A postmodern monastery copyright Steve Taylor
IT | Church | Culture, November 2003

Let me rapidly paint some verbal pictures for you, then draw it together until the title "A postmodern monastery."

Verbal picture One: *The name of the Rose* is a book written by Umberto Eco.[1]

It's a fictional account of monastic life. It's widely claimed to be a "postmodern" book and certainly it playfully deconstructs texts and certainly it undermines the central place of reason and religion. The book finishes with a burned out monastery, destroyed from within by fire. The texts of the library collected and copied through centuries, are burnt. The intellectual, rational reasoning of the main character in fact ignites the circumstances by which the monastery catches fire and the library is burned. And so the central overarching narratives of text, reason and religion are reduced to literally, literal, ash.

However the plot, the deconstruction of texts, reason and religion, is not my focus today.

The Name of the Rose is set in a monastery. A group of people who've given themselves to rhythms of prayer and a way of working within the grace of God.

And the work, the task of the monastery, is to preserve learning. Monks sit for hours in the scriptorium, surrounded by a wonderful library and faithfully copy text. This is the task of the monastery. To preserve knowledge within the rhythms of prayer.

We laugh. We with OCR and laser printers and Adobe Acrobat software laugh at the idea of the hand-written preserve of knowledge.

What today, 2003, Aotearoa New Zealand, does the postmodern monastery look like?

Verbal Picture Two: Come with me to Dublin. Open with me the Book of Kells. The pinnacle of Celtic monastic life. The book of Kells is like The Name of rose, a monastic copying of text. The Book of Kells add creative beauty. Monks add art to text. Monks combine creativity with the task of preserving knowledge within the rhythms of prayer.

Where today, 2003, Aotearoa New Zealand, is the postmodern monastery? Where today are those who combine creativity with the task of preserving current technical knowledge within the rhythms of prayer.

Verbal Picture Three: On the 3rd of October, the New Zealand Herald IT section featured the launch of the *Fanimatrix*. Two Aucklanders, Steve Davis and Rajneel Singh have filmed their own tribute to The Matrix.

They brought together their creative passion, a cast of amateur actors and a cheap Sony Handy-Cam. They produced a 15 minute web-only film for a cost of $800. They transformed mid-winter Auckland into a futuristic cityscape, via Adobe software. Word of mouth internet chat meant 70,000 downloads in the first 5 days.

To quote Rajneel Singh, "We hope people will see it as cheap but not cheesy, because a lot of work went into making it a very authentic film."[2] Authentic, low-budget group creativity.

To quote from the NZ Herald;

---

[1] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 1983.
[2] "Viewers rush for net flick." New Zealand Herald, 03.10.2003, By Richard Amatatua,
http://www.nzherald.co.nz/storydisplay.cfm?storyID=3526734&thesection=technology&thesubsection=general&thesecondsub
section=

"The film's early success means it has probably already enjoyed [in 5 days] more exposure than even the best-known New Zealand short films can muster through the conventional festival circuit. While the move to digital recording and editing has revolutionised the film industry and allowed "guerrilla" film-makers to produce high-quality, low-cost productions, the web is increasingly acting as an alternative distribution channel."[3]

Our society has become highly individualised. Consumption is now the primary route by which all of us confer meaning.

I follow Jesus. Jesus who entered culture. Jesus who worked within that culture.

Incarnational mission today must co-operate with how our society finds meaning. We must critically, creatively, co-operate with consumption, with free downloads.

When are we going to create good enough video loops that 70,000 people will download them for free?

Where today, 2003, Aotearoa New Zealand, is the postmodern monastery? Where today are those who combine authentic, low-budget group creativity with the task of preserving technical knowledge within the rhythms of prayer?

Verbal Picture Four: Spam vs open-source. 70,000 downloads by word of mouth. Contrast that to spam. After we meet last time I got inspired by the nauseous idea of spam evangelism.

My name is Spam.
Spam I Am.
I have some stuff I'd like to sell.
Take a look! It's really swell!

I do not want your worthless spam.
I do not want it, Spam I Am.

Spam I Am:
$500 software that really rocks!
Just 20 bucks--still in the box!

You are really full of bunk.
I do not want your bootleg junk!
I do not want your worthless Spam.
I do not want it Spam I Am.

Spam I Am:
How about some fast cash?
Fifty Thousand in a flash!!!

Stop it Spam. Enough's enough.
I do not want your trashy stuff!
I do not want your damn spam!
I do not want it Spam I Am![4]

How much of Christian evangelism is spam? Worthless junk email.

---

[3] "Viewers rush for net flick." New Zealand Herald, 03.10.2003, By Richard Amatatua, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/storydisplay.cfm?storyID=3526734&thesection=technology&thesubsection=general&thesecondsubsection=

[4] Excerpts from http://www.unwind.com/jokes-funnies/compjokes/spam.shtml.

We now go on-line with dread, wondering how many organ extensions and sexual enhancements we'll get offered.

Sit with your Spam feelings for a minute. Sit with those feelings of rage and impotence.

Now think about evangelism. We as Christians claim that we have the words of eternal life. And we do. But how often do we communicate them in a way that feels like spam to those who receive them.
> Leaflets stuck in a letterbox
> Little black books
> Words shouted on a street corner

Any spammer will swear they are
> Just offering a service
> Just giving us a chance to say no
> It's really important so they must tell everyone.
> That for every million emails they send, if just one makes a sale, it's been worth it.

They're all reasons I've heard in evangelism seminars.
> That people need to hear
> That it's really important
> That God's word never returns void

So on the one hand we have the words of eternal life. On the other, we don't like spam. And we never want people to feel rage at receiving the words of eternal life.

Spam vs open source software.

Rather than pay hundreds of dollars to Microsoft, the open source offering of free downloads.

Rather than spam, the open source offering by word of mouth.
> "Hey, have you heard. It's free, it works and it's good value."

Rather than force feed words, the open source offering of participation. As a way of saying thanks, join the open source community. Make more free software, check new versions, answer other people's queries, write instruction manuals; a range of tasks to suit a range of skills and gifts.

Spam vs Open source code. I know which one sounds most like the Kingdom to me.

Where today, 2003, Aotearoa New Zealand, is the postmodern monastery that combines authentic, low-budget group creativity with the task of preserving knowledge within the rhythms of prayer in order to offer open source spirituality?

Verbal Picture Five: Len Sweet points out that the Sunday School movement arose in the 18th century.[5] It emerged in an industrial society. It was a society in which few could read. In this society, the church ran Sunday School. The church helped educate illiterate children.

At the end of the year the church gave our prizes. Books.

Perhaps you smile. You who received, as a child, a Sunday School prize of a book.

Yet back in the 18th century one Sunday School prize was worth about the same as a computer.

---

[5] Len Sweet, Christchurch, 2001, , pers. comm.

The 18th century Sunday School was giving out expensive resources, and enabling children to clamber across their literary divide.

Where today, 2003, Aotearoa New Zealand, is the postmodern monastery - Authentic, low-budget group creativity - preserving knowledge - the rhythms of prayer; that catalyses open source spirituality and enables kids to clamber across the digital divide?

Let me be practical
- A physical space. I think it needs to be earthed somewhere. It becomes far more meaningful if relationships are physically shared.
- Develop a rhythm of prayer, a shared daily spirituality that ensures geeks do more than see the neon glow of my screen. They work within a rhythm of appreciating people, creation and God.
- Build a community of "monks", a group of people with "knowledge" not of copying books but of web design and video skills and graphic design. Some part-time, some spare-time, perhaps some full-time.
- Develop a few commercial projects to fund the lifestyle of the "monks".
- Nurture, one at a time, authentic, low-budget group creative projects – "video" downloads for the world.
- Tap into "artists dole" and mentor developing Christian "monks".
- Invite Christian teenagers to use the high-tech gear, to build relationships and share skills and develop their spirituality and take websites back to their church.
- Tap into Trusts for the high-tech gear and take computers to schools after-school. Teach kids in GI to log on and design their own webpage. Invite their parents to a viewing and tell them of the Kingdom of God in which the aroha of God crosses the digital divide.

A postmodern monastery - Combining authentic, low-budget group creativity with the task of preserving technical knowledge within the rhythms of prayer in order to cross the digital divide and catalyse open source spirituality.