DISAPPEARING CHURCH

From Cultural Relevance

to Gospel Resilience

MARK SAYERS

Don't Offer Everything. Deliver Truth.

AL-QAEDA IS DESTROYED BY THE THIRD CULTURE

In his last days, Osama bin Laden had a lot to be worried about. Drones constantly buzzed above the heads of his men, unleashing their fury out of the sky. Electronic surveillance by their enemies ensured that all communication now had to be laboriously passed on across the world by hand-delivered, written letters. Bin Laden worried about being poisoned, about climate change, and about the low morale of his organization. In the wake of the attacks of 9/11, Al-Qaeda was riding a high. Not only was it the premier terrorist organization in the world for jihadists, Western organizational experts hailed its fluid, swarm-like structure as the kind of networked future for organizations across the world. Yet a few years later, everything had changed.

One of the significant problems facing Al-Qaeda was the lack of discipline and commitment being shown by new recruits from wealthier, more developed countries. The ascendancy of the self, driven by the West, was having an effect upon the terrorist organization. The

battle-hardened leadership of Al-Qaeda was tearing out their hair, trying to manage recruits who would turn up to training one day and not the next. Instead of planning attacks upon the West, Al-Qaeda members were having to waste time dragging recruits back from their shopping sprees at local markets, repeatedly telling them to stay off their phones. Recruits exhaustively trained and groomed for missions but would simply one day disappear like ghosts, having lost interest.

Al-Qaeda's much-lauded, networked, decentralized organizational structure was useless in dealing with this ghostlike commitment. "We have some other problems . . . like dissent and lack of discipline," wrote one of bin Laden's deputies in exasperation to his commander, complaining that these new recruits "do as they wish and roam in the markets. They are not associated with any group and they have no obedience. Sometimes, some of them participate in jihad, while others make no contribution to jihad. A solution to the problem they represent has escaped us, but we are still trying."[1] It's no wonder that in the last video of bin Laden released, we see him silently watching television in a dark room, draped in a blanket, a fragile, tired man leading a fragile, tired movement.

Al-Qaeda's leadership had coalesced in the tough battlefields of Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. Bin Laden and his compatriots had sacrificed comfortable, wealthy lives to fight for a cause. This process instilled in them a military discipline and fortitude. It was this dedication that allowed its members to go undercover for years in Western cities, before unleashing martyr missions. Al-Qaeda's appeal was rooted in what journalist Moise's Naim labels Code; that is, an appeal to a higher, religious, or communal motivation, which would ensure commitment to the cause and leadership of the movement. Code, according to Naim, "does not employ coercion; instead it activates our sense of moral duty."[2] This activation of duty originates as "a higher and unquestioned power unequivocally tells

us how to behave." Code had worked for Al-Qaeda, just as it had worked throughout human history for movements, be they noble, evil, or benign.

THE REVOLUTION AGAINST CODE

Al-Qaeda, like so many other organizations that rely on a moral code, faced the challenge of recruiting in an age where the individual increasingly finds a moral, binding call incomprehensible. Philip Rieff, in exploring the dynamics of the third culture of the West, observed a revolution against code and all commitments.[3]

In contrast to the dominant Western view of secularism, which sees a gradual evolution toward a progressive, enlightened culture, Rieff saw culture lurching between revolutions of release and revolutions of restraint. Any culture consists of a set of moral commands. These commands tell us what to do and what not to do. In any culture, these commands are under constant pressure from those within the society, so key figures within the culture act as moral authorities, communicating the rationale of the moral commands and exemplifying them with their personal lives. This is the influential power of code.

> THE SOLDIERS OF THE ISLAMIC STATE TOOK BATTLEFIELD SELFIES AND LIVE-TWEETED WHILE IN THE MIDST OF COMBAT.

When the moral commands come under too much pressure, eventually they are rejected and a revolution of release begins, led by those whose authority consists of undermining the moral commands and breaking them personally. The cultural mood shifts from obeying the moral commands to breaking them. Release replaces restraint as the dominant social mode. Code loses power to influence. Duty is rejected. The individual must discover the ways in which they had internalized the old moral commands and then break them. Any forms

of external authority, self-denial, and morality must be expelled, for they have replaced sin as the new sin. Those who once guarded the moral commands are the new enemy to be demonized and defined against; in their place the maverick, the rebel, and the releaser are the new elite.

Rieff noted that groups who continue to operate from a moral code during a revolution of release are tarred with the brush of being controllers. In these eras, including our contemporary revolution of release, anyone who holds to external religious truths, who submits to moral commands and traditions, will be automatically tarred as controllers, repressive and oppressive.

ISIS, THE MUTANT CHILD OF THE THIRD CULTURE

In an interview with Britain's *Guardian* newspaper,[4] two senior leaders of Al-Qaeda complained that the emergence of the Islamic State had ripped their movement apart, and that it was no longer functional. The Islamic State was both a reaction against the third culture and also a mutant, anarchic child of it. Alongside local disaffected Sunni tribes, it recruited and inspired from the West young people who were both reacting against, and defined by, the third culture.

Al-Qaeda prohibited its members from using electronic communications and from using their phones. In contrast, the soldiers of the Islamic State took battlefield selfies and live-tweeted while in the midst of combat. They hashtagged Instagram photos with tags such as #Jihadlyfe, while flirting online with female Islamic State groupies, some of whom made their way from their homes in the West, without their parents' consent, to snag a hot, rebel jihadist. Al-Qaeda promotional videos usually consisted of the talking head of bin Laden or his associate and successor Ayman al-Zawahiri, lecturing and reading out statements. Videos produced by the Islamic State were lushly shot, promising alienated and directionless potential recruits a kind

of real-life Game of Thrones or Call of Duty existence, in which they would find personal meaning and glory.

Videos and photos showed Islamic State fighters from the West, riding around captured towns in BMWs, extorting plunder from captured minorities. Whereas Al-Qaeda are always imagined hiding away in caves, the Islamic State's promotions promised the kind of infrastructure that would ensure the jihadist comfort and security. One promotional video featured a young, blue-eyed pediatrician with Australian-accented English showing the kind of postnatal care offered in the Islamic State. If you muted the sound, you could mistake the video for a health fund commercial. Other videos featured English-language schools for the children of foreign fighters. The message of the Islamic State essentially said that you can partake in armed jihad while having your personal dreams come true alongside Western levels of healthcare. Why wait for virgins and glory in the afterlife when you can have them now?

In a revolution of release, in which individual autonomy reigns supreme, "pitch" becomes one of the only modes of communication and coercion. If one wants to recruit others to a cause or movement, in the revolution of release you must promise benefits to the individual. This is where the Islamic State outmaneuvered Al-Qaeda in the competitive game of jihadist recruitment. Whereas Al-Qaeda demanded discipline and obedience, and recruited through code, the Islamic State in Naim's language used pitch—that is, the promise of tangible, attractive benefits—in order to cut through the messaging of the various jihadist groups. The religious, apocalyptic language of the Islamic State's recruiting at times sounds like code but underneath it clearly is pitch—the lure of personal benefit—promising potential recruits a life of glory and personal meaning within the caliphate.

CODE

Motivated by a higher religious, or communal duty. Self-denying for a higher cause.

PITCH

Motivated by the promise of gratification and reward. Self-expanding through personal benefit.

WHEN RELIGION PITCHES

Pitches that promise tangible benefits have overtaken codes and commands that appeal to discipline and commitment. As the cultural landscape becomes more crowded with competing agendas and claims for commitment, greater promises need to be made to cut through the buzz. In this new environment, one can gather a group or movement; you have tools available to you such as the Internet. The tricky bit is maintaining the commitment in the face of constant temptation. The average citizen lives in a world of continual promise and allurement. Both large organizations and the most fluid, decentralized networks find themselves weakened, as the basic ingredients of commitment, presence, attention, and sacrifice are corroded by the constant lure of something better.

It is worth noting that it is not just consumerism that pitches to us, but today the mode of pitch is used by governments, the military, NGOs, and, as Naim observes, religion:

Consider, for instance the power of religion, which operates through multiple channels. Dogma or moral code, whether enshrined in age-old scripture or propounded by a latter-day preacher or guru, is a big part of what earns an organized faith its adherents—along with their commitment of time and belief, their presence at services, their tithes, and their labor. But when churches, temples, and mosques compete

for members, they often do so on the basis of a pitch, as in advertising. Indeed, many institutions of faith stage elaborate campaigns managed by highly specialized advertising firms. And they offer rewards as well—not just immaterial reward of promised salvation but here-and-now benefits.[5]

The great problem is that to compete with all the other pitches you have to improve your own, either implicitly or explicitly amplifying the tangible benefits on offer. While pitch can deliver you recruits or keep existing members within your organization, eventually a gap will appear between what you can pitch and what you can deliver. Part of the Islamic State's devilish genius is that it understands this. A movement based just on pitch and individual glory could not have produced the military commitment and discipline needed to capture the huge swaths of territory that it has won while under sustained attack on multiple fronts. ISIS's "pitch" disappears once a recruit hits the ground in Syria and Iraq.

Whereas Al-Qaeda has drafted climate change initiatives and pondered introducing their more wealthy members to poorer African jihadists to increase their commitment levels, ISIS will kill you if you decide to return home to Mom because life on the ground isn't like the videos. The Islamic State recruits with pitch and keeps you there with the threat of violence.

CREDIT CARD CHURCH

In the '80s, the social demographer Daniel Yankelovich studied the radical changes that were occurring in American culture as older forms of duty gave way to the new individualism.[6] Yankelovich observed that the unencumbered, hedonistic, norm-free lifestyle promoted by the new rules of individual autonomy had to be funded by a certain personal financial well-being. One had to have the money to afford things such as travel, entertainment, and adventure. One also

had to find themselves in an employment situation which was light on responsibility and which allowed incredible flexibility to drop everything to follow one's desires.

Yankelovich pointed out that the irony was that one needed a certain baseline financial and employment security to generate the kind of free-form lifestyle that culture had set as the ideal, but that the free-form lifestyle ate up one's wealth and undermined their employment abilities. Yankelovich's research found that those who were pursuing the new lifestyle were primarily university-educated 18–35-year-olds who were able to pursue their lifestyle because they were doing so on the back of their parents' and grandparents' ethic of self-sacrifice. The self-fulfilling, norm-free life ethic lived parasitically off the self-sacrificing, norm-filled life ethic.

Such an approach, however, had limitations.

Debt, in particular credit cards, became one solution to this issue, gaining popularity as the new individualism became the norm.

IN THE SECULAR WEST, WE ARE ADDICTED TO TRYING TO ASCERTAIN WHERE THE CULTURE CURRENTLY STANDS ON FAITH.

Individuals sacrificed their future financial well-being for present enjoyment and freedom. Many today who live exciting and pleasure-filled lives in their twenties and thirties will find their older years marked by poverty and struggle. In the same way, many churches are sacrificing the future for the immediate when they pitch. As organizations—and indeed churches—switch from a higher call for commitment and self-sacrifice to a pitch that promises tangible and immediate benefits, the results can initially seem successful. We can attract attendees and members, sometimes in large numbers.

Yet eventually, when we just rely on pitch, we must run into the problem of disappearance, as loosely committed adherents hang around, and half-commitment thrives while waiting for the promise

of the pitch to be realized. We gain the immediate benefit of reaching and attracting people, but if they have just come for the pitch, wanting spiritual succor and community, while maintaining and maximizing their own personal autonomy, eventually the debt must be paid by both the church and the individual believer. Attenders disappear when the pitch is not realized, or they move on to respond to another pitch given elsewhere. Many churches gain numbers and success in the short term, but in essence, they operate their ministries and churches on the vapors of the commitments of past generations. This is a strategy that can only last for so long.

Recruiting and building churches and movements around code is difficult. It requires face-to-face contact, it requires patience, and it is messy. We are drawn to pitch because often we find it easier to grasp the concept of the public and their view of faith, rather than imagining the complexity of individuals. Polls and demographics appear to give us graspable, measurable indicators of where people are at spiritually. In the secular West, we are addicted to trying to ascertain where the culture currently stands on faith. Like a nervous politician watching the polls, our self-esteem as the church can sometimes appear connected to the latest round of stats surveying faith. A drop of mere percentage points can send us into the doldrums.

PITCHING TO THE PUBLIC

In his book *This Present Age*, which warned and pointed toward the kind of disengaged culture in which we live today, Søren Kierkegaard warned of the danger of trying to win over the public. For the public was really "a phantom, its spirit, a monstrous abstraction, an all-embracing something, which is nothing, a mirage—and that phantom is the public. It is only in an age which is without passion, yet reflective, that such a phantom can develop itself with the help of the Press which itself becomes an abstraction. . . . There is no such thing as a public."[7]

Ultimately, the public is a Gnostic creation, a disembodied force that garners tremendous power. Jesus understood that crowds are ghostlike; they make luminous, frightening appearances, but disperse and disappear in a moment. They could not be trusted, and a ministry—let alone a kingdom—could not be built upon them. As Kierkegaard illuminates, in the modern age, the public is even more ghostlike. "Only when the sense of association in society is no longer strong enough to give life to concrete realities is the Press able to create that abstraction 'the public,' consisting of unreal individuals who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization and yet are held together as a whole."[8] The lack of social structures and the individualism of our age creates the need for the phantom of the public, observes Kierkegaard.

When we no longer know people well enough to gauge what is going on, the press and the media attempts to fill this relational gap by telling us what others think and reporting on public opinion. The public is this ghostly entity who is always present, who always has an opinion, and who, in the age of democracy, is always right. Yet they are also a phantom, they don't exist anywhere in concrete form, they cannot be challenge, they have no responsibility, and they commit no actions. They are simply the calculated guess of what some demographic professionals estimate the majority of people are thinking. Yet the phantom of the public carries so much power in the mind of today's Christian.

Eugene Peterson writes, "Crowds lie. The more people, the less truth. . . . In crowds the truth is flattened to fit a slogan. Not only the truth spoken, but the truth that is lived is reduced and distorted by the crowd. The crowd makes spectators of us, passive in the presence of excellence or beauty. The crowd makes consumers of us, inertly taking in whatever is pushed at us. As spectators and consumers the central and foundational elements of our being human—our ability

to create, our drive to excel, our capacity to commune with God—atrophy."[9]

We obsess over the percentage of Christians in our nation or city, and we fret and chatter as public opinion is revealed in percentage form over complex social and theological issues. We wish the press would give faith a more even-handed approach, and we are driven to change public opinion. Part of us wishes we could be thrown off a high building in the public square and plucked out of the sky by angels, in order to dazzle the phantom public. Yet a positive public opinion will not establish the kingdom of God. We do well to heed the advice of Kierkegaard that "a public is a phantom which forbids all personal contact. And if a man adopts public opinion today and is hissed to-morrow he is hissed by the public."[10]

> **JESUS UNDERSTOOD THAT CROWDS COULD NOT BE TRUSTED.**

Instead what is real are individuals, communities, families, groups, and neighborhoods, people you can eat with, talk to, and listen to. These are not demographic phantoms, but real people. If you were to have taken a poll of Christian belief in Israel at about 6 a.m. Jerusalem time on the morning of Pentecost, the results would have shown that the gospel had lost in the court of public opinion; you could have fit the paltry responders in the positive into a small-ish room. But that is precisely the point; rather than public opinion, a small, living, breathing, devoted, Spirit-filled bunch of actual human beings was what Jesus was building His kingdom upon.

We need to release ourselves from the addiction of trying to win over the public and the burden of trying to influence public opinion, of trying to build ministries upon pitch alone. Instead we need to remember that if we are to build resilient disciples in our "on-to-the-next-shiny-thing" culture, we need to do as Jesus did and focus on the concreteness of actual people. We see Jesus building His ministry

upon going deep with a few, rather than going shallow with the public.

I am not making an argument either against large churches or for smaller churches; the practice of going deep with the few can be adhered to in any environment. In contrast to the shifting, swirling ephemerality of public opinion, Kierkegaard advocates that individuals be formed and shaped directly, "taught to be content, in the highest religious sense, with himself and his relationship with God, to be at one with himself instead of being in agreement with a public which destroys everything that is relative, concrete and particular in life; educated to find peace within himself and with God, instead of counting hands."[11]

Contentment is at the heart of our fixation on the court of public opinion.[12] We wish to understand what the public thinks because the public is the seemingly most visible manifestation of what the world thinks. It is a kind of alternate revelation to the Word of God. If public opinion shifts into our favor, then the discomfort we feel and the lack of belonging we experience will fade. We will be at home in the world. Disciples, however, never feel at home in the world.

THE POWER OF A CREATIVE MINORITY

Jesus attracted crowds; however, Gordon MacDonald reminds us that "Jesus did little to encourage spectators to stick around in crowd formation. Frequently, He seems to have downsized them by enlarging on what it cost to be servants of the real kingdom. The lightweights soon dispersed."[13] We see this approach in the strategy of St. Benedict, who found himself in the midst of a Europe that was in chaos following the fall of the Roman Empire. The structures and institutions that had afforded an era of peace and stability were now gone and with it, learning and order. As chaos grew, St. Benedict withdrew and focused on creating a kind of resilient disciple through monasteries. Benedict placed a challenge before those who would enter his

monasteries. There was a high bar. He preferred a few who were committed rather than a crowd who were lax. The commitment of a few would be a foundation upon which to renew a culture. The centrality of a life devoted to Christ would be the foundation upon which to rebuild.

Benedict's monastic retreat could seem like a disengagement from society, but it possessed a missional purpose. In the swirl of cultural and social disorder, these ordered, Christ-centered communities became a kind of oasis. Benedict's monasteries were a spiritual alternative to the castle strongholds that warlords were erecting across Europe in response to the chaos. Christian historian Christopher Dawson observes that Benedict's monasteries operated as an alternative to the clannishness and tribalism that the surrounding culture had reverted to.

The monasteries became centers of learning, which preserved much of the classical knowledge that was being lost. The order of the monasteries, their valuing of work and vocation, their stability and their high moral standing made them attractive places in which trades and business began to flourish. The monasteries were deeply missional and spread across Europe offering a visual and living witness of what the Christian life and community could look like.

> WE SEE JESUS BUILDING HIS MINISTRY UPON GOING DEEP WITH A FEW, RATHER THAN GOING SHALLOW WITH THE PUBLIC.

John Henry Newman likened St. Benedict's monasteries to a kind of revolution of "silent men" who quietly got on with the job of rejuvenating the culture behind the scenes in the most mundane of ways. He writes: "St. Benedict found the world, physical and social, in ruins, and his mission was to restore it. . . . There was no one who contended or cried out, or drew attention to what was going on, but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a

farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning and a city."[14]

By going deep with a few, living by code, submitting themselves to God, dwelling in Scripture, and quietly living out the kingdom, the community that gathered around Benedict became magnetic. This wasn't pitch—attractive because it promised immediate benefits; this was something different.

In a time in which chaos and uncertainty dominated, the order, holiness, and devotion of Benedict's community grew in attractiveness. This was a missional move in a time in which Rome had fallen. It was a missional response to a culture corroding and in chaos. Benedict had gone deep with a few, and he then went wide, multiplying the mission of his community by writing a Rule of Life, which guided others who wished to emulate his endeavor. Communities like Benedict's spread across Europe. They not only preserved the essential teaching and discipleship of their faith, but their commitment to learning also preserved many of the fruits of Western culture.

St. Benedict understood that to rebuild a culture and to be a creative minority, one had to return Christ to the center. The flurry of cultural renewal that grew around the monasteries inspired by his rule was built upon understanding our limitations and the limitlessness of God. This order had to be in the correct place. We cannot renew culture and refresh our churches without placing God at the center. We do so by removing ourselves from center stage, by accepting our limitations, by sacrificing and serving. The revolution of release in which we live and the corrosiveness of the third culture can only be answered not by better pitches but by those who are willing to go deep before they go wide.

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