Theological Reflections on a Contemporary Stations of the Cross

In Holy Week 2008, 240 primary-aged school children visited Easter Icons, a contemporary stations of the cross held in a Baptist church in Stevenage. On Good Friday another 150 people visited it from the church and the wider public. This was the fourth year it had run and the first to include school visits. This essay will explore different ways of considering what Easter Icons offered, to those involved in the planning, and to those that visited. It will focus on Easter Icons as a means of *theological reflection* and as an example of *alternative worship* – here I will explore the *use of ritual*, how Easter Icons attempted to *create meaningful worship* and as *consumer-led religion*.

Various factors led to the creation of Easter Icons. Firstly, during 2004 I had led a series of alternative services at the church where I was a member. These were attempts at doing worship differently – in short, more interactive and visual, without a sermon and with less time spent singing – inspired particularly by the book *Alternative Worship*[1]. Secondly, through becoming involved in conversations about emerging church and alternative worship[2], where I discovered others were creating contemporary 'stations of the cross'[3]. The Stations of the Cross are a traditional form of Catholic devotion that can be traced back to the 13th century. They were designed to be a pilgrimage to the places where it was believed that Christ suffered and were developed 'because of the desire of those who never attempted [a journey to Jerusalem] to have a similar type of "domestic pilgrims" way'[4]. A third reason was a perceived need to enable the church I attended to reflect on the passion story. As a church nothing happened during holy week apart from a walk of witness that was organised by the local churches on Good Friday morning, which meant that a number of people in the church went from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without any observation of the events that other churches celebrated during Holy Week[5]. In

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[1] J. Baker & D. Gay, *Alternative Worship* (London: SPCK, 2003).
[2] This conversation is happening mostly through the phenomena of blogging and the use of other new media.
[3] For example: Cityside Baptist Church in New Zealand (http://www.cityside.org.nz/node/22).
[4] 'Stations of the Cross', *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture* by Peter and Linda Murray (Oxford: University Press, 1996), p.507.
[5] As a Baptist church I would guess that is not unsurprising. Other services were developed – a Tenebrae service on Palm Sunday evening and a communion on Maundy Thursday – and one year I held 'lent explorations' every night through holy week on the lectionary readings. These were created to enable the church to experience and reflect on the passion story in hopefully richer ways; to use

addition, it was my belief that Easter (and also Christmas) services were often times when a 'simple gospel message' was presented in view of the increased chance of non-church attenders. This meant that the church very rarely engaged with and reflected on the passion story. The intention and aim of Easter Icons was to create an 'Easter space'[6] where the church (and the public) could interact and contemplate the passion story.

Easter Icons began in early 2005 when I contacted the church leaders to ask whether they were happy for me to organise a contemporary stations of the cross to be held on Good Friday. The church leaders at first were hesitant – a reaction to the language of 'stations of the cross' and its Roman Catholic connections – but were content for me to go forward with the event, which was subsequently called 'Windows on the Cross'. This was a series of five stations reflecting on different aspects of the cross and open to the church between 12-3pm on Good Friday afternoon[7]. It was mostly put together by myself with the involvement of a few others who were asked to help with some artwork. The event was attended by around 50 people.

Over the next three years, Easter Icons, as it became called, grew and developed. Each year more ambitious than the previous, which meant more advanced planning and a larger team involved. It begun to resemble more closely the traditional stations of the cross, by which I mean it had fourteen stations on different moments from the passion story. Each station had something visual, the particular text to listen to, a written reflection and in most cases something to do, for example, writing a prayer or having your feet washed.

Planning Easter Icons became an increasingly more collaborative experience as a small team was gathered to work together on the design and content of each station and organise the logistics of setting up and taking down. The planning involved choosing the different readings for the stations and then how the station would reflect and respond to that reading. The readings were chosen based on whether they had

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lectionary language that holy week was not 'ordinary time' but a particular time to pay attention to the story of Jesus, and especially his death and resurrection.

[6] The language of 'Easter space' was used in the guide to those that attended Easter Icons.

[7] It was open from 12pm, and this continued in subsequent years, as this was the time when the ecumenical 'walk of witness' finished.

been used the year previously. Instead of having a set of stations which were repeated each year, we focused on different parts of the narrative, some obviously being repeated. (The process is explained in more detail below). The evening before each event the room usually where the church met for worship was emptied – this meant removing chairs, stage blocks, communion table, musical instruments – the windows were covered and the baptistry uncovered. Whereas the focus of the room was usually the front, where the pulpit and music band were situated, during Easter Icons the stations were set up in circular shape. The stations were then set up. Some examples of the stations can be found in the Appendix.

2.   **Easter Icons as a means of theological reflection**

Andrew Walker has argued that it would not be untrue to say that 'the man and woman in the pew are often woefully ignorant about their faith'[8] and that modern Christians suffer from 'gospel amnesia'[9]. This is partly due to what Edward Farley says is the 'objectification and professionalisation' of theology[10], where theology takes place outside the congregation and is the 'scholarly enterprise of school-located academics and school-trained clergy'[11]. In the past, claims Farley, 'theology was not just the scholar's possession, the teacher's trade, but the wisdom proper to the life of the believer'[12]. An emphasis on the sermon, among Protestant churches as the 'decisive and sufficient way the faith of the believer is formed'[13] has meant that the believer becomes passive; they are 'released from the deliberate enquiry and thinking expected of seminary-trained clergy'[14]. The end result is a theological gulf between clergy and laity[15]. One of the aims of Easter Icons was to offer space for people to reflect on and explore the passion story and their faith; that is, a space to theologise. This was sought in two ways. Firstly, through the group that gathered to create the design and content of the stations and secondly, through the visitors engaging with the

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[8] Andrew Walker, 'Recovering Deep Church: Theological and Spiritual Renewal' in A. Walker and L. Bretherton (eds.), *Remembering Our Future* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), p.12.
[9] ibid, p.11.
[10] Edward Farley, 'Can Church Education be Theological Education?', *Theology Today* 42 (1986), p.161.
[11] Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), p.4.
[12] Farley, 'Can Church Education …', p.161.
[13] ibid, p.168.
[14] ibid, p.168.
[15] Farley is also concerned (and I share his concern) that theology has 'become distant and marginal' from ministerial formation, in favour of an emphasis learning a set of functions and skills, to the extent that even where the ministerial student is required to study theology, 'there is no powerful paradigm for their continued presence in the practice of ministry'. The consequence that theology becomes 'functionally obsolete' because 'the minister can be a minister without it', *Practicing Gospel*, p.5.

stations. Due to limitations on space, I will focus on the group that planned the stations.

Creating the stations was a theological exercise, which can be understood as following the pastoral cycle[16]. Our *situation* was fourteen scriptures that we wanted to become stations that would 'engage and involve'[17] visitors in the passion story and ask them to respond, all the time seeking to be 'all-age, multi-sensory, interactive and contemporary'[18]. We started with the notion, as Samuel Wells argues, that the Passion story 'is not simply a means to an end', but that 'the characters in the Holy Week narrative face choices and experience feelings very similar to our own'[19]. Each part of the story had and has something to say. The e*xploring* stage was asking a set of hermeneutical questions of the text – what is this text trying to do? How might this text speak to the contemporary world?[20] Having asked the questions we then *reflected* theologically on how the scripture could be interpreted faithfully and also in ways that made contemporary resonances. This was a participatory process, which enabled 'ordinary'[21] readers 'to feel that the Bible [was] indeed theirs'[22]. This process, as Chris Peck acknowledges, 'by their nature [..] throw[s] up and affirm[s] a wide variety of readings and experiences of the text, [which] make simplistic readings harder'[23]. As a group we shared responses, which included insights from different biblical commentaries, in the form of a large mind map (see appendix). I played a key role in this was offering insights from theological and biblical scholarship. Sometimes an idea for a station would take a long time to germinate and agree on and in other cases it

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[16] It was on reflection that I noticed we followed the pastoral cycle and was not something we were consciously doing. See Paul Ballard & John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action* (London: SPCK, 2006) for more on the pastoral cycle.
[17] This was the language used in 2006.
[18] This description was our aim and was the way we described it on the publicity.
[19] Samuel Wells, *Power and Passion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), p.15.
[20] Paul Roberts says that in using the Bible in alternative worship (more on which below) 'the creative group is taking on the homiletical role of the preacher', *Alternative Worship in the Church of England* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999), p.15.
[21] The word 'ordinary' is a reference to Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). He describes 'ordinary theology' as his term for 'the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of believers who have received no scholarly theological education' (p.1). Andrew Village says that '"ordinary" does not mean "ignorant", any more than "trained" means "knowledgeable" … What distinguishes the ordinary from the trained in this context is primarily exposure to a particular way of reading the Bible: the way of the academy', *The Bible and Lay People* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp.1-2.
[22] Chris Peck, 'Back to the Future: Participatory Bible Study and Biblical Theology', *Theology* 98 (1995), p.354.
[23] ibid, p.356.

came quickly[24]. Part of the challenge each year was to generate new ways of reading the particular texts and make contemporary connections with today's world[25]. As William Stacey Johnson says 'biblical faithfulness is more than just nailing down the meaning of a text. It is putting oneself in a position – by engaging the text – to recognize what God has done in the past as well as to discern what God is making possible for, and requiring of, us in the present'[26]. Such as, reading the moment where Jesus is beaten and mocked in the context of prisoner abuses in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay or reading where Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry the cross in the context of adults and children forced to work in appalling conditions. As with the pastoral cycle, we ended with *action*, in terms of an agreed way of interpreting and presenting the scriptural text in 'station' form. Sometimes, as the pastoral cycle encourages, the 'station' went through another cycle of exploring and reflecting.

This process I believe was a rich way of engaging people with the Bible. It gave those involved a confidence to offer ideas and required them to listen to the text carefully and ask what God might be saying through it. Having said that, it's effectiveness was in part dependent on the involvement of someone theologically educated. Part of theological reflection is the recognition that we are not the first readers of scripture and that we need to listen to past and present readers, not as the last word, but as an aid and a check to our interpretations. The theologian's role is to allow these voices to be heard, to bring the weight of scholarship into the process and so assist the group in interpreting the particular scriptures faithfully and imaginatively.

3.   Easter Icons as alternative worship

The alternative worship movement emerged during the 1990s in large part through the example of the infamous 'Nine O'Clock Service' until its 'public and controversial collapse in 1995'[27]. Worship is considered 'alternative' because it is both *post-*

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[24] In some cases, the content and focus of a station was still undecided up to week before the event. Some members of the team found this difficult, but this reflected my laidback personality and confidence that an idea would emerge in time!

[25] By 'new' I do not mean novel, but that there is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word, which means 'Christian interpretation is "is to be a more or less a continuous activity"', Sean Winter, *More Light and Truth?* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2007), p.30.

[26] William Stacey Johnson, 'Reading the Scriptures Faithfully in a Postmodern Age' in E. F. Davis & R. B. Hays (eds.), *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p.116.

[27] Gordon Lynch, *After Religion* (London: DLT, 2002), p.42. For the story of the 'Nine O'Clock Service' see Roland Howard, *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service: A Cult within a Church?* (London: Mowbray, 1996); Rupert Till, 'The Nine O'clock Service: Mixing Club Culture And Postmodern

charismatic – it rejects 'the culture of chorus-singing and the worship group with a worship leader'[28] – and *post-evangelical*[29] – which should be understood as both 'a reaction against the tone of evangelical personal morality'[30] and an openness to question and debate with a desire to 'grow up theologically'[31]. Positively, Steve Taylor has defined it as 'liturgical innovation characterised by communal participation, employment of popular cultural resources, a rediscovery of ancient liturgy and an appreciation of creativity and the arts'[32]. Stuart Murray identifies the characteristic features of alternative worship as:

> 'an emphasis on space, environment, ambience and context; creative use of diverse technologies, multimedia, the arts and symbolism; a multidirectional, individualised and decentred approach; eclectic use of liturgical resources; an open-ended experience, allowing multiple interpretations; a participative ethos; and a contemplative mood'[33].

Each of these features was present at Easter Icons. We transformed the church space from one where people normally sat facing in one direction into one where people were required to move around individually to different stations. In covering the windows and hanging drapes we were concerned to create an ambience and environment that helped create a contemplative mood. In creating the stations we used CD players, video, the use of sculpture and paintings. Easter Icons was designed for people to walk round individually, in their own time and with room for their own interpretation or response. Resources we borrowed, and often reinterpreted, from a variety of sources (e.g., blogs, books, internet). Stations were planned by a group and required those who attended to actively participate. Easter Icons can be located in the alternative worship movement.

3.1   The Use of Ritual

Christianity', *Culture and Religion* 7.1 (March 2006), pp.93-110; John Rogerson, 'The Lord is Here: The Nine O'Clock Service', in Ian S. Markham and Martyn Percy (eds.), *Why Liberal Churches are Growing* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), pp.45-46.
[28] Baker & Gay, *Alternative Worship*, p.x.
[29] This phrase can be traced back to Dave Tomlinson's influential book *The Post-Evangelical* (London: Triangle, 1995), which 'created quite a stir in the U.K at the time [it was published] and served as a catalyst for describing the postmodern phenomenon', E. Gibbs & R. Bolger, *Emerging Churches* (London: SPCK, 2006), p.35.
[30] Baker & Gay, *Alternative Worship*, x.
[31] ibid, xi.
[32] Steve Taylor, 'A New Way of Being Church' (PhD Thesis: University of Otago, 2003), p.2 cited in Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), pp.87-88.
[33] Murray, *Church After Christendom*, p.88.

Peter Collins says that 'after at least a century of theoretical development, there exist many definitions and theories of "ritual"'[34]. He goes on to contend that 'if we assume that there can never be a single, final explanation for social phenomena, it is worth reminding ourselves … that "ritual" is never one, but always many things'[35]. With regard to this essay, I want to focus on Catherine Bell's understanding of ritual as 'practice' as used by Jonny Baker as a way of reflecting on Easter Icons [36]. At many of the Easter Icons stations there was a ritual or symbolic action to use. Bell argues that ritual activity should be seen through practice theory. She highlights four features of practice: '(1) situational; (2) strategic; (3) embedded in misrecognition of what it is in fact doing; and (4) able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world, or "redemptive hegemony"'[37].

2.1.1 Situational

In Baker's discussion of the context of a labyrinth in St. Paul's Cathedral, he addresses the shift from modernity to postmodernity. This has led to huge cultural change, but for Baker's purposes he highlights three changes in particular: (1) a decline in institutional religion but a growth in interest in 'spirituality'[38]; (2) a culture based on consumption[39]; and (3) a change in identity building from pilgrim to tourist[40]. This context is also true when we consider the 'situation' for Easter Icons, as those who attended are not outsiders to these cultural shifts. However, the majority of people who attended Easter Icons were Christians and church-going and so it is probably more true that they were more likely to be pilgrims who were 'looking to make some meaningful connection [with the event] and their life story'[41], rather than tourists, defined as 'a systematic seeker of new and different experiences … [who] must be able

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[34] Peter Collins, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a "Ritual"', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 20.3 (2005) p.324.

[35] ibid, p.324.

[36] Jonny Baker reflects on how alternative worship can be read as an example of what Bell calls strategic practice in his MA dissertation, 'The Labyrinth: Ritualisation as Strategic Practice in Postmodern Times' (2000, King's College London). http://www.emergingchurch.info/research/jonnybaker/index.htm. Downloaded 8th April 2009.

[37] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: University Press, 1992) p.81.

[38] There a wide range views on this. See Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

[39] David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland* (Oxford: Polity, 2000), pp.73-96.

[40] Zygmant Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist-or a Short History of Identity', in S. Hall and P. du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996), pp.18-36.

[41] Baker, 'The Labyrinth', p.23.

to get up and move on and shake off the experience whenever they wish'[42]. Part of the attraction of Easter Icons was that people were free to come and go at any time during the afternoon. They could fit their visit around their day.

2.1.1 Strategic

Baker sees 'alternative worship' and the St. Paul's labyrinth as 'a strategic response to postmodern times, an attempt to inculturate the gospel'[43]. The characteristics that Murray described above are some of the strategies employed by alternative worship groups and Easter Icons to engage faith and culture. Baker draws particular attention to the strategic use of ritual, the use of popular culture and the use of wholespeak (poetic language). Baker understands ritual as a way of 'facilitating encounter with the divine'[44]. Easter Icons used the language of 'symbolic action', which was defined as ways

> 'to help us engage and involve us in the Easter drama. As those who follow Jesus on the way of the cross, we are drawn into the story, bringing ourselves to ask questions of God, Jesus and ourselves'[45].

Our intention in using symbolic actions was about *engagement* and *involvement*, in part to connect with kinesthetic as well as visual and auditory learners[46], but also, in the experience of having feet washed, throwing money into the baptistry or attaching their name to the web, there would be a movement 'deeper into the heart of the Christian faith' and for some an encounter with God[47]. Baker sees the use of popular culture as incarnational: '"the incarnation gives us a model of relevance. God shows up on our turf speaking our language so that we might understand"'[48]. Easter Icon's use of popular culture was in some ways limited. Two examples are: the Simon of Cyrene 2007 station (see above) used 'Nike' trainers and their slogan 'Just Do It' to interpret the soldiers forcing Simon to carry the cross and to raise questions about how we consumer the likes of products made by global companies. The other

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[42] ibid, p.23.
[43] ibid, p.23.
[44] Baker, 'The Labyrinth', p.28.
[45] This specific language was used in Easter Icons 2006, but was behind the use of ritual actions in other years.
[46] Identifying and recognising different kinds of learning styles, here visual, auditory and kinaesthetic, is a common practice within British schools.
[47] Pete Ward, 'Personalized Ritual' in P. Ward (ed.), *The Rite Stuff* (Oxford: BRF, 2004), p.46.
[48] Baker, 'The Labyrinth', p.33-4.

example is the Easter Egg Cross 2008 station which was designed to juxtapose the symbol of the cross with the consumption of chocolate eggs. Both examples are perhaps akin to the role of the trickster and prophet[49], disturbing and challenging the human-made divides between faith and consumption. Guest comments that 'the symbolism used in worship services is often deliberately ambiguous and provocative. Occasionally, irreverent and controversial images are juxtaposed with images traditionally associated with purity or holiness, in an expressed effort to subvert our understanding and provoke a rethinking of the Christian tradition'[50]. Easter Icons in this regard was very mild in comparison to other alternative worship groups, due to the fact that it takes place in an evangelical church and our desire was not to deliberately offend, but it was to challenge and disturb an expression of Christianity that is increasingly at home in a consumer culture. Baker considers the St. Paul's labyrinth to be theological as it has 'plenty to say about God', but it speech is what he calls 'wholespeak' rather than 'narrowspeak'[51]. 'Narrowspeak' is 'the voice of reason, rational and didactic ways of talking', whereas 'wholespeak' is 'the language of imagination, that recognises the importance of symbols, images, myth, metaphors, music, the arts' – 'a poetic discourse'[52]. Baker views this kind of poetic speech as strategic because it is 'a language that resonates with many of the spiritual seekers in postmodern times'[53], who resist the '"pre-packaged truths of a certain type of Christian exposition'[54]. The reflections that accompanied the stations were likewise attempts at 'wholespeak', to open up the scriptures to possible interpretations and were to accompany the visual images and symbolic actions. The stations were designed to work as a whole – to communicate visually, verbally and kinaesthetically.

2.1.1   Misrecognition

Baker disagrees with Bell's view that ritual involves 'a misrecognition of what it is doing'[55]. He finds it patronizing to claim that those taking part in the ritual are unaware of what they are doing. In Baker's view those involved in alternative worship

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[49] Baker defines the role of the trickster as 'opening the way to possible new worlds, as established categories of truth and property are disturbed via his cunning', 'The Labyrinth', p.29.
[50] Matthew Guest, '"Alternative" Worship: Challenging the Boundaries of the Christian Faith', in E. Arweck and M. D. Stringer, *Theorizing Faith* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2002), p.47.
[51] Baker, 'The Labyrinth', p.34.
[52] ibid, p.34.
[53] ibid, p.34.
[54] ibid, p.35.
[55] ibid, p.35.

have a 'self awareness … in constructing both a ritual space and experience and how that will impact its participants'[56]. He goes on to argue that some participants in the labyrinth might have been 'caught by surprise' in how they responded in taking part, but this wasn't misrecognition, because people wanted 'an experience' because they are '"sensation gatherers"', that is, they are looking to feel something[57]. In regard to EI, Baker is largely right; people were aware mostly of what they were doing and they hoped for an experience. However, it is also fair to say that for some, and possibly many, there was some 'misrecognition' and following 'Bourdieu (who influences Bell)' is right to suggest that visitors to Easter Icons '[did] not know … that what they do has more meaning than they realise'[58]. This is because I am not convinced that those who participate in Easter Icons are as schooled in alternative worship – this is not the normal way worship is led. In contrast, for Baker and others this is the way they worship and has been now for a number of years. They know exactly what they are doing and intending when they put together a labyrinth or a stations of the cross. This is reflected also by their commitment to post-evangelicalism and post-modernism; which I think is less true for many of the visitors to Easter Icons, who would have a more limited grasp of what is happening within our culture. I would suggest that for many who came to Easter Icons the combined effect of the stations was a new feeling of thankfulness at Jesus going to the cross[59]. This is not an invalid response, but, without wanting to claim too much, it was a 'misrecognition' of the deeper intentions that the different stations were trying to realize.

3.1.4 Redemptive Hegemony

Redemptive hegemony is a way of referring to the ability for ritual 'to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world'[60]. Baker argues that this is saying that 'practice negotiates the existing power relations in such a way as to

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[56] ibid, p.35. He makes a footnote reference to Roberts who writes that 'rituals within alternative worship are often quite deliberately designed for the impact they will have on the worshippers present, without any intention to manipulate by subterfuge', *Alternative Worship in the Church of England,* p.17.

[57] Baker, 'The Labyrinth', p.35, the phrase "sensation gatherers' is borrowed from Bauman.

[58] ibid, p.35.

[59] This kind of language was used by many who responded to Easter Icons over the years.

[60] Bell, *Ritual Theory*, p.81. Beth Berkowtiz explains 'Bell applies the term ['redemptive hegemony']to look at how ritual functions so as to give those who ritually act a sense of empowerment, but always limited power: "although awkward, the term "redemptive hegemony" denotes the way in which reality is experienced as a natural weave of constraint and possibility, the fabric of day-to-day dispositions and decisions experiences as a field of strategic action', *Execution and Invention: Death penalty discourse in early Rabbinic and Christian cultures* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), p.69.

empower individuals within it, but without them leaving or destroying the system'[61]. In the context of the St. Paul's labyrinth he wants to see this fourth feature of ritual as practice as a means to discussing how the participant is 'personally empowered' or transformed. Bell argues that 'the goal of ritualisation is "the creation of a ritualized agent, an actor with a form of ritual mastery, who embodies sets of cultural schemes and can deploy them effectively in multiple situations so as to restructure those situations in practical ways"'[62]. What this means, claims Baker, is that 'the powerful transforming effect of walking the labyrinth then does no less than produce new persons, enabled to see the world and act in it in a new way'[63]. The experience of the labyrinth, partaking in the different stations is he suggests formative – empowering – for the participant back in everyday life. I would contend that perhaps the transforming effect of the labyrinth for most was much more partial, if not non-existent. Baker is making a big claim on the basis of limited evidence. In the case of Easter Icons there is not enough reported evidence to support any real transformation of participants back in everyday life. However, that does not mean the event had no impact after their visit[64]. For example, one participant wrote 'it made me reflect on my own consumer choices and challenged me to buy and eat only fairtrade chocolate'. Another wrote 'I have thought more about my own perspective and the "glasses" I have been looking through. They are distorted and darkened by past experiences and I can take them off'.

3.2   Creating Meaningful Worship

Another way of analysing Easter Icons is, through engaging with Graham Hughes' work, to look at how the meanings of worship are organized and transmitted by those who lead worship and also how those who participate in worship appropriate them. Hughes looks to the field of semiotics and in particular the work of Charles Sanders Piece and puts forward a way of reading worship as liturgical signs. Signs can be interpreted in three ways: as *icons*, as *indices* and as *symbols*[65]. Jim Foder's review of *Worship as Meaning* provides a useful summary of what these terms mean:

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[61] Baker, 'The Labyrinth', p.18.
[62] ibid, p.36.
[63] ibid, p.37.
[64] In 2008, participants were invited to fill in a questionnaire following their visit.
[65] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, p.139.

Iconic signs refer directly to objects because of some quality shared commonly with both sign and object: a photograph is thus an icon of its subject. Indexical signs exhibit a dynamic or causal connection with what they signify and the sensory associations of the person for whom they serve as a sign: a weathervane, for example, is an index of the direction of the wind. Symbolic signs refer to the objects that they denote by virtue of convention or habit; a set of red, amber and green lights, for instance, are effective means of traffic control not because of any inherent connection between the sign and its object; rather, the fitness of these symbolic signs (the colored lights) to represent specific rules of the road lies in the fact of there being a widespread habit or disposition to interpret them in a standard way.[66]

Hughes argues that the iconicity of worship 'derives from its being seen as an event which takes place on some sort of boundary or frontier'[67] and so 'iconic signs invite us to imagine how things are in the presence of God'[68]. Iconic liturgical signs bring us to this 'boundary' or 'frontier' and for this reason they are 'heavily impregnated not just with spatial, temporal and movement *imagery* (which it is), but with *actual, physical* movement and directionality'[69]. As an example of this, Hughes focuses on how the worship space is iconic: '"Entrance" means to leave one space and pass into another'[70]. This reflected our concern with those visiting Easter Icons – we wanted people to see the space as different from wherever they had come from and different also from when they attended worship on a Sunday. '[T]he space and everything within it wants to signify "difference": it will not be mistaken for living-room space … its design will attempt to suppress tendencies to chatter, a sense of "the everyday". Conversely it will seek to induce feelings of the unusual, of reverence, of the uncanny (worship spaces are not unique in this: museums, art galleries and war memorials seek similar ends)'[71]. With Easter Icons, we sought, as mentioned above, to create an environment and ambience for people to go on the journey around the stations. Our intention, to quote Hughes again, was that 'as the worshipper move[d] into space which is perceptibly different (visually, audibly) from the space from which he has just come, it is possible to suppose that this might really be how it is with "God's space"'[72]. Often, claims Hughes, Protestants have 'wish[ed] to minimize in so far as they can a

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[66] Foder, Jim, 'Review: *Worship as Meaning*', *Modern Theology* 21.4 (October 2005), p.683.
[67] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, p.148.
[68] ibid, p.151.
[69] ibid, p.153.
[70] ibid, p.155.
[71] ibid, pp.155-6.
[72] ibid, p.170.

sense of alterity and, conversely, strongly encourage a sense sociability, of "at-home-ness", of familiarity, of intimacy'[73] – this is true of the regular morning service of the Baptist church in Stevenage. This he says, 'silently yet powerfully corroborates the notion that "nothing special" is expected of he people who enter it, nor perhaps of what will happen within it'[74]. This is a bold claim, but not an entirely unfair one. With Easter Icons we wanted to create a context where we strongly signalled a sense of movement into a holy space where something special might happen. From the responses to 2008 I think we were fairly successful and people did have that sense of alterity on entering[75].

The 'indexicality' of worship 'has to do with "truthfulness" or "authenticity" in the words and actions of worship'[76]. For Hughes worship should not become a performance, that is, the iconicity of worship – its coming to that *frontier,* is not negated by the inauthentic. For example, a leading of worship which is indistinguishable from entertainment, or a leading of worship which is over politicized[77]. This, asserts Hughes, is worship 'betrayed'[78]. The point of worship is not that people "enjoy the show" or "get the point", but that they come into the presence of God. Easter Icons was not about entertainment and not intentionally, or perhaps more honestly, not wholly, about people taking home some social or political message. Each station was created to be iconic and authentic, but I am not sure we were entirely successful where we were making a political point, at least in the sense of being iconic. The emphasis of these stations was raising awareness and suggesting that Jesus was on the side of the poor, and they were perhaps less numinous[79]. No doubt some participants found it (only) entertaining (and others the opposite), especially with regard to the children who visited from schools and equally some participants would have gone home challenged about slave labour, unfair treatment of prisoners, or making difference in regard to climate change or fair trade (and others again will not have). I would contend that worship should be engaging, and that is sometimes not different

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[73] ibid, p.156.
[74] ibid, p.156.
[75] Only one returned questionnaire indicated that they were affected by none of the stations.
[76] ibid, p.148.
[77] ibid, p.174.
[78] ibid, p.175.
[79] The evidence for this is inconclusive.

from being entertaining. It should also not shy away from the politics of the gospel, but equally it should not be reduced to the political.

The 'symbolic dimension' of worship 'comes from the fact that every liturgy draws on, presupposes, depends upon an incalculable depth of tradition in its construction of contemporary significations'[80]. Hughes writes that 'symbolic signs, or the symbolic dimensions of the signs of worship, then, *interpret* to us the otherwise incomprehensible "boundary" by which we are when we turn from ourselves and towards the otherness which is "God"'[81]. Symbolic signs give content to iconic and this content is located within the liturgical and theological traditions of the church. The importance of its location within tradition 'helps to avoid group and individual beliefs becoming too subjective or personal'[82]. Easter Icons was full of symbolic signs based in the church tradition. The Stations of the Cross themselves are a tradition within the church, which we both tried to remain faithful too as well as renew in contemporary ways. One way in which we were less faithful was this was an individualised and not a shared experience. In different years we used the traditions of foot washing, contemplation of icons of Christ, as well as different ways of praying and opportunities for repentance. Every station was an *interpretation* of scripture and taken as a whole it provided theological content for the worshipper's imagined journey with Christ to the cross.

Hughes concludes that

> 'the signs of worship which, through strategies of intensification, enable or elicit for worshippers their sense of having been brought to "the edge of chaos" (and of being safely returned), are simultaneously carrying interpretants which configure this not just as any adventure of limit, but as the particular interlocution which approaches, addresses and lays itself open before the Other whom we name as God'[83].

The consequences in terms of creating meaning for those who plan and lead worship are threefold. Firstly, an awareness that leading worship is about bringing the congregation to that '"boundary" or "liminal" event' and this is always in danger of

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[80] ibid, p.148.
[81] ibid, p.177.
[82] Baker & Gay, *Alternative Worship*, p.123.
[83] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, p.295.

being domesticated[84]. Secondly, the three dimensions of liturgical signs needs to be present – iconic, indexical and symbolic. And thirdly, the symbolic dimensions 'needs to declare that here is something not made up on the spur of the moment, but forged from millennia-deep sources of wisdom and knowledge'[85]. I believe this is a helpful way of reading Easter Icons in that it already has much that resonates with it, as well as providing a framework and language in planning and leading worship[86]. On the basis of the questionnaire responses in 2008, Easter Icons was successful in creating a meaningful worship experience[87].

There has been some criticism of Hughes' liturgical theology for a precise lack of *theology*. Foder points out that 'very little is actually said about how God participates in, contributes to, is part of, that sense-making', which leads him to conclude that the 'account of meaning on offer … seems to transpire between human agents alone (leaders and congregation)'[88]. This is also the conclusion of James Smith, who notes the 'bewildering absence of God from the production of meaning!', to the extent that he claims that Hughes offers us a 'liturgical theology without revelation'[89]. This becomes a *sociological* reading of Easter Icons, rather than a *theological* reading. The question might be asked where was God in Easter Icons? Some might find the answer in understanding creation as sacramental. Paul Fiddes has claimed that 'any object, act or word can become sacramental'[90]. While the 'sacraments' are a '"focus" of God's presence and activity', they are also clues 'by which we can notice a sacramentality elsewhere'[91]. If Fiddes is right there is warrant in seeing the presence of God in the different stations of Easter Icons. On the other hand, John Colwell argues against seeing God as always present in everything, where everything becomes a possible 'sign' and we just need to learn to perceive it. He contends that any 'single particular may be sacramental', but this does not follow necessarily[92]. This would

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[84] ibid, p.301.
[85] ibid, p.302.
[86] There is more I would like to say with regard to Hughes' argument – this has been a selective engagement – but space permits further reflection.
[87] In response to the 'overall effect' that Easter Icons had, words and phrases frequently used were 'moving', 'thought-provoking', 'challenging', 'humbling', 'powerful'.
[88] Foder, 'Review', p.685.
[89] James K. A. Smith, 'Review: *Worship as Meaning*', *Calvin Theological Journal* 39.2 (2004), pp.460-61.
[90] Paul Fiddes, '*Ex Opere Operato*: Re-thinking a Historic Baptist Rejection' in A. R. Cross & P. E. Thompson (eds.), *Baptist Sacramentalism 2* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), p.228.
[91] ibid, p.228.
[92] John Colwell, *Promise and Presence* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), pp.53-4.

suggest that we cannot just say 'God was there at Easter Icons'. What might be important is to assess how faithful to the gospel witness each station was in deciding whether it was sacramental[93]. A different and perhaps better way is to see that Easter Icons was as space for people to be 'attentive to Christ', through opportunities for 'stillness' and 'journey'[94]. The stations of the cross is a tradition of going on a 'domestic' pilgrimage (a journey) through the events of Christ's passion and at each station waiting and meditating (being still) on those events. In Easter Icons people went on a journey through the passion story and at had space to meditate and also take part in ritual actions mostly in silence.

3.3 Easter Icons as Consumer-led Religion

If Easter Icons is an example of alternative worship it must face the criticism of 'consumerist tendencies'[95], the participants were 'consumers of worship'. Participating in Easter Icons was optional and people visited for a variety of reasons – they had seen advertising, were invited or recommended by friends, or had visited in previous years. It was also individualistic or 'decentred worship'[96] – participants mostly went round by themselves, were free to decide what order and how many stations they visited, and whether they performed the various symbolic actions. The pupils from school visits were given a free T-shirt to go home with. There was the option of refreshments before or after visiting. Easter Icons was 'subject to personal choice', the hallmark of consumerism[97]. However, to single out Easter Icons and alternative worship as having 'consumerist tendencies' is to ignore that 'the culture of choice is transforming [all?] churches into market-led spiritual suppliers'[98]. Every church at some level is a consumerist church. For example, in the choice and selection of what songs or hymns are sung[99]. Easter Icons was, and alternative worship is, arguably more aware and attentive to faith that is consumer-shaped and attempts both to engage with consumer culture and resist it[100]. Easter Icons was 'marketed' as a

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[93] There is not space to extend this discussion in more detail.
[94] See Paul Fiddes chapter 'Spirituality as Attentiveness: Stillness and Journey' in P. Fiddes (ed.), *Under the Rule of Christ* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), pp.25-57.
[95] Rachel Atkinson, 'Alternative Worship: Post-Modern or Post-Mission Church?', *Anvil* 23.4 (2006), p.272.
[96] This is a term borrowed from Pete Ward and he defines it as 'worship that does not rely on a congregational dynamic', *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), p.94.
[97] Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, p.76.
[98] Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p.48.
[99] Pete Ward, *Selling Worship* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).
[100] Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation* (London: SCM, 2008), pp.150-1.

space to engage and explore the passion story – collaborating with the consumerist mindset – and at the same time, it sought to resist and critique various consumer practices – for example, the consumption of chocolate through the Easter egg cross. Furthermore, what differentiated from other similar consumer activities, for example, the visit to art gallery, was it explicit theological meanings. It is difficult to assess clearly whether the resistance to consumerism was entirely successful in overcoming simultaneous accommodation to consumerism. It is a difficult line to tread. Percy has suggested that 'the resilience of religion is often a delicate blend of resistance and accomodation'[101] and this certainly seems to be the case in regard to consumerism.

Easter Icons is not the normative shape and context of worship at the church where it was held, but a specific once a year event, offered, as proposed above, as a space for 'stillness' and 'journey'. If it was, or became, the normative shape of worship, there would be a danger that 'worship had been reduced to an act of individual and collective self-expression' and something other than Christian worship[102]. Instead it served to complement the weekly worship and give people, what can be rare, at least amongst Baptists, a space to meditate on Christ.

Conclusion

One participant after his visit to Easter Icons in 2008 said that 'this Easter space helps to stay with the story from the inside, its building tension, its pain, its desolation and hopelessness. For me it was another meaningful and enriching Holy Week experience'[103]. This is a helpful and welcome reaction to what Easter Icons was trying to do. It acknowledges that the event was trying to explore the passion story, drawing out its implications and developing theological threads for reflection. Easter Icons was designed to be 'meaningful' and 'enriching', to allow the participant to take part in ritual and symbolic actions, to encourage them to pray and to discover the frontier where God's presence, even in the pain, desolation and perceived hopelessness of those events of Jesus' passion, might be found. I believe that events like Easter Icons are resources for those within the church and outside it to explore faith in meaningful

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[101] Martyn Percy, *The Salt of the Earth* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p.21.
[102] Graham Redding, 'Calvin and the Café Church' in G. Scott Dawson, *An Introduction to Torrance Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), p.127.
[103] http://geoffcolmer.blogspot.com/2008/03/easter-icons-2008.html.

and enriching ways, where the aim is not conversion, but an engagement of heart, mind and body with the story of Jesus.

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