

## **Culture & Christianity**

### **(1) Christianity & A City of Culture: Hull 2017**

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Do you remember where you were when you heard Coventry was going to be the next UK City of Culture? I certainly remember where I was when I heard Hull was going to be City of Culture in 2017. I was press officer for the Diocese of York at the time, and a journalist phoned me up to get a quote from the Bishop of Hull. Now, I hate to break it to you, but often those sorts of quotes in papers aren't actually from the Bishop - some hard-worked press officer has written them in advance. But that day, I'd not actually prepared a quote - I just hadn't expected Hull to get the award. I thought it would be Leicester.

And I think lots of other people were surprised that Hull was going to be City of Culture in 2017. I remember posts on twitter along the lines of "I've heard Hull's now a City of Culture. It must be that pot of yoghurt I left in the town centre last Thursday."

And I got really interested in the whole topic and interested in how Hull's churches might respond to their city being a City of Culture. So I left my job in the Diocese to study the theologies of culture arising from Hull in 2017.

To investigate these theologies, I interviewed 20 church leaders from across the city and its different churches. There were seven Anglicans, three independent Evangelicals, three Roman Catholics, two Pentecostals, and one Methodist, one Baptist, one Danish Lutheran, one Quaker, and one URC minister. And before I spoke to them, I had an idea I might find very different approaches to culture from the churches. I thought some more liberal churches or denominations would be positive towards the city's culture, and more conservative churches or denominations might see human culture as more sinful or problematic.

In his book *Models of Contextual Theology*, Steven Bevans describes these positions as sitting along a spectrum, with churches that are positive about culture on one side putting theological prominence on experience of the present, human experience, and culture, and coming from a creation-centred theological orientation. The models on the other side of the spectrum would put more prominence on experience of the past,

valuing scripture and tradition, and come from a redemption-centred theological orientation. But this split isn't what I found in practice: instead, I found that almost all participants, despite their denominational differences, were overwhelmingly positive about the nature of culture, and the way that God used culture to allow people to flourish. My participants' deep understanding of Hull's historical, geographic social, and economic context, and their desire to see people flourish, went deeper than any superficial denominational differences. In short, they saw God at work in Hull in 2017.

And this is an attitude that I see mirroring Paul, in the reading we heard. Prior to this, Paul's been in Thessalonica, but the Jews stir up the crowds against him, so the believers put him on a boat to Athens. When he arrives in Athens, Paul examines Greek culture and finds signs of God already there. He clearly visits the temples and looks closely at the statues. When he gets into conversation with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who invite him to speak at the Areopagus, Paul uses the example of a statue dedicated to an unknown god to talk about the Christian God. He's clearly studied the city well enough to spot one statue dedicated to the unknown god. Paul sees in this statue knowledge of the Christian God, even though that knowledge is implicit and unarticulated. God is at work in Athens, even if the Athenians don't recognise it yet.

Paul also the Greek poet Epimenides in his talk in the Aeropagus, with the poet's beautiful line about Zeus: "In him we live and move and have our being". This isn't just Paul sprinkling his speech with some references that his audience would be familiar with: he sees in the Athenian understanding of Zeus, the supreme deity of the Greek Pantheon, a deeper knowledge of the Christian God.

So, if God was at work in Athens, even before the Athenians knew it, how was God be at work in Hull in 2017? City of Culture had a strong impact on most of my participants, and they saw God working through and in 2017. My participants saw God giving Hull a fresh start in 2017; they saw God's aims for the city being worked out 2017, reconciling Hull to its past, and allowing it to be born into something new.

Participant 4 summed up Hull's sense of rediscovery and renewal:

My own sense is the city rediscovered itself right from that first week in January, right the way through. There was a sense of resurgence; a sense of standing taller; a sense of pride. With all the new cultural expressions that were popping up all over the city and I think it is all that newness and

amazement and scale of worldwide significance that enabled the city to see itself differently.

One of the biggest transformations people felt had come from 2017 was a renewed sense of self-belief and confidence in the people of Hull. Participant 5 (Anglican) felt that the transformation of Hull in 2017 was from God: 'I think God wants people to have self-esteem and self-belief. And I mean, there are massive issues in our society about identity and I think we have a really positive message to proclaim about our identity... Well it's at the heart of the Christian gospel, isn't it? Sort of, we don't write people off! You know, people have a fresh start'. One of the most common themes that arose from my participants' discussions of City of Culture was the spiritual transformation they felt had taken place. They identified redemption and resurrection; they felt it had brought joy, an increase in self-confidence to the city. My participants also identified that God had brought about reconciliation in Hull in 2017: reconciliation between previously antagonistic groups in the city, and a reconciliation between Hull and the rest of the UK. In the first interviews, my participants shared a sense that Hull's pain from the Blitz and the losses of the fishing industry had never been acknowledged nationally, and this unheard pain had caused a sense of isolation in the city. Participant 8 (Anglican) felt that God has resurrected Hull in 2017: 'I mean, I've seen God in the City of Culture in the renewal and that resurrection, that hope... in that inspiration, definitely, definitely! It was a whole spiritual thing going on. But not in the conventional churches of Hull now. It's not always about that, is it?'. City of Culture seems to have enabled Hull to tell its unheard story of pain and be reconciled to the rest of the country.

My participants saw God working through this reconciliation to build up self-esteem, joy, community and creativity in the city. They saw this self-esteem, joy, community and creativity being achieved through the city's flourishing, and also lead to more flourishing in turn. There was the sense that when people are expressing self-esteem, joy, community and creativity, they are joining in with God's plan for Hull, and working towards God's goals for Hull. Overall, I saw my participants expressing an implicit view of culture as a locale where God was able to enact rebirth, reconciliation and flourishing. However, there was also the sense that not City of Culture did not always work towards that flourishing, either by being too focussed on the city centre, or by being dominated by outsiders and not the people of Hull. Participant 10 (Quaker) felt that the poorest and most oppressed people of Hull had not been heard, and the transformation of Hull had not gone deep enough.

As well as asking my participants, these 20 church leaders, how they saw God at work in Hull City of Culture, I also asked them what they thought this thing called culture is. In these discussions, 18 of the 20 participants mentioned facets of “high” culture, such as theatre, architectural culture, poetry, modern art, orchestral music, art house cinemas, and restaurants. The concepts of art and culture were often mentioned together, and “high” art was clearly at the forefront of my participants’ minds when explaining what culture meant to them. This was generally discussed as a positive thing, but many of the 18 participants who mentioned elements of high culture felt that Hull did not have high culture, or any culture at all. Participant 1 (United Reform Church) said ‘My experience of Hull has not been that it is a place that is particularly culturally vibrant’, participant 7 (Anglican) talked about ‘the life that most people lead, and their experience of a rather denuded culture’, and participant 20 (independent Evangelical) said ‘My view, having lived here for 20 years, is that Hull is one of the least artistic cultured places in the UK’. These participants were often clear that this ‘denuded’ culture was a result of economic deprivation: participant 7 explained this saying ‘In people’s everyday lives their opportunities for experiencing arts and culture are extremely limited... It’s not that people don’t have, or might not have cultural sensibilities, it’s not that they don’t enjoy colour or music or something, but they’re experience of that will be extremely limited by the circumstances in which they live’.

The understanding of culture as “high culture” was that which was uppermost in their minds, and most common. Those participants who also saw culture as a way of life or a lived experience, tended to raise this definition after they had described culture as being synonymous with the arts, and usually the “high” arts. I argue that this is symptomatic of an understanding of culture as something which is ‘other’, as something Hull does not have. Culture is not something that Hull possesses as participant 20 put it, ‘culture is not in the culture’ [of Hull].

As my interviews progressed, I started asking some of my participants explicitly if they had been taught about culture as part of their training or education to be a church leader. Of the six people I asked, none had been. Participant 2 (Baptist) explained that he had been taught to understand the culture in which the Bible had been written, but not about contemporary culture: ‘We assume because we’re sort of born in the west, it’s the western... I think western churches created problems for itself because it has assumed the biblical narrative is a western twenty-first century culture, well, twentieth century culture! And it isn’t!’

A couple of these church leaders had read around the subject and done some thinking on the topic, and a couple had received some training that helped them think about the topic of culture. Exposure to people from different countries and with different behaviours and expectations of church had made a few participants think about ideas of culture, albeit as something which was characteristic of the “other”, and not the participant’s own self.

So, this leads to a dilemma. My participants saw God working through culture, but also felt Hull didn’t have any culture. Can God even work in a city if it has no culture? One way of looking at this dilemma is through the work of Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe in their book *What Makes A Good City*. There’s not many theology books which talk about the City of Culture project in the UK - trust me, I’ve read a few. But one that does is *What Makes A Good City*. Elaine and Stephen examine the Cities of Culture project, asking whether churches have a role to play in challenging these ‘topdown’ regeneration strategies which ‘rely on cultural and creative industries as key drivers of economic revival and growth’ and which emphasise ‘high-profile and prestigious developments at the expense of long-term sustainability or provision for the many’ (Graham and Lowe, 2009, pp.100-102). They call for churches to champion the ‘experiences and aspirations of ordinary people,’ and although it is ‘not necessarily the task of Christian theology to oppose all attempts to boost a city’s pride, let alone its economic well-being, through cultural renaissance,’ there needs to be ‘some thinking about “culture” and its role in the building of the good city’ (Graham and Lowe, 2009, p.111). They ask whether culture points towards ‘a city of inclusivity and dignity; is it honest about the human condition; is it realistic about the long-term sustainability of ‘signature’ events and developments?’

Graham and Lowe call for churches to engage critically and constructively with Cities of Culture initiatives. They encourage churches to ‘nurture effective discipleship... to foster individuals’ pride in their own stories and experiences as worthy of inclusion in a wider narrative of identity and aspiration’; to strengthen common bonds and social capital; to ‘build up congregations to contribute actively to a cultural renaissance, by hosting cultural events or fostering the collective memory of a neighbourhood’; to enable communities ‘to articulate questions about what makes a good city’; to ‘speak to the wider population of the things that make us human: to celebrate our own creativity but to be wary of versions of culture that are ideological, exploitative or unsustainable’.

I would be surprised if any of my participants had read *What Makes A Good City*. Nevertheless, many of my participants engaged with the City of Culture in the way Graham and Lowe recommended. The areas in which they engaged were principally by strengthening common bonds and social capital, building up congregations to contribute actively to a cultural renaissance, championing the experiences of normal people, and fostering individuals' pride in their own stories. My participants championed and valued the sense of community explored in City of Culture events such as Made in Hull, the Blade and the poppies. They also enabled community bonding to emerge with their own events: participant 5, talking about the Noah plays, commented that 'you would stand there watching it and people would get chatting and... and a sense of community'. Participant 9's (Anglican) church tried to contribute to a 'cultural renaissance', and champion the experiences of 'normal people'. The church, located in an area not always associated with the arts, made sure a choir performed as part of their City of Culture activities. The church also held events looking at Hull's fishing industry, including an art exhibition on the industry, a photographic exhibition by Alec Gill of Hessle Road in its heyday, and work with schools.

However, my participants did not do all of the things that Graham and Lowe called for. Graham and Lowe call for churches to engage critically and constructively with Cities of Culture initiatives: overall, my participants engaged constructively rather than critically. They tended not to enable communities 'to articulate questions about what makes a good city,' or 'be wary of versions of culture that are ideological, exploitative or unsustainable' (Graham and Lowe, 2009, p.113-14). I described above how my participants had not received teaching or training on the conception of culture or in theologies of culture. This lack of understanding of culture, in secular or theological terms, has led to a lack of confidence in challenging the City of Culture initiative. I think this is why we need to be able to discuss and understand culture, so we can see how and where to get involved, and how and where God is at work.

So, what might I advise the churches in and around Coventry to do, as they prepare for City of Culture 2021? I think now's a good time to start discussing how culture can be a place where we can find God, and where we can expect God to reveal God's self.

Culture is a place where God is already at work, as in Athens in the time of Paul. I'd advise you all to be aware for the places where God might be at work, where creation, redemption and reconciliation might be happening, and where you might be able to join in.