

THE EMERGING CHURCH AS A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO THE NEOLIBERALIZATION OF THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Abstract

The Emerging Church grew in prominence in the United States in the 1990's as a reaction to seeker-sensitive approaches of nondenominational evangelical megachurches. These megachurches are known for the commodification of religion and the conception of church members as consumers, and are thus prime examples of the neoliberalization of the American religious landscape. In contrast, the Emerging Church opposes institutionalized and neoliberalized religious practices and structures, instead emphasizing local and contextual organization and practice as a basis for more "authentically Christian" lives. Nevertheless, the Emerging Church itself displays characteristics of neoliberalization, which I disclose using Wendy Brown's definition of neoliberal rationality. This raises the question whether a lived critique of neoliberalization is possible in the late modern era.

Key Words: Emerging Church, neoliberalization, religion, megachurches, postmodernity

Introduction

The late 20th century witnesses a decline in religious membership and adherence unparalleled in American history. At the same time, the number of the religiously unaffiliated has been growing steadily, which has spawned criticism of neoliberalized religious organizations and their engagement with the spiritual desires of late modern individuals. The neoliberalization of various societal spheres in late capitalist countries, such as health care and education, also includes the religious realm and profoundly affects the development of contemporary religious organizations and practices. This article sheds light on the development of the Emerging Church in the United States, a loosely connected Christian movement that emphasizes local organizational structures and contextual

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religious practices in opposition to the highly centralized, profit- and growth-oriented evangelical megachurch. I will argue that while the Emerging Church is vehemently critical of the neoliberalization of the religious sphere, it is yet inherently shaped by and infused with the neoliberal rationality.

Wendy Brown offers a definition of the neoliberal rationality that emphasizes three core features. It “depicts free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as achieved and normative”; it “casts the political and social spheres both as appropriately dominated by market concerns and themselves organized by market rationality”; and it produces “criteria of productivity and profitability, with the consequence that governance talk increasingly becomes market-speak”². This definition is applicable to a range of religious groups in the United States³, but offers an especially apt description of the nondenominational evangelical megachurch, which propagates a consumer-oriented, feel-good individualism based on choice and entertainment. Megachurches grew in prominence and popularity in the 1980’s and 90’s with the growth of conservative evangelicalism and the Christian Right in the U.S.⁴. While considerable internal variation among megachurches exists, a common denominator of many nondenominational evangelical megachurches is the aggressive marketization of resources they themselves produce; the goal of spreading the nondenominational evangelical tradition⁵; the infusion of religious practices with self-help therapy; and forms of organizing that are inspired by the entertainment and consumer complex⁶. As such, this type of megachurch is a prime example of neoliberal, for-profit organizations employing private sector business strategies on the religious market⁷. The ways in which the neoliberal rationality becomes manifest in this megachurch model has given rise to criticism by leaders across the religious landscape⁸ and has resulted in the surge of a novel religious movement: the Emerging Church.

The Emerging Church is a grassroots Christian movement that has appeared in several countries around the world, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. In the United States, it emerged in the 1990’s as a reaction to

2 Brown Wendy, *American Nightmare. Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization*, *Political Theory*, 34/6, 2006, p. 694.

3 Packard Josh, Sanders George, *The Emerging Church as Corporatization’s Line of Flight*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28/3, 2013, p. 440.

4 Wilford Justin G., *Sacred Subdivisions. The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism*, New York, NYUP, 2012, 7.

5 Ellingson Stephen, *The Megachurch and the Mainline. Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-first Century*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 7.

6 Packard, Sanders, 2013, p. 440.

7 Ibid.; Niebuhr Gustav, *Where Religion Gets a Big Dose of Shopping-Mall Culture*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/16/us/where-religion-gets-a-big-dose-of-shopping-mall-culture.html> (September 1, 2014).

8 Butler Bass Diana, *Christianity After Religion. The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, New York, HarperOne, 2012, 162 f.

the growing influence of conservative evangelical groups⁹. Emerging church adherents call into question existing forms of neoliberalized religious organization and practice, such as the marketization of religious content, the professionalization of religious leadership, and streamlined organizational processes. Interested in practical experimentations with alternative structures and practices¹⁰, they establish local, non-hierarchical forms of organization and emphasize theological and social openness. Consequently, backgrounds, beliefs, and visions vary among adherents; they perceive themselves as participating in an ongoing “conversation” with each other and with individuals and groups beyond Emerging Church circles about how to live their faith outside of institutionalized religious boundaries¹¹.

At the same time, important similarities exist between the Emerging Church and the nondenominational evangelical megachurch model, such as experiential worship styles, the importance assigned to small groups, suspicion of credentialed education and intellectualism, and a focus on meeting the interests of the individual as specifically as possible (albeit in different ways). While this article will not analyse these similarities in detail for reasons of space, they are highlighted throughout to emphasize that the Emerging Church is less radically different from institutionalized, neoliberalized religion than it likes to acknowledge. In fact, late modern and neoliberal rationalities overlap to such an extent that they are inseparable, because contemporary notions of freedom, autonomy, the individual, choice, and other tenets are arguably very similar in both¹². I argue that the Emerging Church’s flat hierarchies and localized organizational structures are reminiscent of neoliberalization in their high degree of individualization and privatization, for instance. This raises the important question of whether the Emerging Church is entirely able to evade the neoliberal rationality in its lived critique of the same.

In what follows, I sketch the starkest manifestation of the neoliberalization of the religious sphere in the United States, the nondenominational evangelical megachurch, and present the Emerging Church as a response to this process. Using empirical examples of emerging church practices from recent, first-hand qualitative research in the Upper Midwest, I show not only which elements of neoliberalism-inspired religion the followers of this movement oppose, but also the kinds of alternatives they envision and attempt to implement. In the final section of the article, I discuss the ways in which the Emerging Church itself is characteristic of an ever-pervasive neoliberal rationality and whether it is able

9 Packard Josh, *The Emerging Church. Religion at the Margins*, Bolder, First Forum Press, 2012, 7.

10 Packard, Sanders, 2013, p. 438.

11 Carson D.A., *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church. Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005, 11 ff.; Cox Harvey, *The Future of Faith*, New York, Harper One, 2009, p. 218.

12 Harvey David, Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 610/1, 2007, p. 24.

to leave neoliberalized religion behind at all on its search for “genuine” and “authentic” faith.

The Nondenominational Evangelical Megachurch and Religious Neoliberalization

I use the term *neoliberalization* in distinction from *neoliberalism* to underscore its procedural nature; neoliberalization constantly progresses and is never an end-state. I strongly agree with Peck and Tickell’s argument that “ideologies of neoliberalism are themselves produced and reproduced through institutional forms and political action, since ‘actually existing’ neoliberalisms are always (in some way or another) hybrid or composite structures”¹³. Neoliberalization advances as its rationalities – I consciously use the plural to acknowledge diverse processes of neoliberalization occurring simultaneously in various societal fields – are ultimately internalized as objective realities in a group or society’s shared common meaning system¹⁴. This internalization not only guarantees the proliferation of a given set of ideas or practices, but also ultimately ensures their perception by the population as factual and even normative.

I define neoliberalization not as a purely external force, but as an internalized rationality that spawns new forms and outgrowths of neoliberalization in various societal spheres, including that of religion. Wendy Brown convincingly argues that the political rationality of neoliberalization “involves a specific and consequential organization of the social, the subject, and the state”¹⁵. She elaborates that

...a political rationality is a specific form of normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship. A political rationality governs the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth criteria of these domains. Thus, while neoliberal political rationality is based on a certain conception of the market, its organization of governance and the social is not merely the result of leakage from the economic to other spheres but rather of the explicit imposition of a particular form of market rationality on these spheres.¹⁶

In the American religious sphere, the nondenominational evangelical mega-

13 Peck Jamie, Tickell Adam, *Neoliberalizing Space*, *Antipode* 34/3, 2002, p. 383.

14 See Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) three-phase model of constructing common meaning systems, which is comprised of (1) externalization, or the production of symbolic structures through social interaction which become shared by the participants of this process; (2) objectification, when these symbolic structures are transferred to others that were not involved in shaping them (e.g. the next generation) and “come to confront [the individual] as a facticity outside of himself” (Berger, Luckmann, 1967: 60 f.); and (3) internalization, when the symbolic structures are reappropriated by the individual as reality.

15 Brown, 2006, p. 693.

16 Ibid.

church is arguably the most poignant example of the neoliberalization¹⁷. While the megachurch landscape is highly diverse and individual megachurches have incorporated the neoliberal rationality to differing degrees, the nondenominational evangelical megachurch model is clearly that of a private firm driven by market rationality¹⁸. Megachurches of this type aggressively market the variety and choice they offer. This includes not only the large number of worship services from which attendees may choose depending on their age group, music preferences, and other interests; it also includes an elaborate web of small groups that gather regularly to engage in a wide range of topics and activities¹⁹. In addition, these churches often have their own gyms, bookstores, and coffee shops, which contribute even more to the branding and marketization of the church²⁰. The small groups and choice of activities function as base support for the larger church, while all church activities focus to some extent on the charismatic figure of the pastor²¹. Prominent megachurch pastors of this type include Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas and Rick Warren of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lakeforest, California, for instance. They have published numerous books and resources, many of which focus on self-improvement and therapeutic approaches to everyday struggles²²; as the self-help market has expanded in the United States, the sale of such resources coming out of nondenominational evangelical megachurches has soared, creating important revenues for the churches²³. In this sense, the nondenominational evangelical megachurch clearly sports the three main features of neoliberal rationality as posited by Brown²⁴. It has adopted entrepreneurial rationality as normative; it is constructed in market terms, in the sense that members are seen as rational actors seeking personal gain and fulfilment of personal interests; and it is aimed at productivity and profitability in all of its activities.

Brown asserts that in the neoliberal logic, an individual's moral autonomy is measured by the capacity for self-care instead of the integration into a social,

17 Packard, Sanders, 2013, p. 440.

18 Ellingson, 2007, p. 7.

19 Wilford, 2012, 89 ff.; Chaves Mark, *All Creatures Great and Small. Megachurches in Context*, *Review of Religious Research* 47/4, 2006, 340. Putnam Robert D., Campbell David E., *American Grace. How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, New York, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2010, p. 164.

20 Bader-Saye Scott, *Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation*, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 6/1, 2006, p. 20.

21 Miller Donald E., *Reinventing American Protestantism. Christianity in the New Millennium*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, 14; Ammerman Nancy Tatom, *Pillars of Faith. American Congregations and Their Partners*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, 106 f.

22 Examples include "Your Best Life Now – 7 Steps to Living Your Full Potential" by Joel Osteen and "The Purpose-Driven Life" by Rick Warren.

23 Snow David A. et al, *A team field study of the appeal of megachurches. Identifying, framing, and solving personal issues*, *Ethnography*, 11/1, 2010, pp. 165-188.

24 Brown, 2006, p. 694.

communal support system²⁵. In nondenominational evangelical megachurches, this individualistic focus is reflected, for one, in worship styles: contemporary music with repetitive lyrics on the self and its role in the world; sermons that focus on individual moral behaviour; prayer teams offering private one-on-one prayers; and even self-serve Communion²⁶. For another, the growing market of religious self-help resources coming out of megachurches²⁷ reflects the neoliberal rationality of efficiency and profitability at the cost of accountability²⁸. The nondenominational evangelical megachurch remakes church into a private religious company that aggregates power and influence at the top and creates a consumerism-oriented membership base which perceives the variety of worship services, music, small groups, and other resources the church offers as participatory and enabling. This is a neoliberal fallacy, of course; choosing between options presented by top-down directives is neither participatory nor democratic. However, the approach clearly resonates with the broader entertainment and consumer culture that the modern Western individual finds him- or herself immersed in²⁹. This model of religious organizing and practice is heavily criticized for its entrepreneurial, consumerism-focused, and profit-centered neoliberal rationality from different groups in the American religious landscape. One such group, the Emerging Church, was born as a direct reaction to the growth of conservative evangelical Christianity and seeker sensitive approaches which megachurches began applying on a large scale in the 1980's and 90's in the United States³⁰. Consequently, the Emerging Church's critique of neoliberalized religious organizations necessarily becomes manifest in the alternative religious practices and ways of organizing it exhibits across the country.

The Emerging Church as a Critical Response to Religious Neoliberalization

In the United States, the Emerging Church evolved in the 1990's in large part as a reaction to the growth of conservative evangelical groups and the seeker sensitive approaches developed by nondenominational evangelical megachurches³¹

25 Ibid., p. 695.

26 Luhrmann Tanya, *When God Talks Back. Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship With God*, New York, Vintage Books, 2012, 4 ff.

27 See Luhrmann, 2012, 115 ff. for discussion on self-help therapy in evangelicalism.

28 Former megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll stepped down as pastor at Mars Hill Church in August 2014 following a series of scandals, including plagiarism and the inappropriate use of church funds (see Paulson Michael, A Brash Style That Filled Pews, Until Followers Had Their Fill, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/us/mark-driscoll-is-being-urged-to-leave-mars-hill-church.html?_r=0 (August 28, 2014)).

29 Roof Wade Clark, *Spiritual Marketplace. Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1999, p. 49.

30 Carson, 2005, 36 ff.

31 Marti, Gladys, 2014, p. 110; Carson, 2005, 36 ff.; Roof defines seeker churches as having the top priority "to reach

to attract people to large congregations, often located in the suburbs³². Although this was not the only factor leading to the growth of the Emerging Church – an increasing emphasis on the individual and on more interactive and democratic forms of religious participation are others – research such as that by Bielo suggests that megachurch criticism played a major role. According to Emerging Christians, megachurches “fail to reject a pervasive social ill: the never-ending impulse to brand, package, mass produce, and generally plot everything in terms of buying and selling”³³. My own research³⁴ indicates that as a lived and practiced critique, emerging church approaches are spreading to established religious organizations as an attempt to revitalize failing institutions. Denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), a mainline Protestant group known for its liturgical traditionalism and theological intellectualism, shares the criticism extended toward nondenominational evangelical megachurches and has begun to adopt certain emerging practices and organizational characteristics in its attempt to distance itself from conservative Evangelicalism. In what follows, I provide an overview of the Emerging Church and present first-hand empirical examples.

Emerging Church worldview

The first appearance of the Emerging Church as a more or less unified movement – although the term “movement” may imply more cohesion than is actually the case³⁵ – is often considered to be the publication of Brian McLaren’s book *A Generous Orthodoxy*³⁶, in which he attempts to transcend pre-existing labels such as evangelical, liberal, conservative, and fundamentalist.³⁷ This approach reflects broader aims within the Emerging Church to disassociate from dominant ways of framing the religious sphere in the United States, including the much discussed

those people who are curious about religion, asking questions and open to the possibility about faith. A long-term goal is to make believers of them, but to start with, programming and preaching center around the doubts and questions people bring with them” (1999, 95). Note that the Emerging Church has the same goals as seeker sensitive approaches, namely focusing on questions and doubts people have regarding faith and institutionalized religion, but obviously follows a different approach in addressing these issues.

32 Wilford, 2012, p. 7.

33 Bielo James S., *Emerging Evangelicals. Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity*, New York, New York University Press, 2011, p. 14.

34 I conducted qualitative empirical research – semi-structured interviews and (non)participant observation – in northern Wisconsin and Minnesota between February 2013 and May 2014.

35 Bader-Say, 2006, 12; Marti, Ganiel, 2014, p. 6.

36 McLaren Brian, *A Generous Orthodoxy. Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/calvinist, anabaptist/anglican, methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004.

37 Marti, Ganiel, 2014, p. 24; Bader-Say, 2006, 18; Tickle Phyllis, *Emergence Christianity. What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters*, Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2012, p. 101.

culture wars and the politicization of American religion³⁸, but also the encroachment of consumerism, choice, and profitability on the religion sphere. It sees the massive decline of church attendance in the United States since the 1990's³⁹ as stemming from the inability of institutionalized religion to convey the message of the Gospel in a way that resonates with modern society. Proponents of the Emerging Church argue that contemporary religious discourses and practices do not help Christians focus on the central tasks in this world as exemplified by the life and deeds of Jesus Christ⁴⁰.

Consequently, the majority of Emerging Church adherents orient themselves towards the first few centuries of Christianity, before it slowly became institutionalized as a state religion (a process initiated by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century C.E.)⁴¹. During the first three centuries after the life of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity was a minority religion, a movement that grew from the fringes of society to the centre because people were attracted by the message of the Gospel, particularly the promise of salvation⁴². An ELCA pastor in Duluth, Minnesota who has adopted emerging practices in her congregation referred to this time period when she commented in an interview on the direction in which she sees Christianity developing:

I'd say that the church will go back [to] the first, second, third century. And if that's the case, then the church will look a lot like the churches Paul started, where the bishop becomes the local evangelist that goes around and constantly visits and supports and encourages a small number of congregations⁴³.

The Emerging Church seeks to emulate early Christianity's vibrancy and growth by resituating religious practices outside of institutional boundaries and focusing on community and worship in participatory and contextually unique ways⁴⁴. While it contains substantial internal variation regarding practices and forms of organizing due to high levels of diversity, and Emerging Church adherents consequently share few unifying elements, those commonalities that do exist are fundamental enough to ensure enough cohesion to subsume a range of worshipping communities under the heading of "emerging".

Observers agree that what unites the Emerging Church is what its adherents

38 Hunter James Davison, *Culture Wars. The Struggle to Define America*, New York, Basic Books, 1991.

39 Putnam, Campbell, 2010, 120 ff.

40 Marti, Ganiel, 2014, 162 f.

41 Cox, 2009, p. 104.

42 Ibid., 77 ff.

43 Interview, Duluth, MN, August 2013

44 Wilford (2012) reminds us, however, that a focus on early Christianity can be found throughout the American religious spectrum; in fact, nondenominational evangelical megachurches such as Saddleback refer to the Bible's book of Acts, which tells of the early Christian church, to justify their extensive small group networks (99). Thus, the focus on early Christianity is by far not limited to the Emerging Church.

are against, more than what they stand for⁴⁵. They are disenchanted with institutionalized religion due to negative prior experiences, often in megachurches; in this sense, the Emerging Church is “a home for the ‘dechurched’ rather than the ‘unchurched’”⁴⁶. In the process of experimenting with alternative ways of being and doing church, Emerging Church adherents consider themselves as participating in “a ‘conversation’, albeit a lively one, that embraces irony and contradiction”⁴⁷. The conversation is open to anyone interested in participating and is aimed at a critical reflection of the Emerging Church and at the constant renegotiation of what it stands for. Fluidity and internal variety are encouraged by consciously avoiding labels and set definitions.

“Off the Grid” in Ashland, Wisconsin was a typical Emerging Church worshiping community. Although it has meanwhile dissolved due to changes in group composition, it nevertheless presents an insightful example: its members came from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds and regularly gathered in informal settings such as homes, cafés, and parks to tend relationships with each other and talk about issues such as faith, doubt, and institutionalized religion together. While the community was interested in pursuing an open and critical conversation, it was also eager to explore alternative approaches to “doing religion” by eclectically experimenting with religious practices. For instance, the group regularly sang traditional Lutheran hymns, had an annual Jewish Seder feast at Passover, and introduced Christian elements into milestone events such as baby showers. As the group’s initiator and leader described it to me in an interview,

[P]eople would just lean in and engage in the what-if, what-next with me, whether or not they had ever been in the church. And [what] continues to inform all my conversations in this community [...] is not that I know something or I believe something that you don’t, or that I turn to this source and you don’t, and I go to this place and you don’t, but the what-if, the what’s next, the authentic, honest inquiry [together]⁴⁸.

As a result of sustaining an open-ended conversation on what the church is and should be in the 21st century, the Emerging Church has experienced pressure from other religious groups regarding the movement’s position on various issues, ranging from social to theological. Conservative churches and denominations are particularly critical of the Emerging Church’s refusal to be pinned

45 Harrold Philip, Deconversion in the Emerging Church, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 6/1, 2006, 79ff.; Carson, 2005, 14 ff.

46 Packard, 2012, p. 8.

47 Marti, Ganiel, 2014, p. 5.

48 Interview, Ashland, WI, March 2013

down on doctrinal positions⁴⁹. The Emergent Village network, a US-based group within the Emerging Church, increasingly felt under pressure by these groups to release an official statement delineating its approaches and positions⁵⁰, a move which would inevitably have contradicted what Emergent Village stands for. In response, it released the *Doctrinal Statement(?)*⁵¹, which explains Emergent Village's (and by extension the Emerging Church's) reasons for objecting any fixed categories or stances. Packard notes that the statement, which he calls the "Anti-Statement of Faith", "aided the project of resistance by erasing even the possibility of an institutionalized ideology which could be pointed to or adopted without question"⁵². However, it is important to point out that megachurches are in fact criticized similarly for lacking doctrine⁵³. Doctrinal "sketchiness" is thus a prejudice that both the Emerging Church and the nondenominational evangelical megachurch are exposed to by theologically conservative denominations; this is only one example of similarity between these two seemingly very different groups. Beyond the level of theological and social discourse, the Emerging Church's emphasis on fluidity and constant renegotiation is also reflected on the levels of organization and religious practices.

Organizational characteristics

In terms of organizational structure, the Emerging Church's most important characteristic is the lack of elaborate hierarchy. Although the Emergent Village network is listed in the *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*⁵⁴, underscoring the larger movement's recognition in the American context⁵⁵, the Emerging Church consciously and intentionally rejects complex organizational and leadership structures⁵⁶. Instead, the contribution of all members of a worshipping community is emphasized to ensure contextual practices based on relationships and shared visions instead of on credentialed training and professional legitimacy. Packard lists three organizational characteristics that prevent the solidification of hierarchy and leadership structures: (1) an "inverted labour

49 Carson, 2005, 57 ff.

50 Packard, 2012, p. 78.

51 Jones Tony, LeRon Shults, *Doctrinal Statement(?)*, http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2006/05/doctrinal_state.html (September 3, 2014).

52 Packard, 2012, p. 78.

53 See for example Thumma Scott, *Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their characteristics and cultural context*, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html (June 6, 2015).

54 Atwood Craig D. (ed.) et al., *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 13th Ed., Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2010. – The handbook is produced by the United Methodist Church and recognized as an authoritative reference work by most US denominations.

55 Marti, Ganiel, 2014, p. 7.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

structure⁵⁷ in which the most prestigious positions (e.g. those of the clergy) are part-time or volunteer positions, while lower positions requiring less training are awarded a full salary to shift power and influence to members; (2) choosing leaders for their practical experience instead of formal training to facilitate lay leadership; (3) a focus on a cause which the group is committed to to encourage active participation in congregational life. While these characteristics may not apply to all groups that consider themselves part of the Emerging Church, they reflect the importance of structural democratization and equal participation of all members in church life. While the nondenominational evangelical megachurch pastor is the centre of attention and offers a variety of worship services and resources to attendees, the Emerging Church pursues a decidedly bottom-up approach of communal decision-making regarding congregational life. The idea is for congregation members to be actively involved and take the initiative instead of expecting the pastor to take over. Although the pastor is perceived as a spiritual guide and mentor and his or her leadership is valued, the contributions of all other group members are highly valued as well, if not more. The idea behind strong lay input is to ensure that the worship community “organically” develops in a direction advocated by its members instead of one advocated by its leaders. Inevitably, this requires considerably more effort by members than the top-down decision-making in nondenominational evangelical megachurches; it also requires leaders who are willing to share leadership and authority with others.

An emerging congregation with loose denominational ties in central Wisconsin maintains flat hierarchies and localized organizational structures despite the steeply hierarchical denomination that spawned it. The laity is not only heavily involved in the logistics and organization of congregational life, but also initiates and leads small groups and various outreach projects in the community and even takes over key elements of the worship service, something which the denomination in fact does not permit non-ordained individuals to do. The pastor told me in an interview,

[W]e really try to fly below the radar and not draw too much attention to ourselves [...], because we do have people who are not ordained preside at communion here, and we have non-ordained people who preach. One of our operating principles here is that if God has called us together to be church, then God will provide us the gifts that we need to be church. We just need to look around and ask, ‘Where are those at?’, ‘Who’s sitting on this gift of preaching?’, ‘Who’s able to preside?’. So we have lay presiders and lay preachers, but we don’t advertise that, because I know that would make it difficult [...]. And I think churches within the denomination that are growing, the ones that are more effective, are those that are willing to take a risk and be outside the box, and be different⁵⁸.

57 Ibid.

58 Interview, central Wisconsin (exact location withheld for reasons of anonymity), April 2014

This reveals the degree to which emerging practices and ways of organizing are taking root not only outside of, but within institutionalized religious organizations. Certain similarities to the structural set-up of megachurches again become apparent; megachurches also rely heavily on lay participation and leadership in small groups and other parts of congregational life, although pastoral leadership particularly as regards worship services is hardly shared with laity.

Emerging Church worshipping communities vary regarding the degrees of autonomy from larger religious bodies⁵⁹. Some are independent non-profit churches, such as Solomon's Porch⁶⁰ in Minneapolis, Minnesota; some are affiliated with or part of a denomination or other larger organization, such as the House for All Sinners and Saints⁶¹ in Denver, Colorado (which is an ELCA congregation, although by far not all members are Lutheran⁶²); and some emerging groups coalesce within denominational congregations as small groups and experiment with emerging practices as a supplication or alternative to regular congregational activities⁶³. The degree to which individual groups are involved in or identify with the Emerging Church varies across congregations precisely because there is no formal leadership that would officially welcome them into the movement. Instead, worshipping communities – whether entire congregations or small groups within them – gradually identify with the Emerging Church as an orientation towards emerging values becomes apparent. They become part of the movement to differing degrees, depending on goals, visions, commitment, and degrees of identification. Like other grassroots movements, emerging communities rely on the internet to stay connected with each other, to exchange ideas and approaches that seem fruitful, and to continue contributing to the larger conversation regarding what the Emerging Church stands for⁶⁴.

Religious practices and experimentation

Corresponding to the theological and organizational diversity within the Emerging Church, religious practices vary widely as well. Nonetheless, several uniting features exist in most emerging worshipping communities. Emerging groups seek to combine elements of contemporary culture and ancient tradition in their worship, a phenomenon known as *ancient-future worship*⁶⁵, to overcome

59 Packard, 2012, 25 f.; Bielo, 2011, 12 ff.

60 Solomon's Porch, Solomon's Porch, <http://www.solomonsporch.com/> (September 3, 2014).

61 House for All Sinners and Saints, House for All Sinners and Saints, <http://www.houseforall.org/> (September 3, 2014).

62 Ibid., <http://www.houseforall.org/whowear/> (October 2, 2014); See also Bolz-Weber Nadia, *Cranky, Beautiful Faith. For irregular (and regular) people*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2013.

63 See below for empirical examples from first-hand research in ELCA congregations in the Upper Midwest.

64 Drane, 2006, p. 9; Packard, 2012, 54 f.

65 Bielo, 2011, p. 75; Bader-Saye, 2006, p. 19.

the divide between traditional and contemporary forms of worship. Bader-Saye notes that

[u]nlike the ‘seeker-sensitive’ worship movement associated with Willow Creek or Vineyard churches, in which ‘worship’ was purged of most of its traditional distinctiveness, emerging worship reclaims all the accoutrements of piety – candles, icons, incense, kneeling and chanting – alongside the projection screens, electric guitars and televisions rolling looped images. The technological elements are intentionally subdued, made subservient to personal connection and spiritual reflection. Emerging worship tries to create the ambiance of the art gallery or the café rather than the excitement of the arena or the rock concert⁶⁶.

In emerging circles, ancient-future worship is considered key for experiencing God⁶⁷. Going beyond contemporary worship music and frontal sermonizing, emerging practices encourage the use of all five senses and a range of objects and materials⁶⁸, including not only incense and candles but also arts and crafts to creatively engage with one’s faith⁶⁹. Worship becomes an expressive experience that demands high levels of participation by worshippers. Another similarity to the megachurch becomes apparent in this instance: while megachurches typically do not rely on candles and incense, they are inevitably also highly experiential. Particularly Pentecostal megachurches are known for their degree of lay involvement in worship and for bodily experiences of the Holy Spirit. Although the atmosphere and types of experiences of the sacred differ, the Emerging Church and the Pentecostal megachurch share an emphasis on sensory and physical experiences of the divine.

The House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, an ELCA congregation that is an important group within the Emerging Church, has become widely known for its ancient-future worship style. Its pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, a woman of about 40 with full-body tattoos and a history of drug addiction and healing through faith, and a committed core group of laity combine liturgical practices, theological reflections, and social engagement in the community in ways that resonate with the local context⁷⁰. They describe themselves as “a group of folks figuring out how to be a liturgical, Christo-centric, social justice-oriented, queer-inclusive, incarnational, contemplative, irreverent, ancient/future church with a progressive but deeply rooted theological imagination⁷¹”. Housed in a classical church

66 Bader-Saye, 2006, p. 19.

67 Bielo, 2011, p. 74.

68 Ibid., p. 75

69 Ibid., 82 ff.

70 Bolz-Weber, 2013.

71 House for All Sinners and Saints, House for All Sinners and Saints, <http://www.houseforall.org/> (September 3, 2014).

building with stained-glass windows and high ceilings, they practice traditional Lutheran liturgy with plenty of contemporary elements and are known for their activities outside of the building as much as for their worship style. Some of their most popular ancient-future practices include Beer&Hymns, where the congregation gathers in a pub to sing High-Church music, and the Blessing of the Bicycles, where bicycles are officially blessed and their owners go for a communal bike ride⁷². In her autobiography, the pastor reflects on her early encounters with liturgy as an ancient-future practice that connects contemporary Christians with early Christianity:

I fell in love with the liturgy, the ancient pattern of worship shared mainly in the Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Episcopal churches. It felt like a gift that had been caretaken by generations of the faithful and handed to us to live out and caretake and hand off. Like a stream that has flowed long before us and will continue long after us⁷³.

Beyond ancient-future worship styles, another characteristic of Emerging Church practices is the idea of taking church into the world instead of trying to attract people to church. While nondenominational evangelical megachurches are geared towards centralizing religious and cultural activities in sprawling suburban buildings, Emerging Church adherents want to engage with local communities in ways that do justice to local contexts⁷⁴ – for example, by responding to locally specific challenges, nurturing existing strengths, and encouraging community cohesion. Two part-time pastors of a small congregation in Duluth, Minnesota which I conducted research in followed such an approach in the attempt to regrow their dying congregation. They invited young families from the community, most of which were not practicing members, for a series of conversations about what they like and dislike about church, their reasons for attending or staying away, and what they would do differently if they could. The discussion rounds intentionally targeted young adults and parents of small children to explore the specific needs and desires of families and families-to-be regarding congregational life. The issues which emerged went beyond family-related needs to include social outreach and a visible presence in the community as a core feature of the congregation. One participant said, “For me, it would be important to have a clear mission statement, like, what is it that the church wants to do? [...] [I]t’s important for me to know what the church is trying to achieve”⁷⁵. This example indicates the emphasis the Emerging Church puts on engaging with the wider world: the pastors included community members in the conversation on renew-

72 Ibid., *Stuff We Do*, <http://www.houseforall.org/getinvolved/stuffwedo.php> (October 2, 2014).

73 Bolz-Weber, 2013, 46 f.

74 Bader-Saye, 2006, p. 20.

75 Group discussion, Duluth, MN, August 2013

ing their congregation, and these in turn expressed their desire to support the neighbourhood through projects initiated in the congregation and elaborated together by members and non-members. It also underscores the fact that while Emerging Church adherents consider bearing witness to others a core task of practicing Christians, they also take the church into the world in order to learn from those outside of the church⁷⁶. They seek not only to sustain the Emerging Church conversation with each other, but to enter into dialogue and multi-stranded conversations with those that are not or not yet part of the movement.

Emerging Church adherents typically consider themselves as being on a faith journey⁷⁷, aided and nurtured by relationships with a variety of people, both churched and unchurched. Their criticism of neoliberalized religion stems in large part from the fact that organizations like nondenominational evangelical megachurches employ top-down, programmatic structures and events in attracting people to church; in contrast, the Emerging Church values “organic” relationships, which it perceives as more “genuine” and “authentic”⁷⁸. Ideally, this would overcome the self-absorption that neoliberal rationality propagates in all spheres of life and reorient members towards God and each other⁷⁹. An ELCA congregation in Superior, Wisconsin has a small group for young adults in their 20’s and 30’s which was created in order to better engage young people in the church, as this age group is almost entirely nonexistent in the denomination⁸⁰. The group meets once a month in someone’s home, a pub, a restaurant, or on the shore of Lake Superior for a conversation on varying topics relating to faith in the broadest sense. Sometimes Bible passages are examined and interpreted; sometimes church life and institutionalized religion are critically discussed and alternatives debated; and sometimes the topic is more general, addressing challenges members face and fears they might have. While the group’s members are enthusiastic about every meeting, only few of them attend worship regularly and participate in the life of the larger congregation. Interestingly, the group’s leader, who is also the congregation’s pastor, is careful not to pressure them into attending worship and being more active in the congregation. Instead, he encourages them to focus on the small group and on translating the issues discussed there into everyday practice to foster a more holistic lifestyle. He sees the small group

76 Bader-Saye, 2006, p. 20.

77 Marti, Ganiel, 2014, p. 158.

78 Bielo, 2011, p. 120.

79 However, the relational aspect of belonging to small groups in megachurches as a crucial foundation of these churches’ success cannot be overlooked when assessing the Emerging Church’s criticism. For instance, Wilford (2012) devotes an entire chapter to the central role of nurturing genuine relationships in small groups at the megachurch Saddleback, noting that participation in these cell groups, often held in people’s homes, is noticeably higher than worship attendance on the main church campus (89 ff.).

80 Wuthnow Robert, *After the Baby Boomers. How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2007, 73 ff.

meetings as worship gatherings in their own right, because they revolve around the Bible, church, and faith, and more importantly are based on a network of relationships from which he hopes a sustainable and organic worshipping community will emerge. Interestingly, such age-specific small groups can be found in every nondenominational evangelical megachurch and in fact present a crucial pillar of megachurch culture. While Emerging Church proponents, such as the leader of the 20's and 30's group, acknowledge this similarity, they point out that the underlying theology and vision of orthopraxy in emerging communities is entirely different than in megachurches.

The strand of neo-monasticism in the Emerging Church takes the concept of orthopraxy – of adopting a Christian lifestyle as modelled by Jesus – one step further. Neo-monasticists invite people to live communally with others of like mind and adopt certain practices from monastic traditions that encourage the development of a collective memory⁸¹. One of the most vocal and visible proponents of neo-monasticism is Shane Claiborne of The Simple Way in Philadelphia⁸². Claiborne founded The Simple Way as an emerging inner-city community whose members continually reach out to the community and support those in need by their presence and activity⁸³. Besides focusing on immediate needs, for instance through food and clothes drives, they also pursue long-term projects for a better future for the most disadvantaged members living in the local community. This includes helping children with homework, helping young adults find work, and raising money to pay the tuition of first-generation college students who would otherwise not be able to afford an education⁸⁴. In all its engagement, The Simple Way is driven by its commitment to following Jesus as depicted in the Bible and perceives a communal approach to this endeavour as the most fruitful⁸⁵.

The Emerging Church is thus critical of the centrality of commodification of religion through neoliberalization, arguing that consumerism goes to the detriment of basic Christian tenets such as kindness, selflessness, and brotherly love. Directly related to this, it disapproves of the central role of personal self-interest in neoliberal rationality, which it sees as dismantling the basis for altruism and an orientation toward the common good. It objects the divide between sacred and profane realms of life that the nondenominational evangelical megachurch propagates with its sprawling suburban church campuses, a system which removes individuals from their neighbourhoods and makes them much less likely to address the challenges in their immediate local contexts. The Emerging Church is opposed to hierarchical organizational structures and the professional-

81 Bielo, 2011, 99 ff.

82 Ibid., p. 100.

83 Claiborne Shane, *The Irresistible Revolution. Living as an Ordinary Radical*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2006.

84 TheSimpleWay, News and Updates Archive, <http://thesimpleway.org/index.php/about/archive/sustain-today> (September 4, 2013).

85 Ibid., Our Commitments, <http://thesimpleway.org/about/our-commitments/> (September 4, 2014).

ization of leadership, and the subsequent status inequality between leaders and members. In a similar vein, it disapproves of top-down programming of church culture and activities, propagating instead that all members should be involved in “being church” equally. Regarding worship, the Emerging Church is critical of the lack of traditional elements and rituals and the over-accommodation of contemporary culture. Finally, it objects declarative and revelatory truths and using pressure and guilt to keep people in church, instead opting to lead an open and open-ended conversation with a variety of people and groups. In fact, it “intentionally invite[s] unpredictability”⁸⁶ and seeks to maintain a high level of messiness⁸⁷ in direct opposition to the preconceived, streamlined, and controlled activities of the nondenominational megachurch.

Neoliberalization in the Emerging Church

The Emerging Church, it is a movement (for the lack of a better term) that is deeply critical of various institutionalized and neoliberalized ways of religious organizing and practicing and is absorbed in a range of discourses and practical experiments regarding how to do church in more genuine and authentic ways. However, a closer look at the Emerging Church’s structures and practices reveals that it is influenced more by what it critiques than many adherents may be aware of. I argue that interestingly, its organizational features, varieties of orthopraxy, and guiding philosophy show clear tendencies of neoliberalization. This is not surprising given the all-encompassing, pervasive logic of neoliberal rationalities in late capitalism; all individuals and institutions existing within capitalist structures have arguably internalized this logic to a certain degree⁸⁸. In this sense, the Emerging Church cannot escape the structures and rationalities that formed it and that it continually interacts with in voicing critique of the same⁸⁹: it is shaped by processes of neoliberalization despite its decided opposition to them.

For one, due to the lack of higher organizational levels that would provide standardized decision-making and implementation procedures, the Emerging Church relies entirely on its members to invest large amounts of time and effort to support it. Packard notes that because Emerging Church members are expected to contribute so much time and energy to their worshipping communities, most adherents are young adults who have no children or other time-consuming

86 Packard, 2012, p. 129.

87 Ibid.

88 Brown, 2006, p. 693.

89 This assessment is based on Margaret Archer’s theory of morphogenesis, which cannot be elaborated on here for reasons of scope. See especially Archer Margaret S., *Culture and Agency. The Place of Culture in Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1988; Archer Margaret S., *Realist Social Theory. The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1995; Archer Margaret S., *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2000.

commitments⁹⁰; they are willing and able to volunteer their time to an extent that is not possible for, say, middle-aged working parents⁹¹. This represents a type of decentralization and de-bureaucratization that resonates with the neoliberal rationality of entrepreneurial individuals. At this point it is important to emphasize that while the nondenominational evangelical megachurch is highly centralized and programmatically streamlined, it is neoliberalized in the sense that it out-sources many of the religious services it offers – small groups, prayer chains, religious education, and more – from religious professionals to volunteers who contribute to the megachurch’s success by investing their time and effort free of charge. The organizational set-up of this type of megachurch and the Emerging Church is thus strikingly similar: the former is built on a cone-shaped structure of volunteer activity, coordinated and led by the pastor and a group of church employees at the top, while the latter consists of a broad grassroots network of volunteers with some paid employees here and there.

In a similar vein, because individuals have so much influence in shaping their own religious practices and ways of organizing, they usually shape them according to the group members’ interests⁹². As a result, individual self-interest – a main tenet of neoliberal rationality – plays a central role in establishing contextual religious practices, even if these are meant to benefit the wider community. In the sense that its primary purpose is to cater contextually to the members that participate in establishing it, the Emerging Church can be perceived as revolving around the fulfilment of personal interests. While clearly not consumer-driven in the sense of the nondenominational evangelical megachurch, it takes individual goals and motivations as its point of departure. Although these come together in a loosely defined shared vision, namely nurturing authentically Christian lifestyles to improve the quality of life for all, the standards by which “authenticity” and “orthopraxy” are measured vary from one group to the next. Consequently, the Emerging Church exhibits and fosters high degrees of religious individualization⁹³ and focus on the self⁹⁴, both of which are also typical of neoliberalization⁹⁵.

Finally, I argue that the continual renegotiation of what the Emerging Church stands for – letting the movement perpetually redefine itself without any basic theological framework – is characteristic of neoliberalization. While prominent Emerging Church leaders hold degrees in theology⁹⁶, the general rejection of

90 Packard, 2012, p. 141.

91 In fact, this leads him to wonder whether “in the long term, the Emerging Church simply becomes a middle stop for Christians between the churches of their youth and the family friendly churches of adulthood” (ibid.).

92 See Wheelan Susan (ed.), *The Handbook of Group Research and Practice*, Thousand Oaks, SAGE, 2005 for an introduction to social group theory.

93 Marti, Ganiel, 2014, p. 179.

94 Ibid., p. 191.

95 Harvey, 2007, p. 24; Brown, 2006, p. 695.

96 For example Doug Pagitt, Brian McLaren, Rob Bell.

theological training and education as prerequisites for leadership and authority potentially spawns a kind of anti-intellectualism that is reminiscent of non-denominational evangelical megachurches and other neoliberalized institutions⁹⁷. Deconstruction, eclecticism, and Do-It-Yourself mentalities replace adherence to received traditions; the objective authority of a given religious tradition is substituted by the authority of the self and its continual search for “authenticity” in postmodernity⁹⁸. Rejecting any form of institutional backing or guidance, the Emerging Church is intentionally thrown back on itself in the processes of interpreting the Bible and cultivating Christian orthopraxy. Just as the market automatically regulates itself in the neoliberal logic, Emerging Church adherents are perceived to develop “better” ways of doing church when left to their own devices in the emerging logic.

Commenting on the entanglements between neoliberalization and the Emerging Church, a blogger uses different vocabulary but argues in a similar vein:

Institutions in the debt economy discipline subjects into a new form of subjectivity. We must build our personal brand and bring every aspect of our lives into the realm of exchange. Perpetually in debt, we are all required to deepen the “self,” because it is towards this biometrically reduced self that our debts are targeted. We must take responsibility for our selves, always fostering our creativity and injecting more and more energy into the institutions within which we participate.⁹⁹

The argument that the Emerging Church is inherently influenced by neoliberal rationalities despite its rejection of the same does not discredit its achievements as a critical and innovative movement. Emerging Church adherents bring abundant energy and imagination to rethinking and remaking church. The argument does however underscore the pervasiveness of neoliberalization even in spaces that are intended to be free of it. Peck and Tickell posit that processes of opposition and innovation in late capitalism are characterized by “a constantly shifting landscape of experimentation, restructuring, (anti)social learning, technocratic policy transfer, and partial emulation”¹⁰⁰ instead of an increasingly unvaried, homogenous outcome. Neoliberalized rationalities thus spread into different societal spheres in diverse and sometimes not immediately apparent forms. An awareness of this logic is necessary for projects of resistance, in order to enable modifications in the philosophies, structures, and actions of oppositional movements.

97 Wolfe Alan, *The Transformation of American Religion. How We Actually Live Our Faith*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003, 67 ff.

98 Marti, Ganiel, 2014, 184; Roof, 1999, p. 130.

99 Keating Stephen, Neoliberal Church?, <http://itself.wordpress.com/2013/04/10/neoliberal-church/> (October 2, 2014).

100 Peck, Tickell, 2002, p. 396.

Conclusion

The nondenominational evangelical megachurch is a prime example of the neoliberalization of the religious sphere in late capitalism. It commodifies religion by marketing choice and entertainment in worship and small groups, relocating community, education, and religious culture to a centralized setting to best cater to the members as consumers, branding resources and church leadership, and focusing on creating revenues. In one sense, the Emerging Church can be perceived as a critical response to this megachurch model and as an oppositional movement against neoliberalized forms of organizing and practicing religion. A home for those disenchanted with institutionalized religion, it firmly rejects fixed labels, the codification of beliefs, the professionalization of organizational structures, and the streamlining of practices. Instead, it seeks to sustain an open conversation and the constant renegotiation of what defines the movement and what its adherents stand for. This includes contextual practices and theologies; a holistic faith approach that dismantles the divide between the immanent and the transcendent; taking church into the community to learn from and better serve others; and nurturing “authentic” relationships to help organic growth. In terms of organizational structure, it intentionally maintains extremely low levels of professionalization and flat hierarchies and expects heavy involvement by all members.

Despite its critique of neoliberalized religious organizations, however, the Emerging Church nevertheless demonstrates neoliberal tendencies of its own. These include the privatization of functions that would otherwise be public-administrative and remunerated; the centrality of the individual and its self-interest in eclectically interpreting the Bible and assembling religious practices; and the decentralized, self-perpetuating redefinition of what the Emerging Church is and stands for, which defies control and authority and is reminiscent of neoliberal free market logic. Importantly, clear parallels exist between nondenominational evangelical megachurches and the Emerging Church, such as deemphasizing formal training for clergy, a focus on bodily experience in worship, the centrality of small group membership, and the aim of meeting the interests of the individual, although in different ways. While this does not discredit the Emerging Church’s achievements, it does underscore the omnipresence of neoliberalization even in spaces that consciously reject it and attempt to construct alternatives.

Late modern and neoliberal rationalities are arguably inseparably intertwined and conceptions of freedom, autonomy, the individual, choice, and other tenets overlap in both¹⁰¹. The fact that Emerging Church philosophy, practices, and ways of organizing are characteristic of neoliberalization in their own way raises the crucial question whether it is possible at all for the Emerging Church as a late modern project to be a project of opposition to neoliberalization. This could be

101 Harvey, 2007, p. 24.

a fruitful point of departure for further research. To conclude, I wish to emphasize that the explicit rejection on part of the Emerging Church of neoliberalized religious organizations in the United States continues to cause important reverberations in the religious landscape, forcing a range of institutionalized religious groups to critically assess and even innovate their organizational structures, religious practices, and approaches to theology and authority.

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Марен Фројденберг

НОВЕ ЦРКВЕ КАО КРИТИЧКИ ОДГОВОР НА НЕОЛИБЕРАЛИЗАЦИЈУ ВЕРСКОГ МОЗАИКА У АМЕРИЦИ

Сажетак

Нова црква је настала у САД деведесетих година прошлог века као реакција на осетљиве приступе за тражење верника од стране неденоминацијских евангеличких мегацркве. Ове мегацркве су познате по томе што комодификују религију и припаднике цркве као потрошаче, и као такве, оне суглавни примери неолиберализације америчког верског мозаика. Супротно томе, нове цркве се супростављају институционализованим и неолибералним верским праксама и структурама, и уместо тога акценат стављају на локалне и контекстуалне организације и праксе као пример „аутентичног хришћанског“ живота. Али и поред тога, нове цркве показују и неке карактеристике неолиберализације, које ја откривам користећи Венди Браун и њену дефиницију неолибералне рационалности. Ово поставља питање да ли је критика неолиберализације уопште могућа у модерној ери.

Кључне речи: нове цркве, неолиберализација, религија, мегацркве, постмодерна

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