Christianity as “wiki-faith”, expressed in other terms like “democratized participation”, “flattened hierarchy” and in how “everyone is an expert”, beyond this discourse, I still see how leadership and power operates as a form of implicit hierarchy working in ways that the Emerging Church itself may not be attuned to, or at the very least, contradicts its discourse.

Even though prominent Emergent writers are not “leaders” of the movement in an executive sense, they are still symbolic leaders who are synonymous with the Emerging Church Movement. Brian McLaren himself has expressed his discomfort with being labeled as “The de facto spiritual leader” of the Emerging Church.<sup>170</sup> But the reality is that individuals like McLaren, Jones and Pagitt, are still highly regarded by Emergents, observers and critics, as gurus of the Emergent phenomenon. In many ways they continue to remain the loudest and most prominent public voices, and by default speak as authoritative voices for the Emerging Church in America.

By being the representative voice for the movement, they play into the existing culture structure that frames what a religious leader is and does. For instance, in how leaders take on other leaders in public discourse, as they have

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<sup>170</sup> <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/resources-archive/brians-annotati.html>

done with critics like Al Mohler, John Piper and Chuck Colson. Tony Jones is famously known for defending negative critiques of Emergent, for instance in how he publically excoriated authors of a *Sojourner's* magazine article on the Emerging Church that portrayed the movement as “too white” (chapter 6). Although many prominent Emergent authors, who are typically white, educated middle-class males, have of late more consciously taken a step back and allowed for a more diverse crop of Emergent leaders to rise. Come crunch issues, these leaders often re-appear to take the stage.

There is another interesting leadership paradox going on here, since many Emergent leaders call for a diversity of voices to be heard. Emergent author and Pastor, Tim Keel writes that “a postmodern context requires leaders who instead of seeking to dominate the environment, are willing to become environmentalists – people who create spaces” (Keel 2007:112) *But by continuing to speak out about how others need to be empowered to speak, they paradoxically continue to occupy the spotlight, and by implication, hold on to the symbolic power.* It seems that the Emerging Church talks much about “letting the subaltern speak” without actually letting the subaltern speak. (Spivak 1988) This point really hit home when a person I shared a table with at an Emergent event told me she was frustrated because she “didn’t see it”. Didn’t see what? I wondered. She elaborated by saying that it was one thing to “talk” about being inclusive, but by occupying the space and continuing to talk as a person of privilege seemed both ironic and contradictory. To put this in context, she was a lesbian woman in her forties, who described to me her battling with the institutional church for a long

time over inclusion and acceptance. She saw herself as “Emergent”, but was frustrated by only hearing about this inclusiveness but not actually seeing it happen at events like this. Another interviewee a woman in her late twenties from Pennsylvania, whom I met at a separate Emerging event, told me that even though this was her first Emerging Church meeting, it was evident to her who the “super stars” were, and that it was interesting how these prominent voices were given power by others in the movement. She herself though, had decided to come to this Emergent conference to hear one of the prominent authors speak.

As a further consolidation of their symbolic power, many leaders in the Emerging Church have created a whole industry of an “Emergent brand” of books. Many of them, like Brian McLaren, Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt have made careers and sold books out of being “experts” on postmodernism. These prominent individuals consistently headline conferences and draw crowds to Emergent events. Many Emergent events rely on the presence of big-names like Brian McLaren and Peter Rollins to draw people. Hence, many of the prominent Emerging Church leaders *have put themselves on the map as one of the Christian publishing industry’s postmodern claims-makers*. They compete for market-share with other postmodern claims-makers like Leonard Sweet (Soul Tsunami. 1999), Rob Bell (Velvet Elvis, 2005) and Donald Miller (Blue Like Jazz, 2003), some of whom write a brand of evangelical-friendly postmodernism. They implicitly promote themselves as “experts” of postmodernism even though postmodernism deconstructs the basis of expertism. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones are “consultants” to churches, and run “social media boot camps” to teach

Pastors how to be media-savvy. Jones is aware of their success in this respect and notes, “The media – both secular and Christian – have taken notice; books are selling; Web sites are expanding; and churches around the country have used emergent language in their marketing material”. (Jones 2008:55)

If, as Emergent author Tony Jones states that the postmodern entails “a flattening of former hierarchies” (Jones, 2008:35), the movement has perhaps become less self-reflexively attuned to how implicit hierarchies are operating in a way that give leading voices in the movement like his own their sustained symbolic power. While they do not want to be defined as “leaders” of an entire movement, by holding the symbolic power, they continue to feed the perception that they are in fact *The* leaders of this movement. Overall, I see a paradox in how even though these prominent Emerging Church leaders say they do not want to lead, their critics and their audience will not let them disavow their leadership. And they do not do much to help themselves in this respect.

#### *Organizational structure and “getting things done”*

What Emergents espouse about leadership, ultimately translates into how localized groups are organized and how they function. As one theooze.com article describes, Emergent leaders need to be “postmodern narrators”. Where modern leadership “tends to be rigid, rule-structured and orderly”, postmodern leadership, tends to be “chaotic and fluid” (O’Keefe, 2002). The postmodern praxis for Emerging Church organizations is that they believe that there is really “no formula” that should be followed in building a community of believers. In fact,



Emergent author and founding Pastor of Kansas City's Jacob's Well, expresses a resistance to "giving concrete examples of what life at Jacob's Well is like or how we got started... for fear that what is merely descriptive of what has happened in one place will become prescriptive for others" (Keel 2007:80) There is both an explicit and implicit critique of the modern church's obsession with "programs" and its tendency to gravitate toward "the latest and greatest" (O'Keefe 2005) The espousal of this kind of "no formula" or anti-program discourse, where everything is supposed to be "organic" translates very practically, as was evident in my fieldwork. I conducted fieldwork at an Emergent conference in Kansas City in 2008, where there was a session organized for people who were interested in starting cohorts, to lunch together and talk. Including me, there were about 10 people in the room, some of whom were already in cohorts, and some who were looking to start one. It was rather surprising that during the meeting, the facilitator told those of us in attendance that anybody could set up a cohort and "just do whatever you want to do". There were no specific steps, nor any guidelines on how to make a cohort happen, or even how to sustain one. While I was not expecting this session to sell a program, this was even more unstructured than I had anticipated. It was from that experience that I wondered how cohorts functioned, and whether many even ran for very long.

The lack of organizational structure has meant that many Emergent groups are transient. They go out as quickly as they come into existences. This was confirmed to me by the Emergent Village cohort coordinator, Mike Clawson, who in an interview, agreed that many of the cohorts listed on the Emergent

Village website were non-functioning. He also filled me in on how cohorts were not offered anything by the way of tangible resources, like study materials. They simply did not have the resources. The only significant thing they received was an official listing on the Emergent Village website as a cohort. Clawson explained to me that ideally, they would like someone to play the role of a “roving consultant” to cohorts all over the country, traveling, spending time with cohorts and helping leaders structure and strengthen their cohort. But they simply did not have any resources or sponsorship to make this happen. In an interview that I had with former Emergent Village coordinating group member, and Sociologists Will Samson, he shared with me his impression that Emergent cohorts, as a localized expression of Emergent were floundering. I saw this difficulty in running cohorts play out even as I attempted to do my research with cohorts in Kansas City and St. Louis, where meetings were few and far between, with frequent cancellations, frequent change of venues, and cohorts heavily reliant upon individuals only able do this in their free time.

In my interview with a coordinator of a Missouri cohort, she expressed frustration at not getting enough support and guidance for running the cohort. I had been to 2 cohort meetings, before this cohort leader stopped organizing meetings due to health problems. She also voiced how it seemed like certain prominent “leaders” of the movement were more interested in their money-making seminar projects than actually helping people on the ground organize and run their local communities. All this is to show that the postmodern praxis of “fluidity” and “chaos” translates into real difficulties as groups and various

individuals attempt to operationalize these ideas in practice. Many Emergent groups are in a catch 22 position of rejecting reification and replication, and hence models of how other people have “done it”, while simultaneously needing some sort of structure, or precedent to operate. Without the latter, many groups, as with those that I conducted fieldwork with, had little or no chance for survival or sustained activity. In this way, the Emerging Church fits the characteristic of what Neitz identifies as ‘cultural movements’, which are made of loosely bounded networks, but “face problems in mobilizing participants and maintaining the movement” (Neitz 1994:128).

Emergents believe that local communities must function according to what one Emergent writer calls a “postmodern structure” that “allows people to get involved and not sit on the sidelines” as opposed to a modern church form where, “someone must be in control” (O’Keefe 2002) In reality, many of the more successful Emergent local meeting groups, like Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis, Jacob’s Well in Kansas City, and Wicker Park Grace, in Chicago, are all associated with prominent, charismatic leaders where it is very clear that “someone is in control”. For instance in Wicker Park Grace, for all the times that I observed their meetings, it was evident that the Pastor Nanette Sawyer was in charge of all proceedings from start to finish. This included putting together the liturgy, choosing and reading the poems, giving a short sermon, and leading people into meditation. My interview with Will Samson, again shed light on this, where he explained how in his perception, many Emergent groups did not survive long because “there were simply not enough charismatic leaders in the

movement to go around”. This showed me prominent Emergent Pastors held symbolic power, and built and sustained their communities in similar ways to Megachurch Pastors like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels. This reduces some of the difference between these postmodern practitioners and their Megachurch counterparts. Even though the Emerging Church espouse a “radical commitment” to the idea of a “priesthood of all believers” where Pastors attempt to lead “without power” (Hahn 2002), the point is that power is still very much operative in implicit ways that undercut their discourse of how a postmodern Christian faith should operate.

Not only do many of the more reputed and well-known local Emergent groups have strong centers, many are in fact supported by denominations to do the work that they do. In the real world, financial backing has to come from somewhere in order for things to operate consistently. So in fact, some Emergent groups are supported by their more “modernist” denominations to do their postmodern work. I heard this dynamic being expressed to me by a Pastor I interviewed, who had previous involvement with Emergent but did not run an “Emerging Church”, he was telling me what he thought of another “rock star” Pastor in Emergent circles, who was supported by his denomination to run a postmodern church. I was surprised by his rather cynical interpretation, of his denomination wanting to have “these little kids playing at the side”, which then allows the denomination to say “we have this innovative, cutting edge ministry here”. I interpreted this as a modernistic rendering of postmodernism, where the postmodern expression was given life as a “pet project” of this particular

denomination as a means-ends display of possessing innovation. So perhaps the irony of postmodern praxis here is that those who manage to do the postmodern thing successfully rely on modernist institutional backing for their continued existence.

I also noted ironies of how organizing activities at Emergent conferences that I attended says something about this issue of postmodern praxis. Simply put, Emergent conferences are costly. It is something that I have found out the hard way, having had to pay my own way to several conferences over the years to conduct research. Cost itself is a form of economic exclusion that determines how a certain profile of people will be the ones to attend these conferences. It is very apparent to me that most of the people in attendance were Church leaders, or those who have some institutional sponsorship to attend the event. For instance, the Christianity 21 conference which was organized by Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt's JoPa Production Company cost \$200 that even I as a graduate student cringed at paying out of pocket for. The media artifact at the end of the conference, cost a whopping \$99, that included all the talks, that would have been useful for my research, but I was unable to afford it, having already paid my way to the conference. My critique is not just an issue of costs being prohibitive to the accessibility of conferences, but even the "event schemas" or scripts of what happens at these conferences seldom match with the discourse on a postmodern way of doing things. The speakers speak from a vantage point of being experts in a certain field of knowledge. They still revolve around ostensible

“experts” on postmodernism, to an audience that consumes these events as those who have to be told by experts how to live a postmodern faith.

### *Gatekeeping postmodern*

A third irony that I have picked up on is the presence of an implicit gatekeeping of what a “real” postmodern church or practice is. One of the typologizing activities that I have come across is precisely an articulation that distinguishes between a “genuine” postmodern and one that is not. This is ironic in a sense that postmodernism is articulated by Emergent discourses as something that cannot be pinned down and absolutely defined. This happens in the realm of discourse, as well as in other practical ways. As an example of how this is done discursively, one writer distinguishes books he considers “genuinely postmodern” from those he does not:

Although we freely use the term “postmodernism,” many of the works that we cite do not proclaim themselves to be postmodern even though they well exemplify the diversity and anti-essentialism of postmodernism. In contrast, evangelical Christian publishing houses now regularly issue books with “postmodernism” in the titles whose content may well not correspond to postmodernism as considered here. These evangelical titles are typically attempts to “baptize” postmodernism and to capitalize on current popular terms such as “postmodern” and “deconstruction” on behalf of evangelical theology.<sup>171</sup>

While on the one hand, the writer is saying that many books that do not carry the label “postmodern” can in fact be read as postmodern. But on the other hand, many books that call themselves postmodern are somehow “missing” the genuine criteria of a true postmodernism. These books, the writer says, are

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<sup>171</sup> <http://lofitrube.com/a-division-in-biblical-studies/#more-3265>, published 06/25/2009, accessed 07/05/2010.

evangelical attempts to subsume postmodernism under a more theologically conservative interpretive grid. Once a distinction between a genuine/ false postmodernism is set up, this inadvertently raises the question about what the specific characteristics of a “real” postmodern are. Despite the postmodern discourse of ambiguous boundaries and open borders, this has pushed some Emergent thinkers to articulate and practice gatekeeping of “true” postmodernism. There can be some practical consequences to this gatekeeping.

A writer and webmaster of one Emergent website, ginkworld.net explains how they receive about 100 requests each month from different communities of faith who wish to be added to the “community of faith listing”, but that they only end up adding a handful to their website each time. According to the author, some of these churches are described as being “Willowback”<sup>172</sup> in style and structure who are seeking greater recognition as postmodern/ emerging churches. He surmises,

Some of these churches desire to call themselves “postmodern/emerging” not because they are, but because they see “postmodern/emerging” as the “new thing,” the “next-wave” in ministry, the “edge,” or the “cool thing to do.” *They have no idea what it means to be postmodern/emerging.*

The author notes that others have asked to be added to the list to “attract and fix” people with a postmodern/ emerging mind, “lost postmodern believers who are being tricked into thinking that anything but ‘the true church of Christ’ is the answer.” In fairness, the paradox of articulating a “true” postmodernism is not something that these Emergent practitioners are unreflexive about. I noted the

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<sup>172</sup> A playful hybrid of “Willow Creek” (Bill Hybels) and “Saddleback” (Rick Warren), both are Megachurches with Superstar pastors.

tension in this paradoxical position, in how the author makes a big caveat that he would *never* say there is an absolute litmus test for a postmodern/ emerging church, but according to him, there has to be some standards “that are central to all postmodern/ emerging communities of faith”. Humorously, he calls this “standard” a “rule of pinky” because “thumbs are too modern” denoting the ironic tension the author feels about the modernistic ethos of prescribing a definition and demarcating boundaries, but having to do it anyway.

The author explains that they need to establish a set of criteria to gatekeep the postmodern/ emerging label to remain honest to their call, and to ensure that when people come to their website looking for something different, that they do find a “real” postmodern/ emerging community. The author fleshes out the criteria, and provides a further caveat that, “these are basic criteria, and not, by any means, to be taken as “written in stone.” (O’Keefe 2004)

In this instance, gatekeeping means that some groups will gain access to resources and others will not; the benefit accrued is being listed as an “officially recognized” Emergent community, to potentially gain access to a wider audience. In a similar way, in my interview with Emergent Village cohort coordinator Mike Clawson, he also articulated how he did not allow every group asking, to be listed as an Emergent cohort, even though they had a consistent stream of requests to be put on the Emergent Village website as a cohort. While from a sociological point of view, it is understandable that as movements form and take shape, some form of self-definition and gatekeeping becomes almost inevitable. So I see the movement finding itself having to gatekeep postmodernism as a paradox



produced by the growth and development of the movement itself. By describing what “true” postmodernism is, effectively articulates a regime of exclusion, which is antithetical to the postmodern ethos, something that Judith Butler notes as an ironic subordination and erasure that takes place in the act of explaining something as postmodern. (Butler 1991:152)

### **Framing postmodernism: culture in interaction**

So far in this chapter, I have shown how the Emerging Church engages in a rhetorical construction of postmodernism/ postmodernity, and moved on to a discussion of certain ironies that come out of the ECM attempting to put postmodern ideas into practice. Through my research, I was constantly intrigued by how much discursive activity centered on this one word “postmodern”. In this section, I analyze from a cultural perspective why this word has garnered so much discursive currency, and in the process seek to develop some theoretical insight on culture. In doing so, I want to engage with some theoretical questions on culture, particularly on the issue of “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

Early in the chapter, I explained my basic approach was to take postmodernism as a cultural construct subject to the interpretive work and claims-making activities of people. My approach was not to say that “postmodernism explains the Emerging Church”, but rather, that the Emerging Church actively constructs postmodernism in various ways. This “handling” of postmodernism, as a construct underlines the “culture structures” that produce a

certain perception about postmodernism and what it explains in the world. I argue that the Emerging Church engages in a “framing” of postmodernism, making postmodernism the lens through which other things become comprehensible. As Benford and Snow explain,

“The verb “framing” denotes an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction. It is active in a sense that something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic evolving process. It entails agency in the sense that what is evolving is the work of social movement organizations or movement organizations or movement activists. (Benford and Snow 2000:614)

Framing is hence an agentic, active process. It provides an explanatory framework for changes that have happened in the world, and it is a frame that enables people to narrate and make sense of their personal experiences.

Through claims-making activities, different people participate in framing. What I am interested in is the interactive process involved in frame construction, or the “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) that is involved in making and remaking of frames. Frames are not constant, and are subject to revision. Hence, *what kinds of frames promote culture in interaction? And is “postmodern” one of those frames?*

This is a question that is consistent with the “autonomy of culture” and “culture as causal” perspective that I have referred to in this chapter and the previous one (chapter 7). If culture is an independent variable, then what are some frames that promote interaction? What are some frames that spur more interaction and activate a social spiral, while other frames might shut interaction down? I was curious to understand what kind of a frame postmodernism is and

how it both constrains and enables. A frame should be evaluated as a cultural element in terms of its ability to mobilize activity. What would be a frame that promotes culture in interaction? I take the concept as the starting point of my explanation.

I saw signs of postmodernism being such a frame fairly early in my research. I noted how different people described postmodernism as being “helpful in some ways, and not helpful in other ways”. It is one that is decried by some people as “not useful” but somehow still continues to be articulated, defined and redefined in discourse. A “bad” frame is not necessarily one that people reject or oppose, because in speaking oppositionally against a frame, they contribute to its discursive salience, as was the case with the way critics spoke out against postmodernism. A good frame also has a certain quality of “definitional ambivalence” about it that spurs the clarification activities of different claims-makers. In some ways, I see parallels between what postmodernism inspires, and what Jeffrey Alexander says the discourse of globalization inspires, since it is hailed by both friend and foe alike, and ushers in both promise and wariness (Alexander 2005:81). A frame that promotes culture in interaction is one that is sufficiently broad and ambiguous. A frame like “postmodernism” is what I consider a “gathering-point” concept that spurs discussion. People are drawn from various quarters to engage with the term.

There is some substantive quality in frames itself. In the same way that Lichterman discusses how some group customs promote reflexivity, while others shut it down (Lichterman 2005), some frames shut down talk, while other frames

promote it. The frame “postmodern” inspires an abundance of collective activity that seeks to “figure out” and argue for (or against) its significance. It mobilizes people to converge and think together. Furthermore, “postmodern” has broad conceptual applications. It can be argued as a collective action frame (Benford and Snow 2000), an interpretive frame (Snow et al. 1986), and an orientational frame (Gillan 2008). I have identified at least 4 uses of the word “postmodern”, which speaks for both the breadth and depth of its conceptual application:

- *Postmodernism*: ideology concept
- *Postmodernity*: periodizing concept
- *Postmoderns*: identity concept
- *Be postmodern*: action concept

Its multi-vocality allows people to use it in different ways. Hence “postmodern” fits Benford and Snow’s criteria of a “master frame”, which have to be broad in their interpretive scope, inclusive, flexible, and full of cultural resonance (Benford and Snow 2000:619). What can frames and frame processes contribute to our understanding of how culture operates?

#### *Culture as “tool commons”*

At first, I thought of Ann Swidler’s conceptualization of culture as a “tool kit”. It seemed appropriate at first, since postmodernism seemed to be a cultural frame that provided different people with a tool kit of repertoires and ways of thinking and understanding the world through a postmodern lens.

Thus far, the tool kit metaphor has been useful for explaining how social actors construct strategies of action for themselves out of the cultural resources and competencies. It is a “tool kit” for organizing action. As Swidler articulates it, culture is like a “tool kit” or repertoire from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action (Swidler 1986:277). Swidler’s view of culture counters the old view of culture as providing values and ultimate ends for action. As Swidler explains, “a culture has enduring effects on those who hold it, not by shaping the ends they pursue, but by providing the characteristic repertoire from which they build lines of action.” (Swidler 1986:284) The metaphor is an “accounting device” of the cultural resources people use to construct lines of action, it implies more constraint than enablement, since the “tool set” is limited, and it says nothing about how tools are shaped or constituted. Implicitly, the “tool kit” metaphor explains how culture structures action and allows less room for agency; beyond the agency of “picking and choosing” what they want from the tool kit. An important insight from Swidler, are that these cultural repertoires “have a life of their own” and people use these tools “in the ways the tools most easily allow themselves to be used”. Hence, culture is autonomous and has a life of its own. These tools provide people with the projects and shared language for thinking and talking. (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003:742)

The discursive activities occurring around postmodernism made me look for a better metaphor that would fit the reality of what I was seeing with the Emerging Church and postmodernism. I was looking for a metaphor that would account for the interactive and rhetorical processes that shaped cultural frames.

The metaphor of a “tool commons” seemed to fit the reality that I was trying to conceptualize, more than “tool kit”. To distinguish between a “tool kit” and a “tool commons” is conceptually useful for several reasons. Although the concept of “tool kit” has been a tremendous theoretical contribution in the sociology of culture, the “tool kit” metaphor has its limitations for a number of reasons. Hall, Neitz and Battani note that Swidler does not address how individuals choose from tools in the toolkit (2003:247), and Gary Alan Fine asks how tools are placed in and taken out of that kit (Fine 2004:3). I go a step further by arguing that “toolkit” does not factor in the theoretical possibility that people can make contributions, and actively shape the tools in use, or engineer new tools for use. “Tool kit” implies a given, relatively static and limited set of repertoires and competencies: people take from the kit what is useful for them, but their choices are relatively constrained. As Rhys Williams notes, the choice of “tools” are not at the complete discretion of people, since choice is shaped “by availability within historically situated social contexts (Williams 1995:126). Further, the metaphor does not factor in another important question: *How do we account for how the tools got there in the first place?*

To address those limitations, and in light of my findings on the discourses on postmodernism, I found utility in rethinking “tool kit” and conceptualizing culture as a “tool commons” instead. The word “commons”, by definition, has the connotation of something that is “shared by all or many”. However, a commons is typically associated with a physical “place” shared by a bounded community that has the right of access. In my conception of commons, it is neither “place”

nor “bounded”. My conceptualization of “commons” is that it is open access and “shared” not just in terms of being available to many. It is shared in a sense that many are able to contribute to it. There is room for improvement to refine and critique the tools at hand. Discursively, no one has dominance over the tools. In a “tool commons”, the tools themselves are subject to reconfiguration. The conceptualization of a tool commons allows us to continue arguing not just for the causal significance of culture, as Swidler does (1986), but also for its autonomy. The autonomy of the “tool commons” speaks for the autonomy of culture, and coheres with Foucault’s notion of discourses being diffusely distributed in peoples’ social worlds. The tools in a “tool commons” literally expand and contract under the discursive activity of people who create new tools, refine existing ones, or doing away with those they think are no longer useful. In a sense, the typologizing activity of the Emerging Church shows us how the notion of “postmodern” is subject to the “tooling” activities of groups and individuals to define it, make sense of it and use it. The “tool commons” metaphor gives us a better sense of the dynamic of how people are, “both consumers of existing cultural meanings, and producers of new meanings” (Tarrow 1992:198). It also incorporates Swidler’s later insight, that she elaborated in *Talk of Love*, of how cultural tools are remade in the process of being used (Swidler 2002, Spillman and Jacobs 2005:11).

A further implication of thinking about culture as a “tool commons” is that it explains *difference + closeness*. A “tool commons” is a common pool of cultural resources that are made available and shared across differences. Access to a

“tool commons” is neither premised on mutual agreement nor on common identification. Being “shared” does not necessary denote agreement, but it is “shared” in the sense that it is the common reference point, even if people do not agree on whether it is “good” or “bad” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003:743). As I have showed in this chapter, Emerging Church voices engaged in making sense of postmodernism across differences with its critics. A “tool commons” enables us to account for a soft form of agreement between interacting participants. The idea “tool commons”, in as much as it pertains to the collective activity of groups to construct and reconstruct frames, can be a conceptualization that builds a much-needed bridge between cognitive psychology and cultural sociology, as expressed by DiMaggio, and lays out a view of culture as “working through the interaction of shared cognitive structures and supra-individual cultural phenomena (material culture, media messages, or conversation, for example) that activate those structures to varying degrees.” (DiMaggio, 1997:264) Swidler, herself has more recently considered how framing might contribute to a better understanding of “culture in action”, even though much of her early work does not use the conceptual language of framing. She notes that,

The sociology of culture needs to understand... how situations come to be organized as they are, how people are cued to *frame* or recognize what sort of situation they are in, and how differently organized cultural elements are brought to bear, or not, in particular contexts. (Swidler, 2008:618)

The “tool commons” concept also draws attention to the interactional element of culture, which is important since culture is never experienced in an interactional vacuum. This approach to “culture in interaction” denotes a theoretical concern



with what Eliasoph and Lichterman coin as “group style”, which they define as “recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group’s shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in group settings” (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2003:737). Their argument is that people’s notion of adequate or proper participation in a “group” acts like a filter to whatever substantive cultural content is being expressed or exchanged. Lichterman and Eliasoph argue that there is some sort of group style operative in all interactions.

With the conceptualization of culture as a “tool commons”, we can consider how a group style might exist where *non-membership* can be just as important as membership for groups to filter collective representations. My argument hence is that the notion of culture as a “tool commons” enables us to consider a style of interaction that is not premised on agreement. Paradoxically, it is precisely what *does not* hold a group together that allows them to continue interacting across differences. Or to put it another way, “the reason why we can talk and ‘do things together’, is precisely because there is no assumption that we are a group or that we ever will be”. Conceiving of culture as a “tool commons” emphasizes both the interactional character of culture, as well as the cultural agency of individuals and groups to actively shape the tools of culture, and what more, to do so across differences. Integrated with an understanding of non-membership being a vital group style, along with any other kind of articulated group style (Lichterman 2006), allows us to understand how *difference + closeness* is accomplished, where people do things together, and collectively

contribute to a discourse on postmodernism, despite their differences of belief, ideology or identity.

## **Chapter 9 Finding elusive togetherness**

*In this concluding chapter I synthesize my important findings from each of my substantive dissertation chapters. I also make some concluding remarks about the Emerging Church Movement and how it points to a more generalized understanding of religion in a particular time and space. I also attempt to discuss how some of my conceptual and theoretical contributions might be relevant and applicable to other fields of study. In the last section of the chapter, I discuss my possible future research trajectory developing from this project.*

### **Finding elusive togetherness: the social reality of difference + closeness**

I have chosen the title “finding elusive togetherness” for my conclusion chapter because it reflects my primary theoretical engagement with Paul Lichterman’s *Elusive Togetherness* (2005), which explicates how religious groups in America work to bridge social divisions, and why some groups failed while others succeeded. My project is both inspired by Lichterman’s substantive focus on religious groups and the centrality of culture and practices to his analysis. Lichterman argues that the cultural meanings that groups produce, affects whether they can successfully reach out and bridge divisions in American society. Following Lichterman, the kind of togetherness that I have tried to get at in this project is indeed elusive precisely because it is a unique and rarely explicated combination of *difference + closeness*. I have focused on the importance, and the place of culture in explaining how this unique and particular combination is accomplished through the various chapter of my dissertation.

### *The reality of difference*

My project also has a sense of urgency to its agenda since the reality of difference has in countless historical instances, proven its harrowing potential to inspire destruction. Both the ill-management and the exploitation of difference account for some of the most striking social atrocities in our world history, whether we talk about the Rwandan genocide between the Hutus and the Tutsis, or the Jewish Holocaust during World War II. The reality of difference is also evident in our religiously pluralistic world, where different religious groups live, breathe and interact with each other. In contemporary America, we can see both the reality of difference and how difference is exploited in the service of power. This is evident in social inequality studies of gender, sexuality and race. Hence getting to a theoretical understanding of how to deal justly or rightly with difference is also something that has driven me forward in this project. Recent events like the controversy over the “Ground Zero Mosque” and the accompanying Quran burning threat by Pastor Terry Jones of Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida show how even in a religiously diverse country like America, difference can be exploited by social agents to divisive political effect.

### *The reality of closeness*

The reality of difference, as I have described above, is further accompanied by the reality of closeness, or of increasing inter-group contact in today’s world. With the impact of globalization, global migration, and advances in

communication technology, there is indeed a tangible sense that the social world is getting “smaller”. Inadvertently, groups of all sorts – religious, ethnic or cultural-based – are coming into increasing contact with a heterogeneous range of “others”. It is hard for social groups to bypass the question of what to do with the “other”, when the “other” is constantly on the social horizon. Hence my project is also important from this angle because of the reality of closeness in a globalized, postmodern and interconnected social world.

*The reality of difference + closeness*

My project combines both the pressings issues of the reality of difference *and* closeness in our contemporary world. I have argued that *difference + closeness* is a particular combination that we have less theoretical knowledge on, compared to the realities of *sameness + closeness*, and *difference + distance*, or “intra-group solidarity” and “out-group othering” respectively. I believe that there is much at stake for the social world, in groups knowing how to work across their differences with diverse “others”. The people that I studied, the Emerging Church Movement, also seem to implicitly acknowledge that Christianity in America needs to be able to change and adapt to the reality of *difference + closeness*. For the Emerging Church, what is at stake in Christianity “doing” their relationships differently is no less than the survival of Christianity and its ability to be a functional, positive and contributing part of the broader social world. For the Emerging Church Movement, for Christians to be divisive and territorial is no longer useful in the postmodern world where heterogeneity is both common and necessary.

Movements like the Emerging Church have changed what closeness in religion is based on. Most people, even scholars of religion have commonly assumed that closeness is defined by sameness in beliefs. Yet for the Emerging Church, religious belief is not at all the criteria for closeness. This parallels a move in the sociology of religion which has progressively shifted from studying religion as a source of beliefs, values and motivations, to studying religion in terms of practices and the “doings” that are often times independent of belief. So it is sociologically significant that groups like the Emerging Church are changing what closeness means, since they are more interested in the ability of groups to “do things together” despite differences in beliefs. So, the Emerging Church Movement is hence an important site for studying the dynamics of *difference + closeness*, and in line with how analysis has shifted in the field of religion, instead of beliefs, my analytical focus has been on culture and practices.

### **Synthesis and summary of conceptual and theoretical contributions**

In each of my substantive chapters, I have attempted to forward various conceptual and theoretical innovations that I hope will contribute not just to a theoretical understanding *difference + closeness* as it occurs in the domain of religion, but I hope that it will contribute positively to other fields of study in sociology as a broader discipline. In this section, I would like to synthesize some of the major threads that run between the conceptual and theoretical contributions of each chapter. In the process, I hope to “connect the dots” between some of the relevant ideas.

In chapter 5, my theoretical discussion centered on the ideas of borderlands (Anzaldúa 1999) and Encounter (Tsing 2005). I discussed how the Emerging Church Movement imagines itself as a “borderland” instead of a boundary-line, where people can encounter each other across differences. I discussed the borderlands and encounter concepts in relation to a broader theoretical project to talk about inventive ways that they “map” their relationships with the “other” to promote reflexivity (Lichterman 2005) and consider the quality of their relationships with groups in the broader social world. I further discussed a concept called “navigational affinity” which is a cognitive strategy that enables groups to imagine the reality of having similar experiences with the “other” without having to collapse differences into sameness, since both are on different “paths”. This allows groups to solidify difference, yet enables groups to “come close” and learn from each other. I also discussed the idea of “collaborative cartography” and how map-making can be a collaborative exercise that promotes communication and working across differences for individuals and groups to come to a consensus about concepts and categories. Collaboration is a means by which groups can work across their different understandings and “think better together”.

The primary contribution that I hoped to spur in the social cognition and boundaries literature is the idea of a “cartographic imagination”, which examines schematic basis from which individuals and groups map themselves and others. I developed some very basic categories of distinction between “complex map cartographers” and “simple map cartographers”. The rather simplistic distinction

is a first step in explicating extreme types or ideal types of the maps people make and their ability to deal positively with otherness. My argument is that complex map cartographers have better and more elaborate maps that realistically account for the reality of difference in socially productive ways. Conversely simple map cartography is bad, which positively correlates with groups being unable to deal properly with difference, and who are more likely to have an ethnocentric conception of themselves and the social world. I hope to inspire others to take up the mapping metaphor and develop further categorizations beyond “simple” and “complex” that I have proposed here.

While chapter 5 discusses more cognitive aspects of imagining *difference* + *closeness*, in chapters 6 and 7 on inclusion and bridge-building, I have shown tangible and empirical ways that the Emerging Church attempts to establish itself as a borderland to facilitate people coming together across their differences. I have tried to show how the movement attempts to “accomplish” being a borderland in both discursive interactions and face-to-face settings of congregations and meeting groups. For instance, by allowing for an “open-identification” of the Emergent label, and by seeking to establish local Emergent meeting groups as “non-homogeneous spaces” or “differentiated spaces”. The culture and practices I have analyzed in my chapter 6 and chapter 7 shows how the movement attempts to operationalize what it means to be a borderland of encounter for groups across their differences.

In chapter 6, my primary theoretical contribution explicates inclusiveness as a cultural accomplishment. In critiquing the movement’s use of the



conversation metaphor, I came to a core distinction between “passive and active” forms of inclusion. This was an important distinction that enabled me to gain a theoretical understanding of how some attempts to be inclusive may fall short, and might still not address existing structures of inequality that operate in society. Subsequently, my discussion of how the movement articulates “self-exclusion” conceptualizes a way that groups put the responsibility on those on the outside not to exclude themselves. Other concepts include the idea of “the bane of all-inclusiveness”, which conceptualizes how groups who seek to be inclusive on multiple fronts, will inadvertently face the pressures of being perceived as falling short on one front, when they focus resource on being inclusive on other fronts. Based on my researcher experiences in the field, I further conceptualized the idea of “opportunistic inclusion”, which explicates how groups may seek to exploit the diversity that was not planned for, but happened to be there. Opportunistic inclusion can be a parallel concept to “token inclusion” or tokenism. It raises the possibility of asking how and why groups resort to opportunistic inclusion and what the costs and consequences are of doing so.

In chapter 7, I attempted to make conceptual and theoretical contributions to Lichterman’s discussion of social bridge-building and the outwardly oriented social spiral. I attempted to further contribute to Lichterman’s discussion of perplexity, and how social groups deal with awkward encounters and hard to digest ideas. Through studying the Emerging Church, I was able to develop ways of further thinking about perplexity. I coined the concept “perplexity elaboration”, which speaks of how groups seek to elaborate and deal head-on with perplexing

encounters which promotes reflexivity. Perplexity elaboration denotes how groups lean into and talk through awkwardness, instead of shying away from it or shutting it down. Managing and dealing rightly with perplexity enables groups to spiral outwards and reconceptualizes difficulty as relational opportunity. I also discussed how individuals were architects or creators of perplexity, using perplexity both to get people to think about relationships differently, but also using perplexity as a rhetorical tool to gain publicity and draw attention to the movement. I also coined the term “encounter lubricant” to conceptualize how managing perplexity rightly enables groups to enter into encounters across differences more easily by diluting some of divisive potential of possible frictions and disagreements.

Another concept that I thought was useful for elucidating *difference + closeness* in chapter 7 was the notion of how groups engage in “alongside practices”, which allows people to come alongside an “other” in a way that preserves difference while expressing solidarity across those same differences. The ability of groups to engage in “alongside practices” is connected to groups being able to “map” the other using the “journey” metaphor to imagine similarities in experiences without collapsing identities into “sameness”. The link between “alongside practices” and mapping metaphors is palpable. It seems that being able to cognitively map how groups can possibly be close but continue to be different, paves the way for particular practices that operationalize these possibilities. My theoretical contribution for chapter 7 elucidates how the outwardly-oriented social spiral can uncoil not just in face-to-face interactions

across difference which is primarily what Lichterman (2005) explains. I showed how the social spiral uncoils discursively, and further, that bridging in both face-to-face and discursive social worlds mutually contribute to how groups can socially spiral outwards.

In chapter 8, my theoretical contribution was to reconceptualize culture as a “tool commons”. My analysis in this chapter integrated insights from the chapters on inclusion and bridge-building, to examine how the Emerging Church spirals outwards by engaging with a broader audience to discursively construct postmodernism, particularly evident in interactions across difference with prominent critics. I discussed postmodernism as a “master frame” that promotes culture in interaction (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), because it spurs a diverse range of people to contribute to ideas that “shape” what postmodernism is and how and how it should be understood.

In doing so, it spurred me to think about the autonomy of culture, and to question whether Swidler’s “toolkit” metaphor adequately captured culture’s autonomy. I argued that Swidler’s conceptualization of culture as a “tool kit” does not account for how the tools get there in the first place, or how tools are shaped and refined. I developed the idea of culture as an open access “tool commons”, where different people contribute to shaping, refining or critiquing the tools of culture. Furthermore, I extended the “tool commons” idea to Eliasoph and Lichterman’s discussion of group style. I argue that culture as a “tool commons” enables us to consider a group style that is not premised on agreement between groups, where non-membership is just as important as membership in

establishing a basis for which people can work together. “Tool commons” emphasizes the agency of individuals and groups to actively shape the tools of culture. Hence conceiving of culture as a “tool commons” enables us to grasp how *difference + closeness* can be accomplished by groups despite differences in identity, belief or ideology. Conceiving of culture as a “tool commons” enables us to understand what diverse groups can collectively produce in the borderland of encounter across their differences without collapsing difference into sameness.

*Finding elusive togetherness beyond religion*

While my substantive focus has been on religion, my overarching agenda for this project is to shed theoretical light on how groups can work across their differences. I am also deeply interested in how the concepts and theoretical contributions in my project might be pertinent to other fields of study, particularly where groups are attempting to build bridges, or be inclusive of marginalized groups. I am hopeful that some of my concepts will be useful in studies of inequality.

I believe that the concepts of borderlands from Anzaldúa (1999) and encounter from Tsing (2005), as I have explicated, will be important concepts that Sociologists can use to further explore how groups can work across their differences. My work reiterates a call by Mary Jo Neitz, who urges social researchers to “encourage a politics of encounter aimed at understanding that we are not all the same, but to believe that it is possible to work together across our

differences” (Neitz 2009:357). In my analysis, I have shown how the Emerging Church attempts to operationalize itself as a borderland, not only to seek out encounter with the “other”, but to generate opportunities and safe spaces for a range of diverse “others” to encounter each other. Thinking beyond religion, it would be interesting to see if other fields of study can locate institutions, organizations, or other social locations which fit the reality of the borderlands concept. An important question related to the borderlands concept would be: how does power operate in the borderland? And further, what practices and codes might be necessary to ensure that borderlands remain “neutral” space for safe encounters across difference? What might be some racial or political borderlands that provide spaces for people from different locations to come together in non-antagonistic ways?

In chapter 6 I discuss the difference between passive and active inclusion. My argument was that the Emerging Church employs a “conversation” metaphor in ways that legitimizes a passive, “you-come-to-us” kind of inclusion strategy, instead of one which actively seeks out the excluded. I believe this conceptualization could prove useful for studies in studies of gender and racial inequality. For instance, it would be interesting to see how groups enact passive gender or racial inclusion, which legitimizes a more hands-off approach to inclusion, and would place the onus on the excluded to *be* included. The merit of this distinction between passive and active inclusion from a critical perspective, reveals how structural barriers to inclusion and systemic processes that promote exclusion are pushed to the background or glossed over. Or it may be that

groups may simply be unable to perceive how these barriers that promote and enforce exclusion operate. Differentiating between active and passive inclusion might be another powerful conceptual tool for Sociologists to critically assess whether organizations and institutions are effective in their attempts to enact inclusiveness.

In a similar vein, the idea of “opportunistic inclusion” could also be extended to how social groups opportunistically take advantage of the diversity that happens to be there as a matter of chance, instead of a matter of planning. I believe this would further contribute to an understanding of problems and contradictions in groups attempting to be inclusive along lines of race, gender and sexuality.

In chapter 7, a core concept that I expounded on extensively was that of “perplexity”. I sought to develop on Lichterman’s argument that dealing rightly with perplexity aids reflexivity and enables groups to spiral outwards (Lichterman 2005). My findings confirmed Lichterman’s conclusions, and I coined the term “perplexity elaboration” to contribute to a deeper understanding of perplexity. For Lichterman, it was whether groups dealt rightly with perplexity that mattered. In my discussion of “perplexity elaboration”, I take Lichterman a step further by discussing how groups work to intentionally generate and manage perplexity to their own ends. Hence with the Emerging Church, perplexity was not just something that they reacted to, but perplexity was something that was actively generated and harnessed, at times for rhetorical purposes.

Again, I think it would be useful for sociologists in other fields of study to explore how perplexity might fit into an explanatory framework of seeking to understand how groups can work across their differences. I am unwilling to say that all perplexity is good. Indeed, Lichterman has also argued this point. But rather, it is how groups manage and react to perplexity that matters. Perhaps in studies of race, it would be interesting to elucidate how perplexity fits into the conceptual framework of understanding how groups overcome awkward, or difficult to handle situations where racial divisions mark social tensions. It might portend well to studies of race relations if theorists are able to elucidate how different races negotiate and navigate perplexity. What would “perplexity elaboration” look like when applied to race? Or even sexuality? I think it would be further interesting to theoretically develop on the one hand “good” kinds of perplexity, and on the other hand “bad” kinds of perplexity. The former would encourage groups to deal with awkwardness, spur them to exercise reflexivity, and give them the necessary tools to spiral outwards. The latter, would cause groups to shut down reflexivity, strengthen their ethnocentrism and perhaps encourage the tendency of groups to further “otherize” those who are different from them. I think a detailed theory of perplexity would benefit the theoretical outlook not just of religion, but of many other fields of study where groups are seeking, but are perhaps struggling to find elusive togetherness.

In my discussion of the idea of culture as a “tool commons”, I related it to Eliasoph and Lichterman’s arguments “group style” (2003) and my attempted theoretical contribution was to spur thinking about how a legitimate type of group

style might precisely be that there is no pressure for people to be a group in order for them to come together. My argument is that this “non-groupness” is an important working premise for diverse groups to participate and engage the “other” without facing the pressure to establish a “new group” in the process. To that extent, my discussion of Bakhtin’s notion of a “double-voiced discourse” (Bakhtin 1981), particularly channeled by Courtney Bender (2003), might be an initial starting point for understanding how different groups contribute to a “tool commons” in such a way that not only preserve ambiguity of meaning, but that it serves another important function by preserving difference while enabling groups to work together (closeness). This too, might be a concept that could prove useful for understanding how groups find ways of coming together and working together across their differences, while attempting to negotiate the religious terrain of religious identity and otherness

### **Beyond the Emerging Church: Religion in a Postmodern World**

In this section of my conclusion, I want to move from discussing the conceptual and theoretical issues, into a more empirical and substantive focus on discussing the empirical implications of my research site, the Emerging Church Movement. One of the difficulties of studying the Emerging Church is the lack of clear boundaries that define what exactly the Emerging Church is, and who they are. As I have argued in the early chapters of my dissertation that it is precisely the ambiguities of its form that provide the conditions that make it significant to study.



At the conclusion of my study, I still find it intriguing that such a loosely organized group with little or no institutional structures has succeeded in garnering so much publicity and generating so much discursive currency for itself. The Emerging Church however, is still a relatively nascent Christian movement, which has only been in existence for the past 15 years or so. Already within Emergent circles, there is talk of how the Emerging Church Movement is losing momentum and might already be “on its way out”. While there is no guarantee that the Emerging Church will not fade into empirical oblivion in a few years time, I believe that even if this happens, it would not render my dissertation or my analysis irrelevant. On the other hand, there is ample reason not to be so bleak about the future of the movement. There are encouraging signs that the movement is progressively coming onto the radar of academics and social scientists. Besides a handful of publications on the Emerging Church Movement (Bielo 2009, Harrold 2006), the Association for the Sociology of Religion annual meeting in 2010, held a special session where Emerging Church practitioners talked about their local faith communities, as well as their ideas. In turn, Anthropologist James Bielo presented some of his own research on the Emerging Church. The session was organized by Gerardo Marti, a religion scholar who has also shown an academic interest in the Emerging Church. Hence my research comes on the cusp of an increasing interest in the Emerging Church has an empirical site for the study of religion.

In this section, I want to elucidate some of the broader and more generalizable issues about religion in today’s world, based on my research

experience with the Emerging Church Movement. Whether this movement stands the test of time or not, there are important lessons that we can extrapolate about the social and cultural significance of this movement as situated in its time and place.

*Religious metaphors reflective of the times*

In my analysis of the Emerging Church, although the primary group metaphor I analyzed was the “conversation” metaphor, it was evident that there were other metaphors that I saw having resonances with the movement. In a sense, these metaphors are also a good indicator of the nuances of a religion in a particular time and place. Besides “conversation”, the Emerging Church Movement also conceptualizes itself using terms like “network”, “wiki” and “open-source”. This group of concepts is a reflection of religion and religious practices situated in the information age, and how advances in communication technology, cyberspace and the accompanying new ways for people to communicate and interact also provide new ways for people to think of themselves and to label their interactions.

So in the same way that the Emerging Church Movement sees itself as a “conversation”, it also uses the prefix “wiki” as a way of articulating its goal to be an expression of Christianity that is open access and non-hierarchical. This taps on the cultural salience of the principles of “Wiki”, which we find most evidently on the World Wide Web, for instance with wikipedia: an open source platform for collaborative authoring that has just about put encyclopedia and dictionary

publishers out of business. The idea of *Wikinomics* (Tapscott and Williams, 2006) highlights a new way of doing economics characterized by mass collaboration, open sharing and global acting. The phenomenon is linked to the concept of “crowd sourcing”: which opens up involvement for example, in research and development projects to the public, through the internet. I first heard the term “wiki-faith” in one of my first Emerging Church conferences. I have found the principles of “wiki” salient with postmodern-leaning expressions of other monotheistic faiths.

Through the course of this project, I have also been interested to see if there were parallel developments in other religions where groups express similar ideas to the Emerging Church. In particular, I have been interested in how other religious groups attempt to reinterpret their particular faith traditions for postmodern times. In other research that I have done, I found articles on Muslim<sup>173</sup> and Jewish<sup>174</sup> websites which separately advocate for an “open source” faith, in much the same way that I heard being expressed by the Emerging Church Movement in my fieldwork.

The idea of wiki-faith was particularly salient in a [www.altmuslim.com](http://www.altmuslim.com) article called “Open-source ijthad: Meet the ijthackers”. The author articulated the merits of an “open source” Islam, which is defined by inclusivity and

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<sup>173</sup> [http://www.altmuslim.com/a/a/a/open\\_source\\_ijthad\\_meet\\_the\\_ijthackers/](http://www.altmuslim.com/a/a/a/open_source_ijthad_meet_the_ijthackers/), “Open-source Ijthad: Meet the Ijthacker” by Ulises Ali Mejias, published 05/19/2005, accessed 10/23/2010.

<sup>174</sup> <http://presentense.org/magazine/open-source-judaism>, “Open-source Judaism: Lessons from the Information Age” by Eitan Ingall, published 03/05/2010, accessed 10/23/2010.

openness. In reading this article, I noted striking resonances with some of the ideas coming from the Emerging Church Movement:

*In an open religious system, God's word is accessible to everyone, and everyone has the freedom to interpret it in their native language. Believers interpret the word of God according to their realities. No interpretation is believed to be applicable to all contexts. Within a specific context, interpretations that make more sense tend to displace interpretations that make less sense. But interpretation is more than coming up with new ideas; those ideas have to be debated and validated by the community, according to their collective understanding of the principles and values of the religion. Certainly, not everyone engages in interpretation, but the freedom exists to do so. Interpretation is innovation, and it is what allows people to improve their religious practice, and what keeps a religious message meaningful and universal.*

The author then goes on to articulate a “new” kind of Muslim thinker: an “ijtihad hacker” who engages in this type of open source religious system. The author expresses that, “As the Linux system itself proves, open source software development works. Out of multiple contributions made by different people emerges something with unity and cohesiveness, something which in turn can be further modified and improved”. There are striking similarities in how the author is articulating an open-source Islam, in the same way that Christian Emergents articulate an open-inclusive form of Christianity, based on,

*The belief that independent reasoning, information sharing and civil debate are powerful positive goods for the Umma, and that it is an ethical duty... to promote openness in the practice of Islam by facilitating access to information, resources, and technologies.*

As with my analysis of the “conversation” metaphor with the Emerging Church, the fact that other faiths beyond Christianity utilize similar metaphors like “wiki” and “open-source” is telling of religion responding to its environment, reimagining and reinventing itself with the cultural tools at hand. Sociologists of religion

should continue to pay attention to the power of these metaphors in enabling religious groups to define themselves and to imagine a “new way” forward in ways that were previously not culturally available. Indeed, the strikingly similar use of metaphors indicates both the contingencies and possibilities experienced commonly by different religions culturally situated in a particular time and place.

*Cyberspace as relational “borderland”*

In my research, I have shown how the Emerging Church Movement’s primarily locus of coordinated activity is located in cyberspace. During the course of my project, I wondered too, if there were equivalents to a primarily online organization like Emergent Village in Islam and Judaism. When I looked, I found other websites that I saw functioned as equivalents to Emergent Village or The Ooze websites. Similar to Emergent Village, I saw how these autonomous voices spoke a language and used concepts that were identifiably more progressive. A good example for instance, was a websites [www.altmuslim.com](http://www.altmuslim.com), which published articles online in English about issues related to Islam in the contemporary world. The website is a convergence point for Muslims who are in disparate physical settings, from London to Australia and America. They contribute articles, and spur online discussions about what it means to be Muslim in a postmodern world.

Another example is the website [www.progressiveislam.org](http://www.progressiveislam.org), which touts itself as a “super blog for Muslims of all theological orientations and anyone else with an interest in issues relating to Islam, empowerment, freedom, equality and authenticity, to gather and engage in creative, thoughtful and intelligent

discussion and debate”.<sup>175</sup> This description of the goal of the Progressive Islam blog, parallels Emergent Village’s own stated intention to be a convergence point for members of a “growing, global, generative, and non-exclusive friendship” and to “bring whatever resources we can to enrich this shared faith”.<sup>176</sup>

Beyond the Emerging Church, other faiths have found the utility of using cyberspace as a “borderlands” to promote encounters across difference. Cyberspace serves as a location *sui generis* independent of physical space. Initiators of blogs like Emergent Village and Progressive Islam, express hope that these websites will be platforms for people to come together and share their ideas across differences. Access is transglobal and transcultural. The communicative structures provided by the autonomy of the internet make the fermenting of postmodern ideals possible by providing a social space of convergence, that progressive-minded religious groups in other religions have also found ways to exploit, much like Emergent Village has.

#### *Postmodern religious affiliation*

The Emerging Church also raises questions about what religious affiliation looks like in postmodern times. Part of the Emerging Church Movement’s strategy was to enable an “open identification” with the Emergent label. In my project, I have also shown how multiple types of hybrid identity labels have appeared, spinning off the Emergent label. Besides denominational affiliation

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<sup>175</sup> [http://www.progressiveislam.org/about\\_progressiveislamorg](http://www.progressiveislam.org/about_progressiveislamorg), “About ProgressiveIslam.Org”, accessed 10/25/2010.

<sup>176</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/values-and-practices>, “Values and Practices” accessed 10/25/2010.

groups like Anglimergent and Presbymergent, there are also Jewish Emergents and others who identify as Queermergent. This is perhaps instructive of how understanding religion in postmodern times also needs to account for the reality of affiliation not being a monolithic, “one thing”. But in fact, that people may increasingly see religious affiliation as something that is more fluid and contingent, as well as configurable across labels. This is perhaps a reflection of the Emergent ethos that labels themselves are unimportant. Religious affiliation in postmodern times may be less about a commitment to a particular identity label, but rather a “picking and choosing” bricolage of elements from different traditions that works for the individual.

It will also be interesting to analyze how religious groups deal with multiple affiliations across their differences. In a similar vein to what I have witnessed with the Emerging Church Movement, I have also heard Jewish voices expressing an observation that the Jewish Community is moving toward a place where “borders that separate the denominations are becoming blurred”, and that a Jewish person’s Facebook profile which identifies their religion as “Recon-newel-ortho-conserva-form”, instead of demonstrating confusion or haziness, it demonstrates within Judaism, “the realization that there is “meaning” to be made from the various pathways to Torah”.<sup>177</sup> It will be interesting to see if there is a similar dynamic occurring in Islam, where followers articulate a more flexible and fluid form of religious identity and affiliation that incorporates several elements.

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<sup>177</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-jason-miller/moving-beyond-denominatio\\_b\\_762706.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-jason-miller/moving-beyond-denominatio_b_762706.html), “Moving Beyond Denominational Differences in Judaism” by Rabbi Jason Miller, posted 10/16/2010, accessed 10/25/2010.

## **Future research: other signs of the spiral**

In this final section of my conclusion, I would like to plot potential future research that I might pursue beyond this study of the Emerging Church Movement, in order to see where the dynamics of *difference + closeness* plays out in other contexts and in other empirical sites.

### *Signs of the spiral: face-to-face social worlds*

In my research on the Emerging Church, one of my arguments was that local Emergent meeting groups sought to construct meeting spaces as “borderlands” where people can encounter each other across their differences. I argued that this catered to a profile of people who seek out “non-homogeneous spaces” or “differentiated spaces” where they would cross paths with people who were unlike them. So for instance, I argued that Emerging Churches were safe spaces for gays and lesbians who did not want to belong to a “gay church” or blacks who did not necessarily want to belong to a “black church” or atheists who still wanted to encounter and learn from people who believed in God.

Beyond the Emerging Church, I think one of the most interesting projects to research would be an organization called “Faith House Manhattan” that is located in the heart of New York City. Faith House Manhattan is a project of influential Emergent author Samir Selmanovic, who has featured prominently in parts of my dissertation. In my opinion, Faith House Manhattan represents the most interesting and significant site of face-to-face *difference + closeness*, because it is where Muslims, Christians, Jews and atheists come together as an



experiential inter-religious community to share ritual life and devotional space. Faith House Manhattan goes beyond “dialogue”, and gathers people from different faiths to observe and “share holy days, learn new spiritual practices, and address current cultural and social issues”.<sup>178</sup>

Faith House Manhattan represents an important and groundbreaking development from interreligious dialogue, which is a movement that has been steadily developing in the US since the 1960s, with interreligious dialogue present in almost every major city in the US right now (Smith 2007). In Faith House Manhattan, religious groups do not just come together to talk, and then retreat back to their respective safe-zones where they continue practicing and believing what they do. Faith House Manhattan is a location where Muslims, Christians and Jews learn to live and observe religious practices together while maintaining clear boundaries between religions. I would be interested to explore how *difference + closeness* can operate in such a borderland of encounter between different religions. I would be interested to investigate the kinds of practices and interactional customs that can be found in Faith House Manhattan. Just from looking at their website, I already see signs of how some of my own findings will resonate with how *difference + closeness* is accomplished culturally.

For instance, their website describes a set of “principles” to guide relationships and the life of the community:

COMMON JOURNEY, DIFFERENT PATHS: We are sojourners who gratefully acknowledge that every faith has its own mystery.

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<sup>178</sup> [http://www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith\\_house/mission-vision-principles.html](http://www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith_house/mission-vision-principles.html), “Mission, Vision, Principles”, accessed 10/25/2010.

RE-INTERPRETATION: We continually seek deeper levels of understanding by interpreting and re-interpreting our texts, traditions, and practices.

GRACIOUS COMMUNICATION: We do not insist that others have to change their language or categories in order for us to hear them, while we strive to translate our concepts to those outside our traditions.

GIVING THROUGH RECEIVING: We strive to learn more than to teach as we are called to receive, discern, and treasure what others have to give.

FREEDOM FROM FORCE AND FREEDOM TO CHANGE: We do not believe in proselytizing; we do believe in personal choice and transformation.

POST-CYNICISM: We believe a new kind of community is possible.<sup>179</sup>

It is evident that they conceptualize, envision and practice *difference + closeness* in many similar ways to the Emerging Church Movement. For instance, we can see how the “common journey, different paths” metaphor is being similarly applied to “map” the other on a similar journey but separate path, thereby preserving differences. And the idea of “gracious communication” is one that resonates with how the Emerging Church attempts to build bridges with its critics, and it similarly articulates a “double-voiced discourse” (Bakhtin 1981) of not insisting “that others have to change their language or categories in order for us to hear them”.

Other interesting empirical sites for face-to-face *difference + closeness* might be particular sites where more than one faith uses for ritual observance. For instance, where churches lend space to Muslims who do not have a place of worship, or where certain spaces hold different religious ceremonies at different

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<sup>179</sup> [http://www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith\\_house/mission-vision-principles.html](http://www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith_house/mission-vision-principles.html), “Mission, Vision, Principles”, accessed 10/25/2010.

times of the day, but within the same spatial location. It would be interesting to see the interactional dynamics of *difference + closeness* in these shared spaces across religious differences, and how groups negotiate and manage the perplexity that comes with sharing ritual space and being so close to the “other”. A contemporary example, which stood in stark contrast to the threat of “Quran burning” due to plans to build the “Ground Zero Mosque” at the time, was the story of a Pastor named Steve Stone of Heartsong Church in Tennessee, which decided to share its space with Muslims because the Muslim Islamic Center across the street that was being built was not yet completed. In fact, when Pastor Stone first received word that the new Islamic Center would be built across the street, he erected a sign outside the church that read “Heartsong Church welcomes Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood.”<sup>180</sup>

It would be both empirically and theoretically interesting to research sites where such interactions and sharing of sacred spaces across different religious traditions occur in local face-to-face settings.

*Signs of the spiral: discursive social worlds*

In a previous research project proposal for a Social Science Research Council (SSRC) dissertation fellowships grant, I wrote about the possibility of studying an exchange of public letters between prominent Muslim and Christian leaders. At that time, in 2008, I had not yet developed this conceptualization of *difference + closeness*, bridging, or the social spiral. But at that time, I was

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<sup>180</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/09/08/heartsong-church-memphis-islamic-center\\_n\\_710053.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/09/08/heartsong-church-memphis-islamic-center_n_710053.html), “Heartsong Church Welcomes Memphis Islamic Center (VIDEO)” by Adam J. Rose, posted 09/09/2010.

already very interested in understanding how religious groups can come together across their differences. I see the potential for revisiting this project in search of further example of the social spiral uncoiling in discursive social worlds.

I would like to briefly describe what this project would look like: In October 2007, 138 Islamic clerics and scholars penned “A Common Word between Us and You”- an open letter to Christians initiating dialogue and conciliation. A month later, 300 Christian leaders and intellectuals issued a reciprocal response- “Loving God and Neighbor Together” as a full page advertisement in the New York Times. This Muslim initiative was unprecedentedly global, given the range of distinguished signatories and countries represented in the list of signatories. As a possible future research on other expressions of *difference + closeness*, I foresee myself focusing on the implications of “A Common Word” and “Loving God and Neighbor Together”. Several years have passed now since the initial exchange of letters. What were some successes and struggles of this mutual effort to build bridges across faith divides? How was “togetherness” accomplished discursively while negotiating difference? I could interview the statements’ progenitors, supporters and detractors and analyze in-depth the discourses surrounding this interfaith initiative, and compare them with the customs and codes of how *difference + closeness* was accomplished with the Emerging Church.

While interfaith dialogues between Muslims and Christians are not new, “A Common Word” represented an unprecedented event in inter- Abrahamic faith relations because the signatories came from “every denomination and school of

thought in Islam”. The signatories to both “A Common Word” and “Loving God and Neighbor Together” were not confined to particular geographical areas, or exclusive to particular communities. They were Muslims and Christians leaders and intellectuals from a variety of geographical and institutional locations. While neither side claims to speak for all Muslims or all Christians, yet there was a global resonance to the documents, which lent weight to their significance.

This exchange of letters hence represents an opportunity to further study the dynamics of how the discursive social spiral initiates the face-to-face social spiral. While the initial Muslim letter and the Christian response started out as discursive, there were face-to-face interactions that followed from the exchange of letters. The following year, the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, for instance, organized an Interfaith Seminary Encounter that brought clergy and scholars from different Abrahamic faiths together. It will be interesting to research how and whether this exchange of letters inspired groups to initiate building bridges across different faiths in local settings at the grassroots level.

These are just some ways that I can envision further studying the dynamics of *difference + closeness*, to shed light on emerging faith boundaries in our social world, and to contribute to an understanding of how groups can work across their differences to find elusive togetherness.

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## VITA

Lloyd was born in Singapore in 1976. He was raised in Missouri for a few years while his father went to seminary in Kansas City. Thirty years later, he found himself back in Missouri doing his PhD in Sociology at the University of Missouri. Lloyd has a passion for teaching sociology, and for taking long road trips out of Columbia. He proudly doubled his car's mileage in four years without blowing the engine. His interests are in the sociology of religion, the sociology of culture, and social boundaries. When he is not trying to come up with the latest groundbreaking sociological theory or concept, Lloyd likes to spend his time singing, playing the guitar and writing songs. None of these things are likely to make Lloyd a millionaire anytime soon.