After the McDonaldization of the Church

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John Drane, formerly the head of the practical theology department of the University of Aberdeen and now teaching in the Emerging Church program of University of Manchester (while also being adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary) became well known with the release of his *The McDonaldization of the Church...Spiritual Creativity and the Future of the Church* (2000) where he sought to identify trends in the (dwindling) Western church which were unhinging it from relevancy to the majority of the population.

I confess I did not know of John Drane until my own daughter, off to Aberdeen University from New York for a Masters in practical theology, began mentioning one particular professor. She started attending a weekly dinner at the home of a very engaging professor, who, along with his wife, created a Sunday afternoon refuge for my daughter and others whose home addresses spanned the globe. You’ve guessed it by now, it was the home of John and Olive Drane.

*After McDonaldization: Mission, Ministry, and Christian Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty* is, for all intents and purposes, a sequel to *The McDonaldization*. Having raised multitudinous issues and problems with how the church was doing church in the 1990’s, Drane seeks here to deepen and extend his analysis by not only clarifying the problems he sees in the church, but offering possible ways forward. He does not do so with a skeptical or adversarial spirit. Rather, Drane clearly loves the church, is committed to the church, and believes in the church. He early points out that his analysis is of the church in the “global North” which includes North America, Europe, and Australasia.

He acknowledges the problem the church faces is multidimensional (p.5). As one might expect, then, Drane explores trends and conceptualizations that encompass insights from cultural studies (Chapter 1, Culture), the social sciences (Chapter 2, Community) and Biblical/Studies (Chapter 3, Mission, Chapter 4, Ministry, and Chapter 5, Theology).
In Chapter One, *Culture*, Drane posits that the idea that people hold an overarching world view, and that all the church has to do is to figure this out and speak to it, is now nonsense. The migration of people, the access of information about and communication with people *anywhere, anytime*, has unhinged so much of what once made society and culture coherent. The truth is, “nothing seems to work the way it once did” (p.11). Rapid change, the realization that people in other countries live differently than we do, and happily so, loosens our own loyalties to the past and the institutions that preserved that past. Furthermore, while we may not now daily fear global nuclear holocaust as people did from the fifties to though the eighties, now we realize terrorism can intrude and profoundly impact our lives without warning.

All of this change, the unhinging and unsettling of our thinking overarched by the fear of loss, has profoundly impacted the way we experience community. Chapter 2 (Community) posits that rapid cultural change has caused “…significant numbers of people throughout the world to feel that their lives are impoverished because we have somehow lost the capacity to create an sustain effective community” (p.29). Drane agrees with Peter Berger’s analysis that “urban tribes” are spontaneously arising (p.38), people who happen to be at the same place at the same time routinely. Drane points out that, in theory, the church should be that place where lonely people are welcomed as they are. Unfortunately, his own personal experience (p.42) shows this is often not the case.

In the remaining three chapters (Mission, Ministry, Theology) we are, as it were, on a journey of discovery with the author. One thing that makes the book so powerful is the author’s skillful weaving of his own discovery in these areas. For example, he was flabbergasted that the business leader of a large community renewal festival in Glasgow suggested that Drane’s association of churches be in charge of an entire day of the huge festival site and the theme be related to the Bible.(p.62). It became obvious to these church leaders that humm…God was working out in front of them, as He always seems to be doing actually.

Introduced are six types of people that have different needs and therefore are (vastly) different in which aspect of the Gospel or the church they will find connection. He comments on the desperate poor. the hedonists, the traditionalists, the spiritual searches, the secularists, the apathetic and the corporate achievers as all distinct in their
mental framework. Some will be drawn by quality of life experiences, others by
traditional experiences, and others by high energy experiences (p.80).

*After McDonalidization* works well as a conceptual whole in several respects.

Dranes’ humility is evident throughout. He is not thundering from on high. He takes the
stance of a fellow traveler and learner. His use of story is frequent, relevant, and
powerful. The reader is drawn into his experiences. I myself could relate to the
pain/discomfort/surprise/astonishment in many of his stories. This book is NOT a dry,
boring read. It is hard to think of an aspect of church, culture, and the future that Drane
does not treat with insight, thoroughness, and hope.

Dranes anticipates the protests of sociologists in his categorizing peoples of the
Global North into six subgroups. He readily admits that his scheme is not based on social
science research, only observation of himself and others (p.65). Perhaps subsequent
researchers will lend academic legitimacy to these classifications.

My only real “issue” the book is his criticism that worship today represents a
“dumbing-down” from the past (p.114). Today’s worship (he says) is too focused on the
person and her/his own experiences. I disagree with this assessment...many of the
hymns I recall from the fifties and sixties were about the personal experiences of the
believer. “I’m pressing on the upward way, new heights I’m gaining, everyday, but one
thing, that I have found, Lord plant my feet on higher ground” (Higher Ground, by John
Oatman, b.1856) is a representative example. Drane thinks that people’s stories are
important, and the church needs to find a way to engage people and their stories. Isn’t it
to be expected then, that some will want to give expression in a way that is accessible to
others? Much of worship music today is about personal story, just as it has been in the
past.

All in all, though, this is a wonderful book that will spark discussion, creativity,
and very likely Kingdom progress in connecting the church with our fast changing
culture.

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