

Theology and New Materialism - Beverley Clack response

Aim: to bring the discussion down to the local level and, indeed, the realm of lived experience. So please forgive me if at times I use personal experience as a way of reflecting on and with John's book.

My focus is on a theme that runs like a thread through John's work, and that is community. I want to explore this as a counterculture theme which challenges a dominant mode of the political which is now breaking down. But it also offers more than that, as it suggests ways of shaping a radical theology, supporting and cultivating the kind of relationship on which good community depends.

The promise of community

John does not explicitly mention it, but I see this book as offering a focus on community and collectivity that challenges some of the practices which have the politics of the last 40 years. This politics has been shaped by a set of ideals often described as neoliberal.

To use that word 'neoliberalism' might make our hackles rise. Indeed, it can be used to criticise anything not liked by a certain kind of lefty. Yet it is helpful for denoting a set of assumptions of what it is to be human that have dominated the political scene and which now are starting to come under pressure.

Neoliberalism offers an account of the political focused on the Market as the arbiter of all truth, and the economic as the measure of all things. Human beings under this model are viewed principally as economic units, and the aim is to become an 'entrepreneur of the self.' We create the self, and the aim

is to treat oneself as a mini-business. Through one's achievements, one is able to stand out from the rest.

The problem with this model - and I think we are starting to see this in the political upheavals of 2016/17 - is that it fails to reflect something fundamental about human beings. We are not isolated economic units. We are 'social animals' (to quote Aristotle) who need each other to flourish. Community is, if you like, at the heart of our humanity.

Now, what John suggests is the need for "spaces of faithful dissent", spaces that allow for developing ways of living that challenge economic individualism. This relates very much to my own hunger for forms of community that are not merely formed out of the same people we meet professionally or who we choose to be our friends.

Shocked by the instigation of austerity politics in 2010, I became involved in Labour politics. I was fed up with the idea that only in the economic is meaning to be found. I was sick of the financialisation of everything. My move into politics involved campaigning in my local community. I got to know my neighbours in a deeper and more complete way. I became aware of poverty and hardship that I had not seen before because I had not looked out of my comfortable life to see it. I felt more grounded in my area, and I worked with people from a range of backgrounds who were all committed to solving neighbourhood problems.

Yet this wasn't enough. John's comment that churchgoers often express the reason for going to church as a response to the feeling that "there is more to life than this" thus resonates. I had not been a regular church goer for

probably more than 20 years, but it felt like the kind of place for deeper reflection with others on what it means to live well. The church I attend is a small, fairly traditional, Methodist Church, shaped by its roots in Primitive Methodism. The congregation is mixed: members are mainly over the age of 50, yet are from a range of socioeconomic groups, races, and educational backgrounds. The connection we make is never just with each other, and we are involved in a good neighbour's scheme, attempts to create a winter night shelter for the homeless, and the annual carnival.

God in community

I was struck by John's comment that the vision for a better future might be found in image of the heavenly banquet. In community we find God. John's discussion of what we mean by 'God' I found particularly helpful for breaking the hold of mono-thinking, and for reasserting the importance of community. Contrary to the obsession of my own home discipline of philosophy of religion, the Christian God is not monotheistic but Trinitarian (and I do want to stick with Christianity for these reflections as it reflects where I am, but this does not mean that other faiths do not have similar resources that might make for this communal understanding of God).

God is found in relationship. God is not alone, but communal. (Rostov icon). In that image of a meal that John so usefully uses, there is community that is also an intimation of the divine. As Jurgen Moltmann says, God is not an individual but an event. God is not a superhuman being. God is other, and yet is shaped through and by our relationships with each other and with the world. Bonhoeffer's words, quoted by John, resonate: "God is the beyond in the midst of life." As John says, in the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, "the transcendent is implicated and entangled in the immanent". This is what we

encounter in the act of breaking of bread and sharing of wine. God is in us and with us in that simple act.

This kind of theology opens up the political. I'd be interested to hear John talk a bit more about the way in which his theology shapes political action. For me, God is found in that act of sharing a meal that demands of us the kind of actions which will help create better communities for all. It is a theology bound up with the promise of a new politics.