From the SelectedWorks of Vaughan S Roberts

Summer June 23, 1998

Theology for the Beach

Vaughan S Roberts

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/vaughan_roberts/10/
Theology for the Beach?¹

Vaughan S. Roberts

Introduction

The beach is an edge between sea and land, and many chaplains (naval or otherwise) work on just such an ‘edge’. I see the beach on which they stand in two ways. First, chaplains often feel on the edge of both the Church and the institution to which they are ministering. Second, chaplaincy can also seem to be the place which is caught between the swirling waters of change and the land-like, permanence of the past – which may often seem like a precarious cliff that is about to crumble into the sea. I have explored the nature of the sea as a metaphor for change in a theological context² but the aim of this paper is to examine some of the ways in which that image works in terms of ordained ministry. In his social history of the Georgian navy N. A. M. Roger has written that the navel chaplain’s position “was an awkward one. Socially he was an inactive landman among busy seamen; his doubtful pretensions to gentility left him no comfortable home among either commissioned or warrant officers, and his actual duties were far from clear … To what extent he could discharge a genuinely spiritual role afloat depended entirely on the quality of the man and the attitude of his captain.”³ It seems to me that most chaplains have, in Roger’s phrase “no comfortable home” so perhaps the beach is their natural environment. The aim of this presentation is to examine the nature of the water that is crashing around them.

Water as a Biblical Metaphor

According to historian William H. Propp water “has four primary connotations in the Bible: birth, fertility, danger, and cleansing.”⁴ However I would wish to add a fifth category, that of authority because, as Werner Jeanrond has argued, “The problem of authority as a theological problem lies at the centre of the Church’s beginning as a reform movement emerging from within Judaism. The traditional authorities in Pharisaic Judaism, such as law, temple, land and family, were re-assessed and relativised by Jesus and his disciples as a result of their particular experience and
understanding of God's presence in this world.⁵ This is represented in a number of places in the NT including the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4: 7-15) where the context of this discussion is a well and a drink of water.

In some ways this story from John chapter 4 encompasses all of the motifs of water already outlined: **birth** – this passage follows on from Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in the previous chapter and he now has another discussion about new and eternal life; **fertility** – Jacob’s Well (Jacob the patriarch with 12 sons and many flocks was the fecund character par excellence in the OT); **danger** – Jesus’ encounters that which is unclean (in Jewish eyes the Samaritan’s were ritually unclean as the woman herself acknowledges); and **cleansing** – their exchange takes in discussion about the Temple, the place where atonement is made for sin). However, there is another element here – that of thirst, of fulfilment and a desire to know. In this respect it is a story about religious change and the authority for that change. It is a narrative which stretches back over centuries yet is immediate and contemporary. If we follow historians like R. J. Coggins and Christopher Rowland then an essential part of the dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews was that of where God was to be worshipped. Originally Judaism had many tribal shrines which were eventually centralised in one place by King David. The Samaritans disputed the focussing of Jewish faith in Jerusalem and denied that any individual or group had the authority to bring about such a concentration of regal and religious power. In this respect, the Samaritans shared some common ground with the sect which had gathered around Jesus. Coggins writes, “They shared with other groups a hostile attitude towards Jerusalem, but differed from them by insisting that Gerizim was the holy mountain upon which God was to be worshipped.”⁶ Neither Jesus nor the Samaritans appeared to have accepted the cultic supremacy of Jerusalem – the Samaritans because they felt that there was no authority for this development and Jesus because he felt that authority was located elsewhere. Consequently, the request from the Samaritan woman: ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water’ could be seen as a symbolic transfer of her religious allegiance from the authority of Mt Gerizim to Jesus’ vision of authority located in love of God and neighbour rather than on a holy mount. As Jeanrond implies, questions of
authority and change are closely linked and in a contemporary context water can also be a key metaphor for change.

**Water as a metaphor for change**

How does water function as a metaphor for change? We have seen it used as a metaphor within a discussion about authority and change in the Fourth Gospel but how does it work in other contexts? I shall briefly outline three ways in which this metaphorical use of water has been developed:

1. **Water: Freeze, Thaw, Change**

   The social psychologist Kurt Lewin outlined his theory of social change in the 1950s. He saw human institutions as a balance of forces – some promoting change and others working against it. He used water to describe this process and pictured these forces in terms of freezing, movement and re-freezing. Organizational stability is disturbed by some dissatisfaction with the existing system and this brings about an unfreezing of institutional equilibrium, for example in a widespread recognition of the need for change. Once this thaw has begun the next stage is that of change, which involves influencing the direction of movement in the now more fluid system. This continues until a new balance between the forces promoting and restraining change is reached. Then re-freezing occurs when new policies or patterns of behaviour become established.

2. **Water: Stream, Flux, Change**

   The theologian Colin Gunton has cast the rise of contemporary thought in terms of the ancient disagreement between Heraclitus and Parmenides, that is between the one and the many. Thus, “Heraclitus is the philosopher of plurality and motion: the many are prior to the one, and in such a way that there is to be found in nature no stability. Parmenides represents the opposite pole of thought. For him, the real is totally unchanging, for so reason teaches, contradicting the appearances presented to the senses. Reality is timelessly uniformly what it is … The many do not real exist, except it be as functions of the One.” There is a dialectic here between the image of flux, force and change on the one hand and solidity, stability and permanence on the other. Heraclitus is also referred to by Gareth Morgan in his exploration the different
metaphors for organizations. Again water is an important element. He recalls Heraclitus’ most widely quoted saying: “You cannot step twice into the same river, for the waters are continually flowing.” And the Greek philosopher went on, “Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed … Cool things become warm, the warm grows cool; the moist dries, the parched becomes moist … It is in changing that things find repose.”

Morgan uses a variety of images to develop this image of flux and explores how thinking about organizations in terms of ecological systems, brains, chaos theory and others effects our understanding of such groups. He argues that this organizational state of flux comes under the influence of competing “attractors” which define the same situations in different ways and he suggests the following exercise:

Imagine you are sitting in the early morning sun on an open veranda. Before you is a scene of complete tranquillity: a perfectly smooth lake reflecting the bright blue sky and the greens of the forest surrounding the lake. Birds are calling. Occasionally those on the lake dive and resurface. The scene draws you into a mood of complete peace and harmony. Now let your attention drift to the room behind you. You focus on the click, click, click of the electric clock; on the gurgling noise of the fridge; a kitchen tap is also dripping. The sounds pull you out of the tranquil scene. Though your eyes may still be focused on the water, your mind is elsewhere. In this activity Morgan casts water in a dialectical role – thus, water (in the form of a lake) can act as a symbol for tranquillity or escapism but water (in the form of a dripping tap) can also act as a sign of annoyance or everyday life. However, in a broader state of organizational flux such attractors can be many and various.

3. Water: Sea, Land, Dialectic

In my paper on the Sea of Faith I argued that R S Thomas’ poem Tidal provided a better poetic description of faith than Matthew Arnold’s Dover Beach because Thomas incorporates the two-fold action of wave and tide into a dialectical understanding of faith whereas Arnold fails to fully develop this metaphor. A similar dialectic between sea and land has been explored relatively recently in Kevin
Costner’s film *Waterworld* (1995). The plot revolves around a lone Mariner (Costner) and the remaining members of the human race who have survived a cataclysmic event which has left the world completely or largely covered in ocean. They are all searching for a ‘mythical’ place called Dryland. This scenario shares some common ground with the imaginary catastrophe with which Alistair MacIntyre begins his enormously influential book *After Virtue*. Perhaps the ‘myth of Dryland’ in *Waterworld* provides a similar framework for understanding important social developments in western culture.

In a key scene where the Mariner takes one of the other survivors underwater to see a city that has been submerged beneath the waters we are invited to imagine what it would be like to live on a constantly shifting ocean in which all established forms of human living have been swept away. More than that, we are living on a constantly shifting world where nothing is stable. The old certainties of belief and social structures have been overtaken by changing, moving, modifying world in which nothing remains stable for very long. And yet there remains the myth of Dryland – that firm, stable, foundation on which humanity could once again build its cathedrals and civic structures. I would argue that the same myth of Dryland exists in many of our organizations and churches: all will be well if only we could reach the ‘Dryland’ of strategic planning or the learning organization, or the professional institution, or the efficient organization, or any other of the ideal organizations that are set before us. When the Mariner and his fellow travellers reached Dryland, he found that he could not live there and had to return to the sea. Maybe that is the organizational dialectic we have to live with – we will search for Dryland but even if we find it, it might not the place we want to live?

**Water as a Metaphor for Postmodernity?**

We are living in a time of unprecedented change, so much so that any name we might give it at the moment has to be provisional. Ulrich Beck has argued that all the old social and economic certainties are passing away and, using a religious metaphor, he states “uncertainty has even penetrated into the cathedrals of economic dogmas. What seemed solid and mandated only a short while ago is becoming mobile.” Beck
believes, paradoxically, that the dynamics of modernity are changing the very world which they have created: “this confusion on future development among the interwoven influences of ecology, new technologies and a transformed political culture has already changed conditions today.” Is it any wonder then that water and the sea is used so often as a metaphor for the time in which we live? How should we respond? I have suggested that most of those who exercise a chaplaincy ministry exist on the beach between an ocean of change and the decaying headland which once seemed so permanent. Let me suggest three courses of action for these beach dwellers – surfing, sailing or standing.

1. **Standing**

How can we stand on water? Walking on water maybe an option when you’re the Messiah but it much harder for the rest of us. Don Cupitt seems to be fond of aquatic metaphors for his theology and in *The Long-Legged Fly* he returned to water for another metaphor for belief. He too identifies the rapid nature of change. In a curious mix of metaphor he speaks of how “The ground beneath our feet is continuously shifting” especially in the period since the First World War. And he notes the importance of “two streams of thought” (psychoanalysis and structural linguistics) which have emerged from this epistemological earthquake and which have provided an important challenge (in his view) to faith. It is actually the stream or the pond which provides Cupitt with his image for faith by drawing on some lines from W B Yeats:

> Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
> His mind moves upon silence

The pond skater or water strider is an insect which lives on the surface film of a pond or stream. Its feet create dimples on the water-surface and it is guided by special sense organs which interpret the tiniest ripple on the face of the water: “It reads each vibration as an enemy, or food or a mate, and so on; and thus makes a habitable world out of materials as simple as can be imagined.” This creature, Cupitt argues, provides the model for how religion should be in an age of reductionism: “It is light, resourceful, fast-moving and well able to survive.” So fitting in with the tendency in
many quarters to model reality as, no more than, a field of vibrations or differences; a packets of wavelets in the texture of space-time; ripples of sensation on the surface of the human body; patterned pulses in an electrical circuit or a mere play of signs and signifiers. “It seems meagre,” he says, “but the pond skater makes a world out of such minimal materials, and so must we. Like the pond skater’s world, our theology will have to be perfectly horizontal.” Thus, we might survive the seas of chaos if we stand lightly on their surface attending to the ripples.

2. Sailing

In his excellent introduction to the impact that nonfoundationalism ideas from the world of philosophy have had on theology John Thiel makes a similar contrast between earth and sea, ground and water to the one found in Don Cupitt but Thiel’s use of these metaphors is more consistent. Nonfoundationalism is much as it sounds – it is critical of the assumption that there are any independent foundations for human knowledge. Thiel elaborates this by using a contrast between a raft and a pyramid: “nonfoundationalists consider it more appropriate to understand knowledge as a ‘raft’ rather than as a ‘pyramid,’ as relative claims, at best coherent, floating on the ever-moving currents of time and culture rather than as certain truths timelessly fixed in never-shifting sands.”

One theologian who has developed this metaphor for his work is Peter Hodgson and his Winds of the Spirit has, on the cover of its English edition, a yacht plying through the water with its spinnaker stretched to its limits. He draws a strong parallel between sailing and theology but his use of the metaphor is significantly different to that of Thiel. Thiel’s raft appears to be totally at the mercy of “the ever-moving currents of time and culture”. It is almost a life-raft, adrift on a vast ocean and to which we cling in the hope of not being drowned. Hodgson’s boat may be driven by “wind and water, over which it has little control and by which it is drawn toward mysterious goals” but at least it does have ‘goals’ and although the boat is constrained by nature it is, at least, able to work with the natural elements to embark on a journey.
3. Surfing

A number of writers in the field of organizational theory have used waves and surfing as metaphors for coping with change. In his recent book *Navigating Complexity* Arthur Battram uses the wave as a metaphor for understanding the complexity of human organizations. There are four key points in his picture of a wave: I) Stasis – the calm sea represents unchanging social patterns and a defunct organization; II) Order – the slight swell behind the wave represents predictable and stereotypical behaviour or a complacent organization; III) Chaos – the disordered area running in front of the wave symbolises the rapid growth and rapid demise of an organization at war with itself; IV) Complexity – the complex patterns of order and disorder which constitute a wave and an effective team. Thus, complexity exists between order and chaos, but curiously he uses some very mechanistic language for his natural metaphor. Complexity is seen as a class of social behaviour “in which the components of the system never quite lock into place, yet never quite dissolve into turbulence either.” However, he goes onto to suggest that in order to cope with such complexity we need to behave like surfers: “In surfing, the area under the about-to-break wave is known as the ‘tube’: surfers attempt to ride the tube, just ahead of the point where the tube breaks as the wave hits the beach. In this analogy, this is the zone of complexity, the zone in which possibilities open up.” Similar use of the metaphor can be found in the work of many writers.

**Summary and Conclusion**

I have argued that the various forms of chaplaincy ministry can be seen as existing on a beach between sea and land. This may be an ‘organizational’ beach, between two institutions, or a ‘temporal’ beach, between the stability of the past and the uncertainty of the future. Furthermore, I have outlined three different examples of how water can be employed as a metaphor for change (‘freeze, thaw, change’; ‘stream, flux, change’; ‘sea, land, dialectic’) and three contrasting methods for coping with the waters of postmodernity (‘standing’, ‘sailing’ or ’surfing’). These images are not mutually exclusive and it may be that at different times and in different contexts chaplains feel the need to stand, sail and surf on the water. However, before we hoist up the sails
of our sloops, dingies, yachts or sailboards in order to set sail in our late-modern or postmodern churches and chaplaincies, we should note that water is not the only source of nonfoundational metaphor in our changing society. Graham Ward in his introduction to a collection of postmodern writing about God provides another quasi-aquatic, nonfoundational metaphor of what *embarking* on such journey might now involve. He writes: “Doing theology, acting, writing, functioning theologically is not to own a voice, but to be voiced; to be spoken, not a speaker. Only as such can living theologically defeat idolatry; by surrendering, constantly, its own legitimacy. Philosophy has always sought foundations for new beginnings, new points for maximal epistemological and ontological advantage. Theology – as discourse, as praxis – proceeds groundlessly … its seeking is not nomadic, for it seeks another city, a heteropolis. Furthermore, in its seeking it structures such a city, a cyberspatial city.”

In many ways Ward’s image of theology as a new millennium “cyberspatial city” and Roger’s representation of ships in the Georgian navy as “wooden worlds” share a good deal of (nonfoundational) common ground, including the mutual theme of exploration. Oceans and cyberspace are places of discovery and, while these journeys may involve contrasting levels of risk, they are still places where new discoveries are made and new encounters happen. Perhaps it will be with metaphors like these that ministry re-discovers its own sense of adventure rather than sighing over the harbour wall at the loss of some fabled golden past?

Notes

1 This paper was given on 23rd June 1998 at the last conference for Anglican Royal Naval Chaplains to be held at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich before its closure. I am grateful to the Ven. Simon Goulding for his invitation to address the conference.
Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn have described the organizational connection between change and authority in this way: “Authority is a conflict reducing invention, but its exercise implies submission to influence, which is almost never perfect. Organizational change is necessary for survival, but an organization with no internal resistance to change would be no organization at all; it would move in any direction and in response to any suggestion. Change and resistance to change, however, mean conflict.” Daniel Katz & Robert L. Kahn *The Social Psychology of Organizations (second edition)* (New York & Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1978 [1966]), p 617

Although, as Mary Jo Hatch has noted, “Lewin’s was more a theory of stability than of change, however, because he defined change as transient instability interrupting an otherwise stable equilibrium” in *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p 353


“Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on scientists. Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all they posses is fragments” Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), p 1.

David Lyon has argued postmodernity is “a concept that invites participation in a debate over the nature and direction of present-day societies, in a globalized context, rather than one describing an already existing state of affairs. Quite unprecedented social and cultural shifts are occurring; whether or not ‘postmodernity’ is the best term to sum them up is a moot point. The important thing is to understand what is happening, not to agree on a concept to capture it with. ‘Postmodernity’ will do fine for now.” David Lyon *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994), p 85.


John E. Thiel *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p 1

“Theology is rather like sailing. It is in contact with powerful fluid elements, symbolized by wind and water, over which it has little control and by which it is drawn toward mysterious goals. The ship of theology has no foundation other than itself, no external prop, but only the structural integrity and interplay of its component parts, which enable it to float and sail. Occasionally the ship has to be taken into port for repairs and refitting. On open water sailing can be an exhilarating and joyous adventure but also one filled with danger and disappointment. Truth, value, and beauty do not exist in the abstract but are created in the act of sailing through a symbiosis of ship and elemental forces.” Peter C. Hodgson *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), p 3.


Battram op. cit. p 140

ibid.
Gareth Morgan says he chose this image because it “captures the nature of the new management challenge. Managers and their organizations are confronting wave upon wave of change in the form of new technologies, markets, forms of competition, social relations, forms of organization and management, ideas and beliefs, and so on. Wherever one looks, one sees a new wave coming. And it is vitally important that managers accept this as a fundamental aspect of their reality, rise to the challenge, and learn to ride or moderate these waves with accomplishment … rather than allow these waves to sweep over them.” (Morgan *Riding the Waves of Change* 1988 pp xi-xii) Whereas Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner have used the sea as a metaphor for cultural diversity and its importance for organization: “A fish only discovers its need for water when it is no longer in it. Our own culture is like water to a fish. It sustains us. We live and breathe through it. What one culture may regard as essential, a certain level of material wealth for example, may not be so vital to other cultures. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner *op cit.* p 20)

I am particularly grateful to the Revd Tim Lewis for his comments at this point.