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**Paper: 'Communities of Resistance: faith as the new cultural avant-garde?'**  
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One would rightly assume that the cultural sector (the publicly-subsidised realm of arts performance, practice and display) is a fruitful and ever-evolving realm of ideas, imagination, and free thinking. Its relative autonomy and freedom from the instrumental and organisational exigencies of the economy lend weight to our assumption of its social value. Artistic culture can surely move beyond the provisional problem-solving methodologies that preoccupy the public policy mind-set, and further, can develop forms of participation, engagement and mutual interests that move beyond the ideologically-ridden strife of political party allegiances. Artistic culture promises (and indeed, on some level delivers) a philosophically more profound meditation on society and the shape of contemporary life, and a more perceptive interrogation of the aesthetic and intellectual conditions of social well-being.

And yet, it is the case that the cultural sector, despite its sophisticated institutional mediation of artistic cultural practices, barely registers its presence in the orbit of political deliberations we refer to as the public sphere. The sub-text of my paper is a complaint, that the cultural sector could make more of an impact on public discourse, more broadly engaging with the political conditions of social life. Arguably it does not. The subject of the paper, however, is 'faith communities', which I argue (albeit briefly) are a significant yet ignored part of the cultural sector. Faith communities could play a role in developing a cultural public sphere, or ways in which 'culture' becomes a substantive discourse on *social* life.

The purpose of this paper is largely theoretical – yet motivated by six months of ad hoc research, travelling around the UK visiting 55 faith groups, from churches to mosques, monastic base communities to evangelistic and lobby organizations. This quasi-expedition was not framed by ethnographic methodology or any other pre-set data gathering. It was simply a 'scoping' exercise in identifying research issues, concerns and interested parties. My interest in culture moves beyond the sociological confines of the individual agency, organisational and institutional structures of cultural production, its products, distribution and consumption. With 'faith' the 'aesthetics' of cultural production (the spaces, social interaction

and dynamics of communication, the experience of symbolic and ritually-embedded values, and so on) are just as important. My experience was rich – I am now attempting to formulate some theoretical questions on the current cultural conditions of faith in this country, and future possibilities. I do so as I witnessed how faith communities demonstrate an extraordinary range of cultural competencies, maintain unique facilities, strategic management practices, transnational networks and organizational formations of all kinds – yet find themselves excluded from the usual public policy contexts in which cultural production is awarded privileged attention.

Of course, the status of ‘religion’ in modern society has always been problematic, and more so if religion maintains an emphatic relationship with public culture, like the Roman Catholic or Orthodox church in southern Europe. Unlike most of contemporary culture, however, religion and religious groups (I’ll attend to the distinction between faith and religion in a moment), have rarely been seamlessly unified with State power. Today, religion continues to maintain a high level of autonomy, and is actually not often successfully co-opted by particular social or political movements (however much social and political movements have mobilised religious sentiment or values). Moreover, religion is fairly resilient against the onslaught of consumer capital and the envelopment of artistic culture within the cycles of general consumption and distribution.

On the whole, religion is remarkably successful as a cultural enterprise. It accomplishes something every political regime or other kind of organization fails to do – manage ‘cultural transmission’, or the historic self-perpetuation of specific and consistently held doctrines, values, organizational formations and leadership. It does so over generations, and centuries and vast geographic spaces. Religion maintains the power to affect individual as well as collective experience and subjective or social re-orientation, as well as basic forms of community cooperation. As noted by major writers in the ‘secularization’ debates (from Casanovas to Habermas) the surprising rise of new religious social formations demonstrate an ability to arm their members with an ethically-charged lexicon of articulate beliefs, engendering a certain cultural reflexivity in their orientation to consumer society. More than most ordinary citizens, religious adherents possess an ability to resist societal norms or economic trends. In my preliminary fieldwork I encountered many young educated groups of Christians, Muslims and Jews, who demonstrated an extraordinary level of critical awareness of the ethical dynamics of consumer society and the complex changing relationship between civil associations and the State.

We are no doubt familiar with the current rhetorical characterisations of 'faith' in the public sphere, reinforcing their public policy exclusion from the cultural sector. For the media, faith is depicted as culturally outmoded religion struggling to reconcile everyday life in contemporary secular society with idealistic aspirations for humanity underwritten by some barely conceivable metaphysical power. Of course, as a sophisticated and psychologically nuanced form of superstition it is socially useful as a palliative for grief or the anxieties of old age, and for the preservation of the ancient ecclesiastical arts, particularly music, and heritage more broadly.

In recent public policy and Government common rhetorical characterisations of faith are, perhaps ironically, more favourable: since the mid-years of New Labour, (from around David Blunkett's Home Office report in 2004: 'Working Together: cooperation between Government and faith communities') the term religion was strategically substituted for 'faith'. 'Faith communities' were enthusiastically enrolled in New Labour's public policy as dynamic sociological expressions of identity and historical ethical traditions, useful in neighbourhood and social welfare ventures (a good overview of such can be found in Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes' *Faith in the Public Realm*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2009).

Lastly, for the New Atheists (led by Hitchens, Dawkins, et. al.) – perhaps most influential in educational and media spheres – the persistence of religious groups is just one, albeit culturally pivotal, expression of a fundamental philosophical irrationalism. For Hitchens religion is the anti-enlightenment impulse in all authoritarianism, breeding social 'extremism' and a sensibility prone to prejudice (Hitchens, 2007). On account of its perceived relation to traditional patriarchal 'family values', faith bears a natural affinity with the political Far Right (though, curiously not with the Far Left, even though most religions are by their nature about collective allegiance and community).

For me, there are two interesting characteristics of the New Atheists. First is their somewhat outmoded enlightenment rationalism (has Dawkins ever read Popper or Feyerabend? Has Hitchens ever heard of postmodernism and the epistemological challenge of anti-foundationalism?) Second, the New Atheists are consciously *post-secular* atheists; that is, theirs is a *neo-enlightenment* rationalism consciously using scientific rationalism as a *cultural discourse* not a scientific one (hence the repeated consternation of many in the scientific community over Dawkins' more radical claims for evolution against religious

belief). Scientific credibility is not where their claims stand or fall. They attain to cultural credibility, eliding fact/value distinctions and the real epistemological problems science has in constructing historical narratives from highly fragmentary empirical data. In all, with a side-glance at the USA and the very tight correlation between religion and collective political behaviour, many in the UK today would concur that religion is not desirable as a force in political life, not even as a cultural resource for marginalised communities (outlined by American scholars like Rhys Williams), not even 'culture wars' as defined by James Davison Hunter (Hunter, 1992).

It seems to me that the Left-Liberal paranoia about religion is more influenced by the USA, than UK, experience of what has become an extremely diverse and quite fascinating realm of faith practices and communities. If anything, I would accuse the faith sector of failed nerve in blithely tolerating such a catalogue of political judgements derived from a partial and stereotypical view of the American culture wars. For the most part faith groups remain in their sub-cultural enclave and do not demand much of a role in public culture (beyond the 'official' voice of the mainstream Anglican clergy). My gambit is that the emergence of a more vocal and challenging faith sector could become a catalyst for *the arts and culture sphere itself* to move out its own rather grand and handsomely patronised sub-cultural enclave. [As an aside: redefining public culture as a cultural 'sector' was a strategic New Labour policy development, affecting a shift in the categorisation of the arts from the nebulous realms of subsidised patrimony and heritage into 'industry', while still maintaining its once-removed status from the public sphere.]

Faith communities, then, need to be theoretically re-positioned, as part of cultural policy discourse, where faith communities are assessed as autonomous organs of cultural production. Cultural policy is primarily a politics of recognition – it possesses the discursive authority to enfranchise emergent organizations and groups in a national discussion on culture, values, cultural rights and liberties, legitimate expressions of identity, and so on. Cultural policy then entails the leverage of resources and their distribution. I speak from a new strain of cultural policy research – *Implicit cultural policy* analysis, such as the recent work of Oliver Bennett and Jeremy Ahearne (Ahearne, 2009). Their research has attempted (among other things) to locate and uncover the way organizations or social movements not admitted or belonging to the 'cultural sector' act nonetheless as agents of significant cultural action.

In travelling the terrain of faith in this country, I encountered what I recognised as familiar rhetorical characteristics in the visual culture, spatialization, and choreography of faith with what I would define as 'avant-garde cultural production'. My theoretical work therefore involves re-positioning 'faith' as a cultural practice within public policy discourse using the idea of 'faith as a contemporary cultural avant-garde'. The concept and historical phenomena of the European avant-gardes, of course, are in part only deployed by way of analogy or used as an heuristic. Yet it is more than that. In a more extensive argument (that would go beyond this paper) I would attempt to explain the general consensus among art historians and critics on how an artistic (art movement or art world) avant-garde is impossible in the present time (the work of T.J. Clarke, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, Thierry de Duve, argue that the conditions for avant-garde art are generally unavailable, as indeed the conditions for any kind of radical social change under capitalism is impossible). I would respond to this by pointing out that avant-garde cultural formations can operate beyond the practice of art-making, and that the discursive 'spaces' of the avant-garde within contemporary culture still remain. By this I mean that we still possess cultural spaces of resistance to socio-economic norms enforced by the State, but these are no longer (or no longer just) the spaces of art production, but the spaces of the reproduction of religious community (perhaps using visual art in the process).

By avant-garde I am referring largely to the artist groups from the 1920s and 1930s – from Dada to Duchamp, Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism, De Stijl – up to the so-called neo-avant-garde recapitulations of their visual and urban strategies, the neo-Dada, minimal art, process art, performance, and so on and on. My correlation of faith communities and the avant-garde is not motivated by empirical-historical similarity, obviously, but by the enduring presence of the avant-garde in our cultural memory and historical narratives of modernism, modernity and post-modern culture. The avant-garde (modernist) and neo-avant-garde (postmodernist) dominate our narratives on art and cultural history, as evidenced in our art museums or university courses on art history. Sociologically speaking, they were of course but a fraction of the art (by tiny groups of artists) to have operated throughout these cultural epochs. As historians like Peter Bürger and Fredric Jameson have shown, the original avant-garde became embedded in historical narrative and artistic practice through its 'recapitulation' in the neo-avant-garde, where the latter performed a hermeneutics of creative practice (an art that was as much an interpretation and conceptual re-identification of the original avant-garde as it was of art-making) (Bürger, 1984; Jameson, 1991).

My point here is that 'avant-garde' remains a fulcrum of art's history and more generally cultural memory, not simply as it became a marker for a lost quasi-political battle (the failure of creative practice – art, literature, poetry, performance – in becoming formative of socio-political consciousness), but because it became and is now a site of cultural mourning for a lost aspiration in contemporary culture (and practically, a lost facility for active radical citizenship).

Apart from the realms of public and urban art (which all have their particular value), it is difficult to conceive of a means today by which art can provide a cognitive frame within which activism can operate and intervene in public thinking on the fundamental political conditions of social existence. The fundamental impulse of the avant-garde was precisely the materialisation in social life of the aesthetic dynamics of the creative process – more formally, pushing culture into the public sphere, where both would be transformed.

So how can – (and of course I have committed myself to a path of generalisations here, only comforted by the fact that politics is driven by rank generalisations) – faith communities be defined as a cultural avant-garde? The matter lies not directly with the perspicacity or validity of the doctrines or 'belief-content' of faith, but something broader – the functional cultural-operation of faith, its 'strategic management' and the aesthetics of its organization, including its creative techniques of communication. The historical significance or indeed popularity of the avant-garde is not a matter of a perceived aesthetic professionalism in its cultural production, or the artistic superiority of its artistic products, or the political-philosophical credibility of its writings or manifestos – far from it. The significance of the avant-garde lay in how it mediated the complex shifts in cultural consciousness as the citizens of France, Germany, Austria and so on, faced increasing political authoritarianism, corruption, conformity, militarism, and the continual prospect of war. I say 'mediated' and not represented or just depicted, as the nature of mediation is active, and is where the *media itself* becomes internal to both subject and content. The avant-garde were not concerned with 'representation' so much as *presentation*, or direct articulation of pressing anxieties. Before we broach the correlation between avant-garde and faith communities, however, we do need some sociological clarification, living as we do in country in which a constitutional church is still embedded [In England we all live in 'parishes', whatever religion we belong to].

The famous American art critic Clement Greenberg wrote one of the first theoretically grounded essays on avant-garde art, in New York's *Partisan Review*, in 1939, the terms of which is relevant here (Greenberg, 1939/). In surveying the cultural landscape, Greenberg differentiated between three cultural phenomena determining both American and European cultural production, from TV to abstract painting. These were Alexandrianism, Kitsch, and avant-garde. The first, Alexandrianism, was essentially the art of the European art Academies, continuing as always by repeating the canonical principles and practices of the past golden epochs of classical perfection (emerging from the seminal works of the Italian Renaissance). Alexandrianism appealed not just to immutable truths, but universal forms of expression (artistic convention) developed over centuries, which could not be challenged as such, only *fulfilled*. Kitsch (appropriating the German term), was, rather, the popular articulation of these very expressions. It was certainly sophisticated in its own way (technically, it required a high level of artistic skill), but its work was to prepare fine art for mass culture. Kitsch for Greenberg was 'academicized simulacra' or a visual replication of high art in the cause of a democratization of culture. The 'mass culture' in question was, of course, the emerging American mass media culture of the 1930s, advertising, TV, magazines and Hollywood movies. The aesthetics of mass art seemed radical (or rather, innovative) as it was mediated by new communication technologies (of photography, film, colour print). They were, however, aesthetically conservative (as Greenberg noted, the labouring classes always preferred Raphael to Picasso).

Into this cultural milieu, and as a response to it, emerged the avant-garde. The avant-garde was not, for Greenberg, a style or genre of artistic practice – it was a *social formation* of cultural actors, who held that despite evidence to the contrary, culture was not flowering but animated by destructive forces. Their response was not to 'revive' culture (which Alexandrianism was in any case always doing), so much as to create a *surrogate* culture, a culture that was capable of both fulfilling and living culture's aspiration (for expression, articulation of belief, representation of identity and philosophical meaning, for sensual visual stimulation), but also for understanding the contemporary conditions of culture, the socio-historical condition of culture itself at that present time. Avant-garde was both an experience of art, and an experience of the conditions of art making (increasingly impossible conditions – where it was becoming impossible to 'represent' life, nature, or social value, under rapid modernisation and industrialisation, combined with the impossibility of political



representation under conditions of imperial militarism and authoritarianism). Thus an 'anti-art' was required to define the nature of this impossibility. The avant-garde was therefore a moment of critical consciousness, where the limits of social life were identified in the act of transgressing them. The avant-garde was thus as much diagnostic as creative.

Returning to faith communities: in an age when all radical political alternatives and the intellectually generative power of politics itself has dissolved, they provide an alternative cognitive context and ethical reflexivity for thinking culture. They embody both the cultural dissolution of social community, values and beliefs under the rising State authoritarianism – for faith communities are symptomatic of divided and fragmented social culture. And they engage in a diagnostic critique of the conditions of modern social life: their faith is defined in and against the ruling ideologies and common belief systems that drive the values of consumer everyday life. At least, that's my gambit.

So when I talk about faith communities as a cultural avant-garde we perhaps need to consider what is outside institutional religion (the religious 'Alexandrianism' of the established churches, for example), and also outside their many vibrant popular, commercialised and successfully marketed versions (the 'kitsch' of evangelicalism). Nor would I – and this may be counter-intuitive – identify the avant-garde as the Left-Liberal wing of contemporary religious groups, the revisionists and reformers, trying to reinterpret their faith through current paradigms of popular political trends (the ruling ideologies and common belief systems that drive the values of consumer everyday), or 'diversity and equality', or scientific conceptions of evolutionary human origins. Many of the faith communities I have come across are not 'liberals' in a loose sense, but hold strong convictions that on the face of it may seem like Alexandrianism conservatism (like Salvador Dali, adopting the retentive style of eighteenth century naturalism). They are, in their own way, radical, but not equivalent to national cultural conservatism. Of interest here, is the expressive form that faith takes in the context of its social communities, and the aesthetics and politics of the faith community. Faith is not simply religion, but a life lived out in dynamic reflexivity both to existing conditions of community; it registers the boundaries of human relations as they are inscribed within current political norms, and multiple contexts of mass, media and consumer cultural life. It is (or can be) a form of enlightenment, not forgetting the ways in which religious authorities or the processes of institutionalisation or sectarianism can curtail its enlightenment potential.

The cultural production of contemporary faith – using the avant-garde as a paradigm – betrays the following characteristics: [and here I am abstracting from the literature on avant-garde movements, by Poggioli, Burger, Foster and Buchloh, among others].

First is an experience of cultural dissolution. This, famously, is the ‘shock value’ of the avant-garde – the clash of the routine, regular or accepted in everyday life, and the assault of ‘the new’. Mainstream culture finds itself with an enemy or opponent who threatens to render it inadequate. There is a certain irony in the way religion and faith communities, even though they are for the most part derived from historical and even ancient texts, doctrines and rituals, can confront the everyday life of consumer society as offering something ‘new’ or radically different. This new experience is often cultivated as a spatial practice, where new faith communities invariably use a specific delimited space (such as a faith centre or place of worship) that is reserved precisely for the articulation and expression of its distinctive cultural experiences. For the subject, these spaces undertake what is called (after Duchamp) ‘recontextualisation’ and the work of ‘de-familiarisation’ through a radical shift in attention, priorities, worldview and social context. ‘Recontextualising’ a person’s life or subjectivity (thought, feeling, allegiances), not only affords the subject a strong sense of possibility for personal transformation, but transformation through community membership.

This leads to the second avant-garde characteristic – the impulse to make ‘art into life’. Inherited from the German romantics, this became a ruling ethos of the avant-garde in all its forms, where ‘art’ (as we saw with Greenberg) was subject to a critical scrutiny as to its social function. For the avant-garde, whatever the aesthetic virtues of what we may call ‘institutional fine art culture’ (the art of the Academies and the museums), ‘art’ had become co-opted by the culture of ruling elites, who in turn were perpetuating objectionable ideologies and unacceptable forms of authoritarianism. The role of fine art culture in the evolution of class sensibility, values and political aspirations, is a complicated matter, and not one subject to much historical theorisation by the avant-garde, save to refer to Marxist notions of rising bourgeois supremacy. For us, the relevant issue is transformation. The avant-garde sought to purge artistic practice of those artistic forms that had been co-opted by mainstream society (or the ruling elites) and to use art for the purposes of transformation. Art thus was as much about ‘movements’ and new social formations of change as it was about individual objects or works of art (the kind of art that itself generated change and a discourse of change). It was as much about individuation through collective creativity as it was discovering basic human needs and aspirations. Avant-garde was art that generated

possible conditions for change, however small. As a sub-culture it presented an opportunity for social reinvention, identity-conversion, and lifestyle transformation. The avant-garde bohemian became the common symbol of this lifestyle.

Our third characteristic is 'creative syncretism'. Avant-garde, though fond of sects, factions and manifestos, were not puritanical or doctrinaire with regard the tools or media of art. The avant-garde processes by which all socially retrograde or conservative conventions or meanings were expunged from art, was conducted by an open and adventurous approach to artistic production. There was no longer any contradiction between the materiality of art and materiality of life, for the latter was material for the former. The avant-garde was experimental and used domestic or industrial detritus, new technologies like photography and film, or mundane objects. Conventions of production were also re-inscribed within constructed local contexts of value – where the value of the work of art object was entirely relative to its impact in a certain situation (it's 'event' nature). In other words, everyday life was not anathema and not a threat or contaminating force. It could be used in ways that could be called eclectic and eccentric. The ways in which faith communities work in improvised and ad hoc environments, usually with limited financial means, is indicative of this.

Lastly, avant-garde cultural practice involves a radical scepticism of all forms of social and cultural authority. Once the avant-garde has been experienced and has generated a certain conviction and allegiance, then a contest begins between the 'law' of the community and the law of broader society. This in itself generates a higher degree of social and political awareness, where the subjectivity of faith and the obligations of citizenship are often in contradiction. Avant-garde sub-cultures openly lives through conflict and contradiction as mechanisms of differentiation and further motivation for change.

My purpose in this paper, therefore, has simply been to re-define contemporary faith communities in terms of a cultural avant-garde, and out of the usual anachronistic (and inaccurate) portrayals of faith as 'religious belief' in the media. In doing so, we open up a number of questions on their social, and public role. I have argued (albeit in a circuitous fashion) that contemporary faith communities possess a certain unique role, whereby in mobilising their resources they could make some profound contribution to the current debates on public culture, its politics and meaning. The opportunity for cultural dissolution, conflict and provisional community, individual reinvention, all managed in a context of

creative improvisation, is altogether a social phenomenon worth considering, and considering in its potential presentation of resistance, dissent, and alternative viewpoints in the public sphere. A naïve fear of proselytization is no excuse for avoiding the intellectual impact of genuine pluralism in our public debates on culture, values and the public good.

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