

Adapting to a Gift Economy

A Review Essay

Williams, John, 2020.

*Ecclesianarchy: Adaptive Ministry
for a Post-Church Society*

London: SCM Press

ISBN: 978-0334059806

Barrett, Al, and Ruth Harley, 2020.

*Being Interrupted: Reimagining
Mission from the Outside, In*

London: SCM Press

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IN THE AMERICAN TELEVISION comedy *Community*, a college student named Shirley recruits her friend Abed to make a film adaptation of the life of Christ. She wants him to make Jesus cool for young people. But Abed is suspicious. He (rightly) suspects Shirley's evangelistic motives, and he thinks the "Jesus-film" genre has been done to death. But after staying up all night reading the gospels, Abed comes back to Shirley enthusiastic about the project. Jesus, he tells her, is way more interesting than Christians claim. It is time to make a Jesus film for the "post-postmodern world," where Jesus is a filmmaker trying to find God with his camera, only to realize that he is being filmed by God's camera, "like a mirror in a mirror." Shirley doesn't like it; she no longer recognizes Jesus in Abed's portrayal.

The Abed-Shirley dialogue should feel familiar for anyone who has worked at the edges of emergent, missional and church planting conversations over the past couple decades. Wrangling over relevance in changing Western contexts tends to leave enthusiasts for "postmodern" or "post-Christendom" ministry at odds with those who hope to stop the bleeding. On the one hand, we quote from well-known autopsies of Christendom and modernity, account for the white supremacist, colonialist, patriarchal, and neoliberal narratives that formed and fueled white mainline churches of the West and assure one another that an important deconstructive work is taking place. We are being set free for God's mission.

On the other hand, we are also members of mainline churches, and live with the steady decline of resources and congregational members every day. And so we hope to sustain institutions and bear witness to the gospel in a faithful and trustworthy way. Like Shirley, we desire new tools to update church practice in the short term. But like Abed, we are caught in the liminal discourses of postmodernity.

Two recent books, *Ecclesianarchy: Adaptive Ministry for a Post-Church Society* by John Williams and *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Ministry from the Outside, In* by Al Barrett and Ruth Harley, wade into this ambiguity, balancing the need for

new ecclesial structures with pastoral concern for local congregations. Writing about the Church of England—though this analysis certainly holds for Mainline Churches in the US—both books show how inherited forms of church life prioritize hierarchical order at the expense of missional imagination, marginalizing possible sources of renewal in the process. *Ecclesianarchy* invites the Church into a “Post-Church” space, in which decentralized, flexible, adaptive and experimental forms of community are the new normal. *Being Interrupted* identifies the gift of neighbors and neighborhoods for calling the Church into a more humble and human participation in the mission of God. Both lean into an understanding of *gift*, in which the Church *receives* new life by attending to its context.

The term “ecclesianarchy” describes a flexible, fluid, bottom-up approach to church organization. Williams argues that Church structures are not inherent in the being of God, but rather historical and contingent. As a missional people, the Church thrives when it is adaptive to cultural contexts. The Church of England, Williams warns, ignores the anarchic nature of church life at its own peril. At present, it suffers from “an excess of ecclesiology,” in which church order is “warranted by a fundamental theological tradition” and unable to adjust to the post-Christendom, post-Church realities of contemporary life (Williams, 2020: viii).

For a book that begins with anarchy, Williams’s argument unfolds with a surprising amount of attention to the given ecclesial structures of the Anglican Church. After establishing the nature and scope of church decline in the UK, Williams turns toward the traditional divisions of ministerial labor. Drawing from a wide range of historical and ecumenical sources, Williams argues that a contextual understanding of deacons, presbyters, and bishops suggests a more localized and laicized approach to ministry. Pentecostalism, chaplaincy and Fresh Expressions provide contemporary examples of such flexibility, though each falls short of Williams’s vision.

In the final chapters of the book, Williams offers his own missiology for ecclesial anarchy. In a post-Church society, where

religious expression has become deregulated and reduced to another form of consumer choice, Christianity offers the impossibly good news of unmerited grace, or gift. Drawing from the “gift” discourses of postmodern philosophy, Williams suggests Christian life and practice should be characterized by “creative possibility” in which “dispossessive [anti]structures, dispersed leadership, decentred worship, and dis-illusioned ecclesiality” make possible an encounter with the Christian gospel (Williams, 2020: 164). The anarchic plurality that characterizes these features of Christian life witness to “the absurd but liberating truth that as Christianity is impossible, so is any ideal of ministry as being an exemplary Christian. In a post-church society, the subversive strategy of Christian presence is a communion of the broken and a fellowship of the failed, a shaft of divine illumination in a frantic world where motivating yourself to succeed is frequently the sole, but bogus, recipe for happiness on offer” (Williams, 2020: 196).

While Williams offers a moving picture of a decentred Church organized in response to the ways God makes Godself known in a postmodern setting, the anarchic proposal remains tethered to postmodern analyses in such a way that the innovations to ministry or structure that might emerge from Pentecostal movements, chaplaincy, or Fresh Expressions remains lost. In the end, Williams’s ecclesianarchy feels like it is in the analytical frame, with few concrete practices to offer Church leaders. While he points to several well-known emergent churches to provide examples, one is left wondering *where* or *how* one might begin to form such community in one’s own congregation.

Being Interrupted shares with *Ecclesianarchy* a discomfort with the status quo and an analysis of post-church, post-Christendom Britain that suggests a more grounded, contextual, and pluralist approach to church ministry. However, rather than focus on internal church structures, Barrett and Harley situate congregational renewal outside the institution. They begin the book with a list of crises the Church has been slow to address—Brexit, the Windrush scandal, the fire at Grenfell Tower, #MeToo and the climate crisis—and suggest a reappraisal of the ways in which the

Church thinks about and relates to its various contexts. Using the metaphor “economy,” they argue that most congregations in the Church of England operate within a “counting in” or “giving out” model of church. A “counting in” economy employs congregational resources for attracting people into the building, growing the congregation and the budget. It is a highly rational, efficient, and growth-oriented “McDonaldization of Church” (Barrett and Harley, 2020: 65). A Church operating in the “giving out” economy repurposes its resources for meeting needs in the neighborhood and world. It desires to share its many gifts with those outside the church to work for cultural and societal change.

But neither approach addresses the current moment. A congregation operating within a “counting in” economy can safely ignore the overlapping crises of structural racism, classism, socio-economic inequality, patriarchy, and environmental degradation; the “giving out” economy can acknowledge these issues without wrestling with the Church’s complicity in them. Such crises, Barrett and Harley insist, *interrupt* congregational life and invite the Church into a new economic reality: the gift of interruption.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is interrupted at several key moments. A woman who is bleeding touches his coat, a Syro-Phoenician woman asks him to heal her daughter, a woman breaks into a dinner party to anoint Jesus with oil. Each woman redirects Jesus’ ministry and opens new possibilities for all parties. These stories form, for Barrett and Harley, the basis for the gift economy they call “being interrupted.” The Church in this economy lives with, among, and for its neighbors; it is “neither anxious for its survival and its scarce resources, nor overflowing in its God-given . . . abundance. Instead, it rejoices in its radical insufficiency—in its not wanting or needing to be everything—and in its role as a treasure-seeker” (Barrett and Harley, 2020: 130). Drawing from Asset Based Community Development strategies and their own ministries, Barrett and Harley end the book with a rich description of congregational transformation through relationships of mutual care and listening with one’s neighbors and neighborhood.

Ecclesianarchy and *Being Interrupted* help us see that, in a quest for relevant missional ministries in post-Christendom contexts, the high priests of postmodernism and the evangelists for outward-focused missional practices remain too tethered to the privileges that attend the Christendom Church. We need neither a new, post-postmodern Jesus nor a more approachable and activist one. We need, instead, to take our cue from the rich young ruler, shedding the “excess of ecclesiology” that Williams highlights and embracing the vulnerability that comes with joining the work of Christ in the world that God loves. For what is God’s mission in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit, if not an enduring, surprising, persevering economy of grace?