

## Emergence as a challenge to the legacy of Christian dogmatics

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### Introduction

Ruth Senter, in “The adventure of a kite”<sup>1</sup>, tells the story of a kite which loved to fly. One spring day, the kite was taken outside and took to the skies. It drifted happily, soaring higher and higher. With each lift of the wind it felt freer, only limited by the string to which it was attached. The kite soon wished that the string were not there at all. If it were only free from this limiting device, the kite could fly as high as it wanted and glide wherever it wished. The kite was convinced that strings were not meant for kites, especially since kites longed to be free. All of a sudden the string snapped. “At last, I can experience freedom!” the kite thought. For a few moments it felt exhilarated by its own ability to exercise freedom. But it was not to last. The same wind that lifted the kite ever higher caused it to plummet to the ground, where it smashed into pieces.

The story of the kite is an analogy that describes the necessary tension between freedom and limitation. In the context of this paper, the relationship between the Christian faith’s growth towards freedom (through the phenomenon of emergence) and the dogmatic legacy which holds it accountable is described. As indicated in the title, I suggest that, in emergence, the urge for the Christian faith to develop in an upward trajectory has to be kept in tension with the dogmatic legacy which has helped to define and it into what we have today. The forces in this relationship – emergence and dogmatic legacy – operate in seemingly opposite directions but, when placed in tension with each other, may result in an equilibrium which enables the Christian faith to manifest in contextually relevant and effective ways. Reference will be made to the Emergent Church movement in the light of this discussion.

### Understanding the terms

First of all, let me clarify the different elements of this paper’s title. When we speak of “Emergence”, we refer to a scientific theory which postulates that there are different levels of complexity in creation, each of which consists of more than the sum total of its components. Take, for instance, the varied levels of complexity in a substance such as water. At the atomic level, water consists of hydrogen and oxygen atoms, which are fixed according the natural laws which operate at the atomic level. Combine these atoms and a water molecule is created, which is more than just the sum total of its atomic construction. The new level of complexity operates with its own level of natural laws, where the new entity cannot exist without the proper environment and conditions of the lower levels of complexity. The combination of atoms, under the right conditions, forms a different level of complexity, namely the molecular. If one has enough water molecules, one gets a body of water such as an ocean with tides and waves; in other words, a new level of complexity emerges, one which is much more than the building blocks that exist at an atomic or molecular level. The illustration can be expanded on in numerous ways to show the dynamics of emergence and emergent complexity.

Philip Clayton goes on to relate emergent complexity to prediction:

The principles underlying emergent complexity are that there are multiple levels of organization in the natural world, that the way things happen changes radically as one moves upward from one level to the next, and that prediction becomes less and less precise as the systems become more complex (Clayton 2011:53).

The theory of emergence goes on to stipulate that complexity increases substantially when the jump takes place from the inorganic to the organic and then to biological organisms. How does one describe, for instance, levels of complexity such as consciousness, the self and community? Relating the theory of emergent complexity to social structures, Clayton is quick to point out that: “In fact, by the time we get to something as complex as a person or a society, the agents being studied have become so strongly individualised that it becomes questionable whether their actions can still be explained in terms of underlying laws” (Clayton 2011:53).

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://ribessj.org/AUTOBIOGRAPHY\\_OF\\_A\\_KITE.pdf](http://ribessj.org/AUTOBIOGRAPHY_OF_A_KITE.pdf) [Accessed 14 February 2013]

Stuart Kauffman applies the theory of emergence to more than the natural sciences, suggesting that emergence as phenomenon touches the very heart of the problem concerning the questions reductionism has been unable to answer satisfactorily: "... while no laws of physics are violated, life in the biosphere, the fullness of our human historicity, and our practical everyday worlds are also real, are not reducible nor explicable from it, and are central to our lives" (Kauffman 2008:l.120). Coupled to this thought are the place of religion and the exercise of religious conviction in the identity of individuals and groups. This is not to say that religion in itself is a constant, but that religious expression and understanding are continuously being moulded and shaped by contexts, history, discovery and revelation. The recent development of what in Christianity is called the 'Emergent Church', for instance, bears testimony to new growth in established religious convictions which have been operational for millennia. The question can be asked whether the emergent in 'Emergent Church' is the same as the scientific theory explained by, amongst others, Clayton and Kauffman. It would be irresponsible to suggest that these two terms are the same for, if they were, it would have to suggest that the Emergent Church reflects a new level of complexity in the scope of broader Christian adherence. Is the Emergent Church a higher level of Christian devotion? Although stringent and passionate adherents to this movement may claim that this is the case, the more realistic answer has to be 'no'. At best, the Emergent Church can be described in terms of low-level emergence; that, under the right conditions and circumstances, a new movement in the Christian tradition has, for want of a better word, emerged. However, the fact remains that the Emergent Church tradition has rocked the boat of Christian dogmatics. It has, and is asking questions of dogmatic tradition, challenging long-held beliefs and, linked to the earlier illustration, resembles the kite's understanding of freedom. This notion will be explored later in this paper.

Secondly, concerning dogmatic legacy, "Dogmatic theology aims to examine and present coherently and systematically all major Christian doctrines" (Bowden & Richardson 1983:163). Dogmatic legacy therefore refers to the history of the Christian faith's identity as captured in the major doctrines and beliefs passed on from one generation to the next by means of creedal statements, theological traditions, and the accompanying proclamation-ministry exercised by the church.

Dogmatics captures the identity of the Christian Church in the formulation of words, which then acts as a guide, keeping the beliefs of the Church accountable to what dogmatics would consider to be 'orthodoxy'. Linking this construct to the illustration, dogmatics is depicted in the symbol of the string, the downward tension which limits the Christian church's ability to exercise non-accountable freedom.

Lastly, the term 'challenge' needs some unpacking. Does 'challenge' mean 'threat' or 'catalyst for growth'? In the context of this paper, I would like to suggest that both these definitions are valid, but it is precisely in the threat to dogmatic legacy that one finds an upward projection for the growth and strengthening of Christian faith while providing the opportunity for new theologies to develop which speak more clearly to the contexts in which they exist.

### **Existing tensions**

It would be erroneous to start a discussion on the tension between emergence and dogmatics, assuming that these two terms have absolutely nothing in common. The general assumption regarding dogmatics, especially from the perspective of empirical and natural sciences, is that it should be regarded as a static, deontological construct which governs the way the Christian faith is defined and practiced. It is from this perspective that atheists such as Dawkins assume that the Christian dogmatic legacy has been placed in an immovable and infallible position by the church, an assumption that often leads to conflict between religious conviction and natural science. Such an approach greatly undermines the development of theology through the ages and completely ignores the fact that theology itself has adapted to the discoveries made through, not only the natural sciences, but also the human sciences, art, philosophy and history.

Although dogmatics – and the very term suggests a rigidity – has been slow in conforming to social and scientific trends, it cannot be described as immovable. In fact, a more accurate description of dogmatics would be that theology itself is a product of emergence, albeit more often than not a low-level emergence. Thiselton describes Christian dogmatics as consensus truths that develop against the background of unfolding histories, experience, knowledge and encounter (Thiselton 2007:3–18). For the church, these consensus truths are based on core truths, but are interpreted from different perspectives, thus giving rise to the formation of different Christian traditions.

Osborne states that, from a historical perspective, Christian dogmatics emerged from the structures of European philosophy and culture which, in turn, greatly influenced Christian dogmatics (Osborne 1993:5). If the early Christian missionaries had travelled East rather than West, and if Christianity had developed in the East at the same prolific rate as it did in the West, but under different cultural and philosophical conditions, we might have a totally different form of Christianity, and perhaps a different world altogether from the one we know today. However, it is under specific historical conditions that we know that Christian theology and, by default, dogmatics developed. Osborne further notes that from this perspective - Christianity having a subjective historic

Western bias – Nietzsche opposed it as ‘the longest lie’ (Osborn 1993:5–6). Nietzsche simply could not fathom that the whole of civilisation could be shaped by the idea that there is something or someone out there which/who will ‘save us’ if we do or say the right things.

The historic, philosophical and cultural impact on the emergence of a Christianity known throughout the globe cannot be underestimated and all counted significantly in the formation of Christian dogmatics as we experience it today. But even to speak of ‘Christian dogmatics’ or ‘Christian Theology’ is problematic. The diversity of Christian expression and belief makes it almost impossible to speak of these terms in a generic form. Hendrikus Berkhof correctly states that it is impossible to speak of *the* Christian dogmatics or *the* Christian Theology: this would imply that there is one universal Christian dogmatic to which all Christian traditions subscribe (Berkhof 1986:xii–xiii). It would also be incorrect to speak of *a* Christian Dogmatic, for it would imply that there are several Christian dogmatics from which one is able to choose. When speaking of Christian traditions or denominations, there is a certain amount of truth in the notion that different interpretations of Christian dogmatics exist, or that traditions hold to unique teachings which may not necessarily be adopted by other Christian traditions. At the same time, there is a fundamental identity which unites these divergent traditions under the one umbrella term, ‘Christian faith’. Christian dogmatics is therefore not static, but in continuous flux, oscillating between the parameters set by the dogmatic legacy, but swayed through the external influences of history, philosophy, culture, etc.

Not only is the Christian dogmatic legacy an emergent product of external influences – one dare not say lower levels of complexity, but these certainly do contribute as building blocks – but the dynamics of Christian dogmatics also transforms itself owing to internal reflection and accommodation. The American Christian ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas “... sees doctrine not only in terms of living out the ‘narrative of God’ but also focusing on ‘what kind of community the church must be to rightly tell the stories of God’” (Hauerwas 1991:1). The meta-narratives within the Christian tradition are thus compelled to be reflective, asking questions of its dogmatic legacy so that it will be able to stand with both conviction and integrity, proclaiming its commitment to what it understands as being divine truth. There are clear examples in theological history where dogmatics alone has proven to be not enough for a responsible and contextual expression of the Christian religion.

On a personal level, Anselm of Canterbury promoted the idea of *Fides quaerens intellectum*, ‘faith seeking understanding’. Using this dictum, faith as captured in the dogmatic legacy of the Christian tradition alone does not suffice for personal Christian devotion. By the same token, Anselm’s motto does not mean that faith is to be replaced by understanding or knowledge. The result of such a faith expression would be nothing other than Gnosticism, a kite that would soon plummet to the ground. Faith, for Anselm, is acceptance of something more than only that which one ought to believe as passed on through the Christian dogmatic legacy. “It may, therefore be said with sufficient fitness that living faith believes *in* that *in* which we ought to believe; while dead faith merely believes that which ought to be believed” (Anselm of Canterbury 2012:l.1361). Faith in the dogmatic legacy alone is stagnant, and cannot be exercised in freedom (grace); it is a blind devotion to law.

The English evangelical, John Wesley, further expounded on the nature of grace, emphasising that although grace is the gift which brings the Christian religion to life, it is only possible because of the law. God offers prevenient grace, the grace that goes before; justifying grace, the grace which breaks the power of sin; and sanctifying grace, the grace which brings transformation and renewal, against the backdrop of the law which does not contradict the essence of the Gospel (Wesley 1987:227). The law is the promise of the Gospel. “For example ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart’, (Mt 22:37) is part of the law when it is thought of as an order, but it is part of the gospel when it is thought of as promise” (Wesley 1987:227). Faith without the covenant is, by this definition, a self-gratifying exercise, a drifting off in personal freedom which has no true relational accountability. The law without grace, similarly, would be God’s imposed order without relational freedom. Outler recognises that Wesleyan theology distinctly fuses dogmatics and freedom through the use of a quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience (Outler 1980:iv). Through Scripture and Tradition, the church’s dogmatic legacy is given expression, but needs to be interpreted through the lenses of Reason and Experience. This fusion makes for a balanced, relevant and contextual theology which is neither captive to dogmatics nor wholly subjectively free as a result of personal preference and opinion. I suggest that it is because of this balance in Wesleyan theology that today we have the privilege of reading about the Wesleyan Revival which swept through England and North America, facilitating social change on a scale which would be difficult to emulate through any other means.

Barth, too, warned against the idea of religion being the sole dominion through which God expresses Godself or the only means by which humanity can engage with God. Barth classified such religion – religion exclusively exercised within the realm of the dogmatic legacy – as *Religie als Unglaube*, ‘religion as unbelief’ (Barth 1987:327). It would be fair to say that, in all of the major shifts that had taken place in theology through the centuries, spanning from the Church Fathers, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the theological challenges during the World Wars, even in questions of politics in contexts such as in South Africa, one finds the rise of new theologies emerging out of the tension between dogmatic legacy and the urge to break free from these as a result of contextual influences.

## *Absolutes*

There is, however, the question of absolutes. When considering the Christian dogmatic legacy, what are the 'unchangeables', if there are any? Are we to assume that that which is considered to be fundamental to the Christian faith will continuously be diluted by the kite's urge to break free from these constraints, until such time that the Christian dogmatic legacy will fail in providing the necessary guidelines, leading to the complete collapse of the Christian framework – the string snapping because the pull is too hard? Is there anything in the core of the Christian dogmatic legacy which is indeed unchangeable, immovable and perhaps rigid? This is indeed a very difficult question to answer.

Throughout the church's history, there have been doctrines which have been considered infallible and beyond question, but later had to be adapted in light of new discoveries. Take, for instance, the doctrine of creation. Science is calling into question the belief of a *creatio ex nihilo* or a seven-day creation belief. It is now widely accepted in theology that the world is not flat, that the process of evolution is almost a certainty and that the world is not 10 000 years old. Christian dogmatics may have shifted somewhat by reinterpreting doctrine, so as to read Scripture more metaphorically than literally, but the enquiry into the fundamental strength of dogmatics still comes into question. Something more recent and profound is the question of the physical resurrection of Christ. How far can dogmatics bend in order to make space for new interpretations without having to let go of the fundamental core which holds it in place?

Perhaps the problem is not so much whether we can define the immovable fundamentals of Christian dogmatics, but recognising what happens when there is a fixation, stagnation or 'stenosis' of the Christian dogmatic fundamentals. When this takes place, the Christian tradition assumes the formation of absolutes, which then themselves become the focus of faith, becoming the very gods which replace the immovable God. Dogmatic stenosis defeats the purpose for which dogmatics exists. "To find the truth of the gospel is a futile exercise. God's truth is not found or discovered, for if it were, God would be dispossessed of the truth and it would belong to the finder or discoverer" (Bentley 2008:22). Fixation or stenosis strips Christian expression of any situation ethic which could be employed in order to be more informed and relevant in an age of science. Instead, what is created is a deontological paradigm which creates an either-or dynamic for those who wish to adhere to the Christian faith. Either one follows along a certain doctrinal path, or one's journey is off the beaten track and one is labelled as a heretic. Flying a kite using a steel cable will not work.

The other side of the dilemma is also true. If dogmatics is flimsy, without a strong core, then we are faced with having to try flying the kite using only a spider's web. This has been one of the major critiques of the Emergent Church movement. Stephen Hunt suggests that this movement's 'unorthodox' theology, which alludes to pantheism and depends on a sort of New Age-type Christian mysticism, emphasises the idea that the self is not separate from God, but in God (Hunt 2008:293) and can thus speak with the authority of God in the world. This open-ended theological approach may be a mouthful but, according to Hunt, is in effect without substance. Secondly, he suggests that the Emergent Church is a slave to relativism. "The efforts of the Emerging Church to accommodate post-modernism by shaping theology to suit culture is viewed as every bit disastrous as liberal scholars' accommodation to Modernism. With no foundation or boundaries it becomes practically impossible to say what is or is not Christian truth or conduct as there are no definitions or limits to faith or practice" (Hunt 2008:294).

Is Hunt's assessment of the Emergent Church movement accurate?

### **Where is the Emergent Church going?**

Scott McKnight, a forerunner of the Emerging Church movement, describes the Emerging Church as the coming together of four rivers – postmodernism, praxis (worship, orthopraxy, social justice, mission), post-evangelicalism (post-systematic theology) and politics. These 'rivers' flow together, with their own presuppositions and truths, into what he calls "Lake Emergence" (McKnight 2006:9). He further states that there is no such thing as an Emerging or Emergent Church denomination, but that it is rather a renewal movement within the church, a reconceptualisation of who the Church is and how the Church functions in the world which it forms part of (McKnight 2006:3). This movement therefore should be considered to be ecumenical in nature, open to theological difference, but seeking to give the Christian Church a renewed legitimate voice, especially on issues that are not answered satisfactorily by conventional dogmatics. McKnight further suggests that the critique levelled against the movement (e.g. that it kicks against systematic theology) is unfounded (Moritz 2008:32). What it does, in fact, is call into question constructs in traditional dogmatics which have been accepted as core fundamentals, but which do not, according to the movement, do justice to the teachings of Jesus in our current context. An example is the Emergent Church's questioning of the church's traditional understanding of marriage being solely between one man and one woman, thus excluding the possibility of same-sex relationships. The movement's claim that no systematic theology is permanent is in fact a description

of what a good systematic theology is. Systematic theology (read dogmatics) does not claim to be absolute, but serves as a reflection of the theological standing during a particular time and context. Secondly, even if the Emerging Church movement constructs an argument against dogmatics, it is by default already in possession of a dogmatic formulation. In the case of Emerging/Emergent Church, its theology places a strong emphasis on doctrines of God, Christology, Soteriology and Ecclesiology.

The movement's emphasis is "Not 'what is the church?', but 'what is the church for?'... form should follow function" (Tiplady 2008:ii). The argument posed seems to suggest that dogmatics on its own and left unquestioned will be the source of the Christian tradition's demise in the context where new questions are being asked about humanity, creation and God. The questions themselves may tempt the critic to explore a freedom outside the limitations of dogmatics, and may do so by choosing agnostic secularism, critical atheism or the spiritually subjective route of personalised mysticism. The Emergent Church wants to be the flying kite, hearing the new questions, holding in tension the Church's dogmatic legacy through the process of rethinking and re-evaluating conventional theology, hoping that in doing so a new form of Christian expression will emerge. This renewed Christianity will then be true to the Gospel, while taking seriously the modern context and questions raised by the merging streams.

Where is the Emerging/Emergent Church? Bader-Saye identifies three manifestations of the Emergent Church movement (Bader-Saye 2006:12–13). First of all, there are churches which are Emergent, simply because they focus on stylistic change. These are mainly traditional denominations that have transformed their methodology, but which have not changed their theology. For lack of a better description, these are the mainstream denominational churches that have modernised their services for the sole purpose of becoming more attractive to society at large. However, these churches preach the same doctrine. This is not to say that this form of Emergent Church is superficial. The pivotal question underlying the reshaping of methodology is: how does one communicate traditional truths in a contextually relevant manner?

The second type of Emergent Church are those churches who have responded to traditional evangelical theology with a postmodern reaction. In these emergent churches, both the methodology and theology have changed. Traditional formats of congregational life are challenged through innovative programmes, the open questioning of long-held beliefs and the offering of reinterpretations of Scripture and doctrine which are more inviting to those on the ecclesiastical fringes. The third type of Emergent Church are the mainline evangelical churches, which have surrendered liberalism for missional evangelism. The focus here is not on church in a building, but church in the daily realities of the world. It is therefore not uncommon for 'church' to gather in coffee shops, at sporting events and other places of normal social gathering. For this group, the aim is to show the relevance of the Christian faith in the world.

Although these classifications are helpful, I do not think that these descriptions should be understood as set categories within which the Emergent Church movement operates. They do, however, offer a scope of the Emergent Church movement, ranging from changes in traditional churches to the more extreme expressions of the movement outside conventional Christian denominationalism and/or places of worship. There are also certain points regarding dogmatics that the Emerging Church movement seems to display.

1. The Emerging Church seeks a way forward for the Christian faith in general by "... rejecting the airtight categories" posed by modernism, inviting an open-minded approach to the questioning of traditional theology and traditions (Moritz 2008:28).
2. "Emergents see orthodoxy as 'generous', that is, inclusive of beliefs Christians have historically thought of as aberrant or heretical. For that reason, many leading emergents ... refuse [sic.] to assert Christianity's superiority to other world religions" (Hunt 2008:291).

In theory this all sounds very good, but does the Emerging Church movement speak for all Christians? Does it give a true reflection of where Christianity should be heading while holding in tension its dogmatic legacy and the freedom sought from its constraints? It seems that, although this movement offers a legitimate view, it must be considered *a* theological position and not *the* theological position for the future of the Christian faith. I say this because the movement itself seems to appeal more to liberal-minded Christians than conservatives. In fact, it is on this very point that the Emergent movement isolates and contradicts itself.

On the one hand the movement proposes an open-minded approach to theology, but yet shows scathing intolerance of views that oppose its stance, more specifically those held by conservative evangelicals (Hunt 2008:292). It accuses conservative evangelicals of preaching apologetics and being exclusive in their theological discourse, but does so in a dismissive manner that suggests that the Emergent movement is truly a 'step upwards' in theological complexity, a level unattainable by conservative evangelicals. Is it true that tolerant people are only tolerant as long as you agree with them?

Hunt commends the movement's refusal to chuck out the dogmatic baby with the bathwater by turning to philosophers and theologians to "recover an understanding of knowledge and truth" (Moritz 2008:30). But others, such as Kunkle, warn that this re-appreciation is done too liberally. Kunkle argues that there are three

main theological concerns regarding the movement's reassessments. These concern a reinterpretation of the death and resurrection of Christ (Kunkle 2006:6) (suggesting metaphoric readings of specifically the resurrection and reinterpreting Jesus' death only in terms of religio-political pressure to silence Him), the authority of the Bible (Kunkle 2006:5–15) (not a book dropped from heaven, but the product of human, fallible, but inspired people) and the nature of truth (that absolutes and universal truths should be avoided) (Kunkle 2006:8). Christian truth is therefore a matter of perspective (Kunkle 2006:9).

It appears that even if the Emergent Church wants to fly the kite of the Christian faith, it stands the real risk of its dogmatic string getting entangled in relativism and subjectivism. Does it have a future? Will it be able to successfully hold in tension the Church's dogmatic legacy while seeking to fully appreciate the critical questions which demand a letting go of this historic line? Time alone will tell.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I aimed to describe the relationship of tension between dogmatic legacy and the freedom from dogmatism sought after if the Christian faith is to soar. The building blocks, dogmatic legacy and freedom, contribute towards the establishment of a new 'level of complexity' – a Christian faith that is relevant and contextual, yet which holds firmly to its core beliefs. I showed that: "Dogmatic theology aims to examine and present coherently and systematically all major Christian doctrines", (Bowden & Richardson 1983:163) yet that "... dogmatics should be constantly aware of the service it has to render to the believer, the church and the world" (Berkhof 1986:28).

This paper did not juxtapose emergence as a scientific theory against the religious worldviews of the Christian faith, but suggested that it is precisely because of emergence that Christian dogmatics evolves, grows and regenerates. One such a regenerating strand in the current context is called the Emerging Church movement. Although it is plagued by being relatively dogmatically undefined, the Emergent movement resists the notion of dogmatic antinomianism. Nevertheless, its impact on influencing the course of the Christian faith of the future should not be underestimated.

Is emergence a threat to the Church's dogmatic legacy? Yes and no. The trajectory of emergence (new contexts) will continue to ask questions of dogmatics, rebelling against dogmatism and for this reason challenge the legitimacy and place of doctrinal formulations. Thus, yes. But also no, because true dogmatics can only be seen as existing in flux. Their very existence is dependent on the ebb-and-flow of history, philosophy, science, art, and much more. Dogmatics needs emergence, and continued regeneration in order to speak truths into contexts of change.

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