

God, the Church and the World: Two Paradigms

Geoff Boyce, 2014 and 2021

The theological insights of the Dutch Catholic theologian Erik Borgman shine a light on a modern dilemma for the church – a relevance gap from the perspective of the world.

What follows is my take on the thrust of Borgman's argument, which he presented within the context of university chaplaincy at the Conference of European University Chaplains.

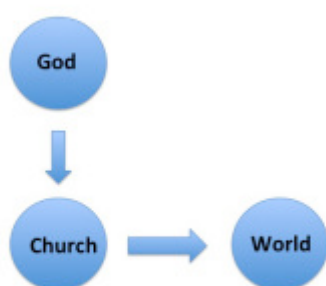


Fig. 1 Traditional church consciousness

Borgman suggests that the typical consciousness of the church assumes that the world is god-less and in need of salvation. The world is the domain of sin. The church mediates the means of salvation between God and the world. God has revealed the means of salvation to the church. Christians within this paradigm are the church's representatives bringing the good news of salvation to 'unsaved' people in the world, or pastoring the church's adherents in the world.

The church is discovering that the world is not interested in the church's 'answers' and finds such a paternalistic approach offensive. The church, if it is listening at all to feedback from the 'World', is being given the message that the World's people (at least in the West) are "spiritual, but not religious". Commitment to institutional religion has declined dramatically and continues to do so – which may be an indicator that the traditional approach, based on the assumptions underlying figure 1. is failing in the very mission it has assumed for itself.

Many churches are responding to this failure by 'trying harder'. Or by importing 'programs' which purport 'church growth'.

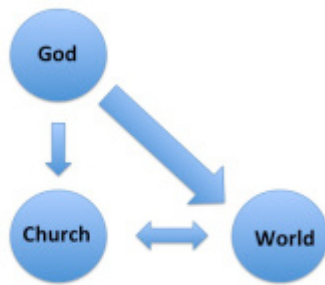


Fig. 2 God-in-the-world consciousness

Borgman argues:

*Theologically, it is the task of churches to respond to Gods salvific presence **in the midst** of our confusing world, not to preach their own presence as salvation **from** the confusing world. The pastoral task to be and stay close to people in their experiences, is based on the firm belief that it is there that God is kenotically present, as the Biblical traditions teach.*

Borgman is not suggesting the traditional approach 'in situ' – that is a Figure 1 approach that embeds itself in the world, like a journalist in a combat unit. He is suggesting something far more radical.

The Church should not be seen as the community of those firmly convinced of the truth of their tradition, but as the community of people seeking the support of the Christian tradition to discover Gods salvific presence in the world, and to walk — and to help others to walk – the path to true life God's presence opens.

This understanding radically changes everything.

At the heart of this God-in-the-world approach is the conviction that God is present and active *in the world*. The Christian is therefore looking for the activity of God *in the world*, to cooperate and support that activity, not seeing herself as an agent of the church mediating God to the world (nor a mere agent of the institution).

This, incidentally, is perhaps why many effective chaplains, effective from the point of view of the institutions in which they work, often find participation in traditional church life so problematic and say they “don't feel at home” there – if they attend church at all! They feel at home in the world, where they find God. They are often uncomfortable in church culture.

While the church continues to assume the model of figure 1 and enlightened Christians increasingly discover and embrace the model of figure 2 it is likely that we will see the following:

1. the churches defunding engagement based on the assumptions of Figure 2 because it cannot see how such mission delivers the goods according to the assumptions of figure 1 and does not contribute to 'church growth'.*
2. Institutions embracing a secular chaplaincy model that is inclusive and articulated in terms of spirituality and religious diversity.
3. A refusal by chaplains to engage in conscious attempts at 'evangelization' in the narrow sense..

It may be that chaplains become prophets to the church, agents in the church's own reformation, by helping the church examine how it has arrived at such a position of impotence. But more likely, quietly withdraw from church life.

In my view, the church should reject the assumptions of Figure 1 and its concomitant outmoded structures. It may then be in a better position to interrogate any addiction to a self-interested exercise of power and any propensity for denial, in the hope of protecting itself. And may position itself for creative support of what God is already doing in the world.

Reference:

Borgman-Notes

<https://geoffboyce.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Borgman-Notes.pdf>

(Notes distributed at Borgman's presentation at the Conference of European University Chaplains)

* The distinction between the theologies represented by Fig.1 and Fig. 2 might help understand why the church instinctively privileges Sunday worship and Minister of the Word and the institutions that support them.