Wilding the Church

Reflections on the Process of Wilding as a Metaphor for the Church as a Co-agent in Mission with the Holy Spirit in a Secular Age

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Abstract

IN RECENT YEARS NUMEROUS wilding projects have emerged, many inspired by Isabella Tree's book *Wilding* (Tree 2018). *Wilding* tells the story of the transformation of the estate at Knepp from intensive arable farm to biodiverse woodland and scrub. Wilding is a process that offers a new paradigm for land management, in which nature leads and human agency facilitates. Here I argue that wilding offers a rich metaphor for a new paradigm of ecclesial imagination in a secular age. This new "ecclesial imaginary" places

the Church as a co-agent with the Holy Spirit, participating in the emergent life generated through the power of the Spirit. The use of this metaphor in nature conservation is described and its theological validity explored. The article ends with some preliminary reflections on the potential of this metaphor to move the Church toward a more fruitful disposition in its mission in a secular age.

Introduction

Wilding is a movement within the world of conservation which advocates a radically different way of addressing the challenge of reversing the decline in biodiversity. In recent years its approach has gained considerable traction across the world. Wilding rests on a principle of giving nature freedom to "take the lead," allowing areas of land to "rewild" without a preconceived end result. Human agency is facilitative rather than directive. This is in sharp contrast to standard conservation projects where habitat restoration toward target species in decline is driven by science and human intervention.

I first explored wilding through engaging with the story of the wilding project at the Knepp Estate in Sussex, a story told in Isabella Tree's book *Wilding* (Tree 2018). At Knepp declining yields of wheat, despite numerous technical innovations and amalgamations with neighboring farms in search of economies of scale, led to the reluctant decision in 2000 to stop arable farming and begin a process of rewilding. This process, still ongoing, involved leaving land fallow and introducing "keystone species," such as large grazing mammals that mimicked ancient indigenous species, in order to facilitate a nature-led process of environmental renewal. There was no specific end in mind, no aim to return particular species or produce particular outcomes. A key principle of wilding is that "the process is the outcome" (Monbiot 2013, 83). The story is replete with surprise as unanticipated species come to make their home at Knepp, often in habitats which modern experts assumed were unsuitable. Twenty years later Knepp and the story told by Isabella Tree is a source of inspiration and expertise for landowners

and land managers worldwide. The concept of managing land for biodiversity as well as for products for human consumption is now part of UK government legislation.[1]

The Church in the West currently finds itself in the midst of a fundamental transition in the social paradigm in which people live. Its forms, practices, and procedures are those that developed predominantly in a premodern and modernist age (Murray-Williams 2004; Murray-Williams 2011; Tickle 2012; Duerksen and Dyrness 2019). Its inability to adapt sufficiently to cultural change and its tenacious commitment to some patterns and structures that served it well in a now-disappearing paradigm leave it in a situation not unlike Knepp in 2000—facing declining "yields" (based at least on its own metrics, attendance and giving) despite numerous rounds of amalgamations (e.g. Church of England parishes merged into ever larger benefices) and technical innovation programs (e.g. Challenge 2000, the Decade of Evangelism, Myriad).[2] The Church is facing a failure of its own imagination, stuck in a particular way of seeing itself and the world, and historically invested in a missional disposition toward the world that is no longer apt.

In this paper I want to reflect on wilding with reference to the Church. A conversation in this area has developed over recent years, accelerated by the recent publication of *Rewilding the Church* by Steve Aisthorpe (Aisthorpe 2020). Aisthorpe argues for a recommitment to a fundamental love of Christ alongside our love of the Church. Aisthorpe's perspective is primarily Christological. He brings a key insight from the wilding metaphor in his argument for the reintroduction of Christ as a "keystone species" within the environment of the Church. Referring to Christ as "the

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1. "The Agriculture Bill sets out how farmers and land managers in England will be rewarded in the future with public money for 'public goods'—such as better air and water quality, thriving wildlife, soil health, or measures to reduce flooding and tackle the effects of climate change" (Gov.uk 2020).

2. Challenge 2000 was an ecumenical congress held in Birmingham in 1992 which set a goal of planting two thousand churches by the year 2000. The Decade of Evangelism was introduced as a resolution at the 1988 Lambeth Conference. Myriad was recently launched by the Bishop of Islington with a goal of planting ten thousand churches in ten years.

Great Interferer," he states, "saying 'yes' to Jesus is to introduce into the environment of our lives a species so other and so powerful that total transformation is inevitable" (Aisthorpe 2020, 53). My perspective is more pneumatological, a complementary perspective to Aisthorpe, focusing primarily on an ecclesiology that might be reimagined by learning to participate with the wild creative gift of God's missionary Spirit.

Why the Metaphor of Wilding?

Aisthorpe's book is just one example of the degree to which the metaphor of rewilding is capturing the imagination of the Church at present. In my own work engaging in networks of mission enablers and church planters across the country this metaphor is generating considerable interest and discussion. Is this significant? Or nothing more than a passing trend?

Sally MacFague argues that the power of metaphorical language lies in its invitation to a dialogical approach to exploring reality. Metaphors describe how reality both "is and is not" like the metaphorical field in question. A metaphor which gains in popularity may become a dominant metaphor, whose power to explain reality provides some degree of a model for our experience and our engagement with the world (McFague 1982).

The power of wilding as a metaphor lies in its connection with the recent growth in more organic and relational ways of understanding organizations. Organizational theorists have drawn on work in the sciences to radically alter how organizations are understood, shifting our conception from Newtonian machines toward that of "complex adaptive systems" (Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey 2007). This developing "complexity theory" (Waldrop 1993) has been driven by a perceived failure in the Newtonian paradigm's ability to do justice to the experienced reality of organizations. Complexity theory recognizes the relational nature of organizations as the sum of conversations between interdependent and interrelated individuals drawn toward a common purpose. Further, it sees change as a characteristic of the system, through

the system's ability to learn and adapt to changes in the environment around it. Complexity theory thus embraces the possibility of emergence and "self-organization" as the system welcomes new ideas and recalibrates in response to information from the milieu of the world (Doornenbaal 2012; Moynagh 2017; Rooms 2019).

Wilding's emphasis on the interrelatedness of our environment, on emergent change as a property of the system, and on human agency in humble solidarity with the complexity of the natural world, all relate closely to the perspective of complexity theory. Wilding's growing influence on contemporary ecclesiology may also be a function of a similar perception of the limitations of previously dominant mechanistic metaphors for our understanding of the Church and of its ability to make better sense of our experience of the complex and interrelated world in which the Church sits.

Whilst recognizing that all metaphors run the risk of luring us into making the world in their image, wilding offers to the Church a metaphor that invites a shift in paradigm, in particular a shift in paradigm away from Newtonian cause-and-effect conceptions and toward more relational and porous understandings of the essence of the Church and its relationship with the world.

Wilding can act as a powerful metaphor toward a renewed "ecclesial imaginary." I use the term "ecclesial imaginary" as shorthand for the way in which people imagine their world and context as members of the Church. For the vast majority of people this imaginary is not articulated or explicit but carried through cultural forms and practice. The term is a development of Charles Taylor's "social imaginary" from his hugely influential book *A Secular Age* (C. Taylor 2007). Taylor describes a social imaginary as "the way in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations." He further describes it as "how ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings." For Taylor this "social imaginary" is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories

and legends, etc., and as "that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (C. Taylor 2007, 171–72). An "ecclesial imaginary" is therefore the way in which the relationship between God as missionary agent and the Church is imagined. It is how the normative expectation of church in relation to God and the world is held in our imagination and expressed in our language and practice.

In this paper I explore this renewed ecclesial imaginary through a conversation with Taylor's thesis in dialogue with Jürgen Moltmann's three ecclesial paradigms (Moltmann 2011). Moltmann's work offers an ecclesiological perspective on the paradigmatic shifts in Western culture so powerfully articulated by Taylor. This conversation then opens up a space in which the metaphor of wilding can be explored theologically, before describing how the metaphor can enable the Church to start to inhabit a renewed ecclesial imaginary.

The Secular Age—Taylor's Articulation of a New Cultural and Religious Paradigm.

The sense of a fundamental shift in the social and cultural paradigms of the West is by no means new. The Church has, however, been relatively slow to respond, either in reconceiving its identity and purpose or in reimagining the forms and posture it might take. Decline in religious affiliation in the West has been well documented (Brierley 2000; Goodhew 2016; Brown and Woodhead 2016) and, despite significant efforts from church institutions in the form of investment and strategy, appears largely irreversible. The popular secularization story of decline, arguing for the eventual disappearance of religion, has, however, been largely dismissed in favor of a story that starts to articulate a change in the religious disposition of the West. It is not that religion is declining, but that people are expressing faith in different and novel ways. Taylor paints the popular secularization story as a "subtraction narrative" whereby the decline of religion is the sloughing off of religious baggage with a consequent liberation into the

freedom of religion-less humanity. His counternarrative is one of addition, a tracing of the ways in which the Enlightenment and Reformation(s)[3] made it possible for humans in the West to consider life without a conception of God and within an "immanent frame" that is of human flourishing within a purely material world. For Taylor, the persistence of religion vindicates this addition narrative, for it points to the insufficiency of the secular vision for human flourishing and to the fundamental nature of humanity, not as beings within an immanent frame, but beings with a sense and need for the transcendent. We are "*homo quaerens*"—people who search[4]. However, the *expression* of our search in this new secular age is different. Taylor describes the "nova effect," an explosion of religious expression which is diverse, novel, and largely individually oriented. He further describes the new paradigm as the "age of authenticity," characterized by a social imaginary of "expressive individualism" (C. Taylor 2007, 473). In this paradigm "the injunction would seem to be: let everyone follow his/her own path of spiritual inspiration. Don't be led off yours by the allegation that it doesn't fit with some orthodoxy" (C. Taylor 2007, 489). This therefore invites the question: How can the Church respond faithfully to this radical change in the social imaginary and faith expression of people in a secular age?

Missio Dei, Moltmann, and Metaphor—Towards an Ecclesial Imaginary for a Secular Age

It is the development of the theology of the *missio Dei* that lays the ground for a renewed ecclesial imaginary and that offers a more faithful conception of the Church's posture in a secular age. John Flett traces the development of the theology of *missio Dei* to the

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3. Taylor prefers to describe the immense changes of the sixteenth-century Reformation as "Reformations," arguing that the social and cultural changes generally associated with the Protestant Reformation had equally long-term effects on Catholicism, for example.

4. This phrase comes from a podcast interview between Nick Spenser and Charles Taylor (Reading Our Times 2020).

missionary conferences of the first part of the twentieth century (Flett 2010). The debates responded to the challenge to the West of its missions as no more than colonial expansion. This challenge raised the question of the nature of mission. What is the theological substance of mission? Is mission intrinsic to the nature of the Church? Is mission intrinsic to the nature of God? The theology of *missio Dei* works to situate the mission of the Church within the nature of God and to collapse any notion of a rift between the immanent and economic Trinity. The life of God contained within the Trinity is a self-giving flow of reconciling love. Thus, God's nature is not contingent on mission, or any work of the Church. God's nature, which is mission, is sufficient in and of itself. Mission is not a second step for God, and nor is it a second step for the Church.

Jürgen Moltmann has articulated three paradigms in the history of the Church which relate closely to cultural paradigms of Western history described by Charles Taylor (Moltmann 2011). The "hierarchical paradigm" describes what we might commonly call Christendom, a "monarchical episcopacy" clearly and powerfully ordered by the vertical relationship between God, the Bishop and the Church. This ecclesial structure is firmly embedded in society through the anointing of the monarch or ruler by the Church as a divine ruler and servant of the state within the wider normative structures of Christendom. The Reformation begins to usher in what Moltmann describes as the "Christocentric paradigm." The Church increasingly looks less to the vertical authorities of the episcopacy and the monarchy for unity, authority, and legitimation and instead gathers these around Christ as the head of the Church. The congregation or community of the faithful, gathered around Christ, through his word and sacrament, constitutes the major form for this ecclesial imaginary. Thus, a developing separation is made from the world, a growing emphasis on individual choice and membership in the fellowship of the church, and a growing sense of the Church's agency in the world as a means of extending the lordship of Christ. This more assertive church imaginary relates closely to Taylor's definition of the modernist age as the "Age of Mobilisation." Pre-modern

Christendom and its embedded enchantment of all life is in retreat. God may be present in divine design or order but the cosmos has been disenchanted and the previously reliable status quo disrupted. The void must be filled by institutional effort and assertion into the public space (C. Taylor 2007, 445–72).

Moltmann, however, believes that "the new age of the Church will be the age of the Holy Spirit" (Moltmann 2011, 24). Moltmann describes this predominantly as a democratizing movement of the Spirit whereby every member of the Church acquires their agency and "through the experience of the Holy Spirit the all-equalizing brotherhood of Christ fans out into a multicolored diversity of charismata" (Moltmann 2011, 26). This is a Church that trusts in the power and authority of the Holy Spirit and thus makes space for every individual to have the power of agency and to bring their experience of faith in an active and participative way into the life of the Church.

Moltmann's paradigmatic shifts in the ages of the Church are an ecclesial perspective on Taylor's articulation of the transitions in the wider culture of the West. The present "secular age" Taylor dubs the "Age of Authenticity," characterized by the understanding that it is the role of the individual to realize their own way of being human. The constraints of religion or social convention are thrown off. Choice is the ultimate value and tolerance the only virtue. Christianity's liberalizing and individualizing impulse through the democratizing and empowering work of the Spirit finds things in common here, while at the same time recognizing the dark side of liberalism's deification of choice and aversion to constraint. For our purposes here I want to note the complementarity of these paradigmatic shifts in the Church and in wider Western society and to probe what this means for a church whose routinized processes and structures can be belligerently resistant to the sort of agility needed to respond to wider cultural change.

The premodern era saw the emergence of the parish as the fundamental unit of social organisation in Christendom, a form which has been remarkably resilient to social change (Rumsey 2017). The modernist age saw the emergence of the congregation, a

voluntary association of believers, as the primary form of church life (Duerksen and Dyrness 2019). This form has become normative in our experience and in our imagination. However, as Duerksen and Dyrness assert, the Church is not an entity that sits above cultural contingency. The Church is an emergent phenomenon whose forms develop through the conversation between Scripture, tradition, and context. Our frequent error is to mistake established forms as normative not just for our context and time but for the Church's nature:

> Quite often the particular expression of an ecclesial marker becomes frozen in time, disassociated from the cultural, social, and political influences that generated its emergence. Over time, the context in which those markers gained their particular salience fades from view, and the practices themselves come to be seen as pure markers of the church (Duerksen and Dyrness 2019, 149).

In the same way that liberalism and the secular age have created a new social imaginary, the Church is being invited into a new ecclesial imaginary. It is an imaginary oriented around the *missio Dei* in which the Church takes an ec-centric place in the context of society, a humbler and more collaborative posture, that seeks to participate with the already-present-and-active Holy Spirit in the building of the kingdom of God and that embraces emergence in the development of its forms and ministerial life (see Fig 1).
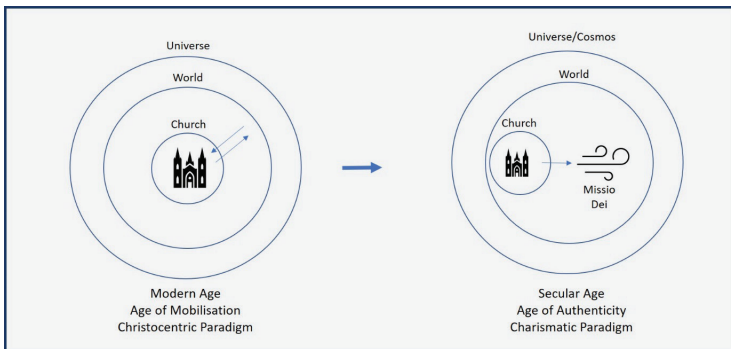

Figure 1: Christocentric and Charismatic Paradigms in Mission

Our struggle to fully inhabit any new paradigm of ecclesial life is thus a struggle to shift our ecclesial imagination toward a new paradigm. Furthermore, it is language that helps articulate that imaginary, a language that draws almost exclusively on metaphor. As McGilchrist (2009, 179) argues: "All understanding, whether of the world or even of ourselves, depends on choosing the right metaphor. The metaphor we choose governs what we see." Thus, we turn now to examine the theological resilience of wilding for the life of the Church in a secular age.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON WILDING

Knepp's transformation strikes a chord in the wider world not least because it represents a very different anthropological stance to the land and environment. The land is no longer a utility, an object whose value is purely in its potential and ability to provide a yield, a product. The environment has a value in and of itself; it is not *for* anything but is allowed to be. Human agency can thus explore a new relationship *alongside* and in conversation *with* rather than *over* the environment on the basis of its prior being. This relationship is mutual and explored by conversation in which humility and an openness to discovery is embraced.

Judeo-Christian anthropology has been accused of bolstering an anthropocentric and utilitarian attitude to creation (White 1967). Genesis 1:28 along with a tradition of interpretation that assumes a language of subjugation and rule play a key part in this narrative.

Rowan Williams (2000), however, argues that the creation narrative's historical context is that of exile, a context in which dominance and agency have all but disappeared. For Williams the exilic language of Second Isaiah and, in particular, God's summoning of creation to enter into the life of God represents a truer understanding of the creation narrative. Williams (2000, 68) cites in particular Isaiah 48:13 (ESV): "My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together." Similarly, Richard Bauckham

(2000, 45, emphasis mine) reasserts the Christian tradition of humans "*joining in* the praise offered by other creatures." This tradition is represented by liturgical texts such as the Benedicite, a Greek addition to the book of Daniel, which in the Protestant tradition is placed in the apocrypha but which (at least in the Church of England) continues to have a prominent place in the liturgy. The tradition of the Benedicite is firmly within the biblical tradition of creation's praise, e.g. Isaiah 41:10; Psalm 69:34, 96:11–12, 103:22, 150:6; Phillipians 2:10; Revelation 5:13. As Bauckham asserts (Bauckham 2002, 47), "The Benedicite makes no theological statement not already made in Psalm 148." The Benedicite calls on all creatures, heavenly bodies, weather phenomena, other living creatures and (only in conclusion) human beings to join in the song of praise to God. This tradition provides "the strongest antidote to anthropocentrism in the biblical and Christian tradition" (Bauckham 2002, 48). Worship of God the creator therefore provides the context in which humanity's relationship with fellow creatures and the environment can enable a creaturely solidarity that mitigates against hierarchy, anthropocentrism, or anything becoming the object (or idol) that validates or affirms our identity and our agency by means of exploitation and utility.

The wilding movement may well have found its milieu in a secular age seeking to affirm the unity and connectedness of all things, and may be more comfortable with a (G/g)od-within panentheist perspective. However, Christian anthropology argues for the distinctiveness of creatureliness as fundamental to a non-exploitative posture towards creation. It is only in relation to the intrinsic self-giving nature of God, who needs nothing in return to affirm God-self, that creatures are free to be creatures, and humans to be human. Only in this freedom as distinct creatures are we able to love and give without instrumentalizing any act in service to an agenda (R. Williams 2000, 67–75). It is within the self-giving flow of the life of God that humanity finds its truest relationship with creation.

Affirming, from the perspective of Christian anthropology, a position of solidarity in relationship to creatures and their

environment expresses itself in a posture of humility in terms of humanity's *engagement* with creation. From the moment the Knepp estate invited an expert in to come and observe the trees of the estate, those at Knepp embarked on a journey of humble discovery, embracing a lack of knowledge, open to surprise. They were joined by a host of researchers from the world of conservation who named, counted, sampled, and joined them for conferences and conversations as they sought to understand the narrative unfolding before them.

It is the embracing of uncertainty and unknowing and of the hospitality of creation that provides particular theological resonance with the shift described between the mobilised and applied model of church engagement with the world in a modernist context and the emergent paradigm of the secular age. The Gospels provide ample support for a posture of open engagement in the act of being sent into the world.[5] Likewise, as the Church emerges in Acts there is little sense of a community clear about its identity and scope, rolling out a plan or applying a strategy. The very identity and mission of the Christian Church is discovered through conversation between the Jewish tradition of its early adherents, their contexts and the experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 30–31).

Clare Watkins's work, as part of the Theological Action Research Network,[6] has developed an ecclesiology that is deeply conscious of the theological nature of practice and experience and therefore of the provisional and vulnerable nature of church. She expresses this posture in terms of "fragility," arguing for its adoption as a "virtue" needed for the development of church life. Watkins roots this posture in a willingness to embrace the "negativity" of theology, a stance which is not simply an accommodation to a

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5. See for example, Jesus asking for a drink from the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7), his conversation with Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28), the sending of the twelve in a position of dependence on the hospitality of others (Matt 10:9–11; Luke 9:3–5, 10:4–8).

6. https://theologyandactionresearch.net/.

postmodern sentimentality but a more truthful self-understanding which mitigates against world-shirking or world-dominating fundamentalist positions. Watkins describes a "double negativity," that is, an apophatic disposition both in terms of the intrinsic nature of God and the revelation of God through practice (Watkins 2020). However, such a stance is not Wittgensteinian, that is, taking us to a place of silence. On the contrary, it invites *conversation*, or more specifically a conversational mode of theological discovery in both philosophical and practical spheres. The Church is thus, in its truest expression, "a community of discerning conversation" (Watkins 2020, 247) engaging in the world without imposition and entering into a praxis of conversation in solidarity with other human beings and creation.

Engaging with the world in the humbler posture of a conversation partner opens up a more centripetal perspective. The margins become important places where new avenues of life and vitality emerge. At Knepp it was commonly understood that the estate lay on marginal land for arable farming, but until the decision to rewild, engagement with the land continued with an approach modelled on more suitable land elsewhere. Eventually the reality of their context had to be faced. Marginality in the process of rewilding was reframed as an asset. Furthermore, the marginal habitats which were created, as former arable land became scrub edging onto ancient woodland and a river course, became the context in which biodiversity thrived. The margin rediscovered its character as a locus of emergence and innovation.

Steve Aisthorpe notes the edges of a field yield up to 25 percent less than the center, a statistic that drives the move toward the scrubbing of hedgerows to create larger fields (Aisthorpe 2020, 197). This downplaying of the innate gift of margins therefore has its logical consequences. Conversely, when the edges are seen as crucially valuable places for emergence, innovation, and diversity a different attitude and approach to them is taken.

Theologically speaking the value of marginality is a rich theme. The story of the people of God takes place in the tension between a settled destination or locus for the presence of God

acting as a focal point for his people and their common life and the revitalizing life of a nomadic and marginal existence. The Old Testament narrative reflects most critically perhaps on the exile as that marginal period of Israel's story which nevertheless "evoked the most brilliant literature and the most daring theological articulation in the Old Testament" (Brueggemann 1997, 3). Likewise, as the Church emerges from the ministry of Jesus (a figure from the margins of a marginal Roman territory), the narrative of Luke-Acts describes a movement constantly emergent through new experiences of liminality as the conversation between the tradition of Judaism, the revelation of God, and the contexts into which the message of the gospel was brought takes place (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 10–31).

Marginality is a strong theme in Al Barrett's work, which draws on the work of socio-political writer Romand Coles. Coles uses the term "ecotone" to refer to the boundary between different ecological communities. He draws the distinction between economy rooted in the words *oikos* (home or habitation) and *nomos* (law) with "ecotone" where *tonos* brings in the notion of tension. Thus ecotones are "special meeting grounds" that "often harbor a greater variety and density of life than either of the two distinct communities alone." (Barrett 2017, 145) Embracing this marginality for Barrett, as a vicar on an outer urban estate, represents a turn from assertive ecclesiocentric missiologies such as "resource church planting," or radical visions of transformative eucharistic communities, towards a greater openness to voices at the edges. This has the effect of "inviting the 'centers' of the Church to learn from, and be transformed by, a passionate (and non-penetrative) engagement in the abundant resource-full 'edges'" (Barrett 2018, 89).

It is precisely at the point at which an assertive and programmatic approach to land management is dropped that significant new voices start a new conversation at Knepp. Isabella Tree begins her story not with the decision to sell the farm machinery and cease arable farming, but with the visit of a tree expert. Ted Green "came to stand still under the canopy of the old oak" (Tree 2018,

15). The visit became in retrospect "an epiphany" (Tree 2018, 32) as the results of Ted Green's attentiveness led to a reappraisal of their engagement with the land and with nature in relationship with it. This epiphany worked to de-objectify the land and provided the first step toward a new relationship of co-agency between the farm, the land, and nature, a relationship in which nature was consciously given space and time and to take the lead.

Knepp's story therefore plays out as a parable of the kingdom, of the eschaton coming to meet us by the Holy Spirit, and of the posture the Church is invited most fruitfully to take in this unfolding narrative.[7] It helps reimagine the primary role of the Church not to expand into the world, or as the solitary builder of the kingdom, but as a living witness of and participant in the eschatological vision which the Spirit is realizing. The "purpose of the Church is not the Church itself," rather "the point of the Church is to point beyond itself, to be a community that preaches, serves and witnesses to the reign of God" (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 7). This is a missional ecclesiology where, as former missionary and Bishop John V. Taylor (1972, 133) put it, "our theology would improve if we thought more of the Church being given to the Spirit than of the Spirit being given to the church." This in turn provides a more ec-centric locus for the Church by placing the Church as co-agent with the Spirit in the flow of the emergence of the kingdom. This co-agency is necessarily asymmetric as the Church is invited into the overflowing and reconciling life of God that flows firstly within and beyond the Trinity. The Church is thus "the eschatological creation of the Spirit" (Moltmann 1977, 33), continuously called and formed by this flow of God's reconciling life.

7. Organic metaphors abound within the parables of Jesus regarding the kingdom of God (e.g., parable of the yeast, mustard seed, sower, wheat and tares). Other parables reassert an anthropology that places human agency within the limits of the sovereignty and nature of God. For example, in the parable of the growing seed (Mark 4:26–29 NIV), the kingdom is likened to a man who scatters seed. Agency is given to the man but this is tempered first by humility ("The seed sprouts and grows though he does not know how") and second the freedom and life of the kingdom ("Whether he sleeps or gets up . . . all by itself the soil produces grain"). Thus, human agency is reframed with the freedom and agency of God and his kingdom.

THE WILDING OF THE CHURCH?

I have drawn on Charles Taylor's description of the emerging "secular age" and Moltmann's three paradigms of the Church to argue that the Church needs to explore a radically different "ecclesial imaginary," a renewed way of seeing itself as Christian community in the context of Western society. There are rich theological resonances with wilding which provide a basis of confidence for inviting an engagement with it as a pathway into this new ecclesial imaginary.

Wilding's power as a metaphor lies in its subversion of the modernist assertion of rational control and agency *over* creation and a consequent subversion of our objectification of creation into a resource for our own ends. Wilding affirms a thoroughly Christian anthropology that places us as human agents in conversation with nature and with the land, alive to the mysteries of nature, attentive to the space between things, conscious of the limits of our knowledge, and attentive to the deep connectedness of the creation of which we are a part.

Wilding thus provides a parable of the shift from a Newtonian view of the world to an emergent one. From a world of cause and effect, inputs and outputs, and predictable systems where humanity assumes control through power and knowledge to a complex and fluid world where connectedness, relationships, and conversation provide the environment in which life emerges. It is a parable that ejects humanity from an anthropocentric "age of mobilisation" where any engagement with the world must work through human agency and organization into a new age where human beings and organizations can operate with a more humble, collaborative kind of attentiveness to the world.

Wilding may therefore provide a means by which the Church can reimagine itself away from an objectifying posture in the world, where context is a resource to be instrumentalized toward its own missionary aims, toward a doxological posture in which its whole life is oriented toward the flow of creation's praise to God (Paas 2019).

This approach places the Church in a more ec-centric locus in the world, a position in which voices and agents on the margins receive attention as potential partners in the Church's mission and the growth of the kingdom. It is a locus where liminal boundaries of belonging and engagement can be fostered—a church thus more able to engage with the "expressive individualism" and restless spiritual searching of so many trying to find their way in the secular age.

In my own ministry as a pioneer minister[8] in the Church of England this perspective has increasingly been expressed in a missional disposition that is marked by an attentiveness to the Spirit at work in the world and a more emergent approach to the form and nature of new ecclesial communities. It is also expressed by an openness to humble dialogue with those networks and individuals seeking to express their spirituality in a variety of ways. This posture, common to other pioneer ministers (see for example Ross and Baker 2015), comes into significant tension with the inherited institution, where the normative ecclesial imaginary assumes church formation to quickly involve attendance and membership through the application of mission projects and programs. Within this tension pioneer ministers feel a pressure for measurable results which can foster a utilitarian attitude to their context.

However, where space and freedom are given to allow pioneer ministers to explore a more emergent approach something akin to the blossoming of diversity experienced at Knepp shows signs of taking place. For example, in the Diocese of Bath and Wells the appointment of nine full-time pioneer ministers, free from the demands and responsibilities of the inherited Church, alongside a program designed to train and release further volunteer mission leaders, is beginning to generate a new environment for contextual

8. The term "pioneer ministry" became a normative term with the publication of the Church of England Report Mission Shaped Church (Archbishop's Council 2004). The Church of England now defines pioneer ministers in the following way: "Pioneers are people called by God, who are the first to see and creatively respond to the Holy Spirit's initiatives with those outside the church; gathering others around them as they seek to establish new contextual Christian community" (Church of England 2021).

mission and ecclesial formation. In this environment process takes precedent over project, attentiveness to context and to the leading of the Spirit are prioritized over predetermined outputs or results, and conversation and partnership are fostered. In the beginnings of this project what is emerging within the conversation between those facilitating the project, missional leaders, and their context at the margins is often surprising and unplanned. Much more work needs to be done to research the effects of such ministries and projects on the Church. If wilding and the story of Knepp point to a deeper understanding of the reality of God's mission of creation and new creation and to the kind of change within his mission that we are invited to participate in, we need to listen attentively to our own "wilding projects" already at work. Further research is needed into the shape of mission practice for church leaders to embody the kind of ec-centric ecclesiology I describe here. Such research could also explore how such an ecclesiology can relate to the inherited ecclesiologies in which church ministers and leaders work and how these different perspectives might work together.

The metaphor of wilding has the potential to subvert an ecclesiocentric imaginary which sees the flow of God's life through the Church and into the world, and to create a more ec-centric imaginary where the Church joins in with the flow of God's life already present in the world by the Spirit (see Fig 1). It is a metaphor which opens up a rich way of "seeing" the Church as "emergent phenomena" (Duerksen & Dyrness 2019) and of engaging with the constantly unfolding conversation between cultural context, tradition, and Scripture which has always been the foment of the Church. Wilding helps envision the reception of the Holy Spirit as the prime agency and conversation partner in the mission of God and the realisation of the eschaton, the Spirit which flows from the future, inviting the Church to join in with the growing song of praise to God which is the coming and fulfilment of the kingdom.

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