

Review of Frost, *Incarcate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement*

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Frost M 2014. *Incarcate: the body of Christ in an age of disengagement*. Downers Grove: IVP

1. Introduction to the Author

Michael Frost is a leading missiologist with an international voice in the missional church movement, and frequently speaks at conferences throughout the world. Frost co-founded the Forge Mission Training Network together with his friend, Alan Hirsch, with whom he has co-authored several books. He is also the Vice Principal of Morling College and the founding director of the Tinsley Institute, a mission study centre located at Morling College in Sydney, Australia. Many of his books explore missiology in the postmodern age, and are required reading for colleges and seminaries in many parts of the world. Some of these books include, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (2008, co-authored with Alan Hirsch), *The Road to Missional, Journey to the Center of the Church* (2011), and most recently, *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (2015) .

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

2. The Purpose of the Book

Frost, in his book, seeks to show his readers how contemporary society has become what he calls excarnational, that is, living a defleshed human existence, disengaged with the physicality of the here and now. He laments that ‘Christianity has become an out-of-body experience-personalized, privatized, customised...’ and sees ‘dualism as one of the chief problems facing the evangelical church’. His purpose for authoring such a book is to critique our age of disengagement in both the secular world as well as in Christianity, and to argue that the church is called to live an incarnational lifestyle, rooted in the physical present. Frost, not only tells us what is wrong with our age and society, but also proposes how the church might live incarnational lives meaningfully in the way of liturgy and worship, and in mission, engaging our communities as the body of Christ.

To make the point, *Incarnate* begins by providing ancient examples of the ritual of defleshing as seen in the cultures of old, up until medieval Europe, whereby the flesh of the deceased is removed and the bones bleached for burial purposes. Frost draws parallels between this ancient, obscure practice with that of the postmodern defleshing of human experience, or excarnation, as he calls it, calling our age an age of disengagement.

Frost offers a powerful and relevant critique of the contemporary life which lures us into the process of excarnation. One cannot help but identify with the plethora of examples which he provides of defleshing of the human experience in our present age. Frost engages with an array of contemporary media, namely, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, online gaming and zombie movies, which he refers to as the disembodiment of morality. His commentary on pornography as excarnation is particularly striking. As an example, Frost reflects on the novel, *Lost Memory of*

Skin, written by the novelist Russell Banks. The story is about a sex offender and porn addict, referred to as the Kid, living in a makeshift camp in close proximity to an airport where the ‘down and out’ and other sex offenders live. Pornography continues to destroy his life. While the Kid is still a virgin, he has seen all there is to see, at least of the virtual kind. Yet, his only real friend is a pet, an iguana. Frost observes that the irony is that the Kid knows more about the feeling of iguana skin than he does about anything truly human, relationship, sexuality and the touch of human skin. An example of excarnation.

A practical illustration which most of us experience is an airport departure lounge. Frost highlights some points of excarnation; (1) it’s a lounge filled with people who do not belong in that moment, (2) they participate in trivial interactions, if there are any interactions at all, (3) the spaces are depersonalized, all airport lounges look similar, if not, the same, lacking architectural particularity, (4) people sit, ignoring their neighbour, as they do in all public spaces, with devices in hand and immediate access to Wi-Fi. The layouts and arrangements of airport lounges are designed to be like that, with social engineering in mind for desired environments and behaviours. Frost’s observations are dead right, the departure lounge is the last link in the assembly-line process, to get the passenger from one point to the other via the ‘human assembly line’. Not to mention the security screening, removing laptops, wallets, watches, belts – excarnation, and sometimes even dehumanisation.

It is not difficult to feel the existential undercurrent of Frost’s book. And while his examples were probably one too many (I have only shown two of them), they were nevertheless masterfully interwoven and served the purpose of making a significant point, that many people in

today's age of disengagement belong everywhere but nowhere, experiencing spiritual and emotional homelessness.

Frost explains, 'What was intended to honor the dead has become the unconscious habit of the living. Practising excarnation on the dead gives meaning to life; practising excarnation among the living is destructive, violent, death-bringing'. This movement towards excarnation had an effect on Christianity whereby our religious expression in bodily forms of worship, ritual, liturgy and practice moves towards cognitive expressions of worship in which the church experiences a loss of liturgy and sacred space and practice.

Frost believes that ultimately all this has resulted in a disembodied approach to the mission of the church, a drift toward non-incarnational expressions, where disembodiment is encouraged and preferable to getting one's hands dirty, so to speak, serving our local community as the body of Christ. We see this in the preference for short-term mission trips and 'treasure hunting' approaches to evangelism, now widespread, started nevertheless in Bethel Church, Redding, California, where we are expected to minister to strangers we will likely never see again. Frost emphasises,

In a time of disengagement and excarnation, the body of Christ is required all the more to embrace a more thoroughly embodied faith, a truly placed way of living that mirrors the incarnational lifestyle of Jesus. Now, more than ever, it seems, such a call to incarnational living needs to be heeded.

In his book, Frost puts forth a call for all Christians to leave evangelical dualism and 'to be fully present in our bodies, to inhabit flesh and to be home in the world where God has placed us is a difficult task, particularly for Christians who have for so long been taught to yearn for a home in the age to come'.

Jesus, of course, is the incarnate one par excellence, he mingles with the sinners and finds his way to the sick, the blind, the lame, the dead and the demon-possessed, and he cures them and offers life, calling them to a renewed hope. And so Jesus, being the only bona fide incarnation, Frost takes incarnational to mean that Christ followers are being disciplined and shaped on the incarnation; this should empower them. Of course, this also includes joining the great quest of the incarnational mission of God.

3. Evaluation of the Book

While Frost makes use of media, film and novels to make his point, I also appreciated his interaction with various scholars, which made for some fascinating writing and interaction. Among other scholars, of interest were (1) the philosopher and theologian Nancy Murphy, (2) the Polish socialist Zygmunt Bauman, (3) the Roman Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, (4) the medical missionary, philosopher and theologian Albert Schweitzer, (5) the French philosopher of social science René Girard, (5) the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, and (6) the Missionary and Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, whom Frost himself greatly admires. One can also sense the presence and influence of the New Testament Scholar N.T. Wright, and the philosopher James K. A. Smith, throughout much of the book. He interacts with them too.

The book offers honest articulation of the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the physical in Christianity. Frost highlights three such dichotomies: (1) Christian Anthropological dualism has its roots in Platonism, the temporal and the eternal, which was later developed by René Descartes, who explored the idea of the human as divisible into body and soul. The ascetic monks' flagellating themselves is an unmistakable expression of such dualism. (2) Christian

metaphysical dualism emphasises that heaven is of great importance and that earth is more or less unimportant. The evidence of this is the preoccupation of many Christians with ‘all things otherworldly to the exclusion of anything good or godly in this world’. (3) Christian religious dualism promotes faith as an exclusively personal and private matter with little to do with daily life. Such dualism also encourages ‘moralistic therapeutic deism’, whereby the Christian calls on God as if he were a cosmic vending machine.

This is where Frost’s study on Murphy’s ‘spirited bodies’ is helpful. Frost explains, if we are spirited bodies, we have an invitation into a rich and lively union with God through Jesus Christ. Simultaneously, while our bodies are who we are, our union with God enables us to be ‘spirited’. Frost continues and explains how Murphy rejects the mainstream views and ‘develops the idea of spirited bodies as a kind of physicalist alternative to the dualism of bodies and souls: We are, at our best, complex physical organisms. Imbued with the legacy of thousands of years of culture, and, most importantly, blown by the Breath of God’s Spirit; we are Spirited Bodies’. With this in mind, Frost believes, and I think rightly so, that ‘the church has largely embraced an overly developed dualism that has proved to be unhelpful and has given religious endorsement to the excarnational forces in secular society’.

Frost offers reflection on the thoughts of the Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith, who considers public rhythms of liturgy, worship, contemplation, reflection and prayer as fostering attitudes of incarnation and spiritual practice. He seeks to broaden Smith’s horizons to ‘include missional practices and daily habits’. This is especially evident in Frost’s latest book publication, *Surprise the World*.

While some might view *Incarnate* as a provocative read, it certainly is thought-provoking. Frost offers a sustained argument throughout,

furnished with copious examples from a variety of sources; these include his own experiences, pop culture, and scholarly works. Although the book itself is written on a semi-popular level it is well researched and yet very much readable. As one who has thought through some of the issues raised, and having read N. T. Wright and James K. A. Smith, I found *Incarinate* a challenging yet delightful read.

Of course, Frost is a missiologist, and so he also provides helpful insight on the practical and missional applications on how to live as the Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement. He explores these further, though, in his book, *Surprise the World*. But I think the present book, *Incarinate*, lays a firm foundation. This brings us to the next discussion.

4. Missional Applications

With a slight allusion to a certain awkward eschatological notion, Frost rightly states that God does not ‘pluck us out of this world’, but rather redeems us so that we may be sent to love and serve others and to reflect the image of Christ to those around us. Our vocation is to live in the here and now.

While in his book, *Incarinate*, Frost does not go to great lengths in describing how we should live incarnate lives as Christians, he suggests that the Christian community should demonstrate to the world ‘what a truly earthed, communal, relational, embodied experience of life can be like’. Some of this, he believes, may be expressed through various activities like weekly practices and embodied liturgy, rather than drawing from the shallow wells of podcasts, social media and televangelists for one’s spiritual nourishment. These are intrinsically excarnate, not to mention the highly individualised and emotional culture found in many of our churches, in the way of Megachurches,

rock music, stimulating visuals, to name but a few. As an alternative to such, the book advocates the importance of physical gathering around Scripture, ‘embracing the embodied task of being a hermeneutic community’. And then to proclaim and demonstrate the universal reign of God through Jesus Christ by engaging at a deep, personal level with the brokenness of humanity.

I appreciate Frost’s emphasis on both right Christian theology being taught, together with incarnate practices. Drawing again from the contemporary philosopher James K. A. Smith, Frost reminds his readers that we are creatures of desire, and that all Christian education (or theology) should be to influence and infirm these desires, assisting in drawing others into this biblical picture of human flourishing and ordering our lives rightly around God’s universal reign. Such rhythms of practice, habits and liturgies really need to punctuate both our private and communal lives in such a way as to maintain, orientate and order our affections.

Frost also points out some concerns in the field of missiology, namely the popularity of short-term mission trips where people can participate in mission as ‘vacationaries’, offering people a taste or an experience of mission overseas without even rooting themselves in the culture and language of the people. Such short term missions are often unhelpful.

Towards the end of the book, Frost helps us with four essentials that may be adopted in order to live incarnationally in an effort to engage our communities meaningfully, (1) Anthropological (move in), that is to embed oneself in our communities and learn to appreciate the needs, hope and yearnings of such communities, and to make one’s presence felt in the immediate community. (2) Empathically (listen to them), that is to actively listen to those around us, to be attentive to the disenchantment (a reference to Charles Taylor no doubt) of our

neighbours, so that we may know how to offer something more than the heartless secularism. (3) Collaboratively (Partner with them), by this Frost means to partner with other churches, businesses, city councils, social organisations, and so on, in order to be a part of restoring our cities. This is demonstrating the kingdom of God. (4) Sustainability (stay with them for a long time), church leadership needs to become a part of the fabric of the community, through the good times and the bad times. We need to be there through it all.

Reflecting on what he has written, Frost's epilogue is certainly thought-provoking, calling us to make a change in the way we live out our Christian faith in the world, how we do church, how we worship, how we do mission, and how we pastor and care for others. I think it would be appropriate to let Frost have the last word.

When all our cultural impulses are pushing us toward disembodiment and disconnection, how do we reverse them sufficiently to not only live out an incarnated version of the Christian faith as an end itself, but to also bring about meaningful cultural change? I think the answer to these questions has ecclesiological, liturgical, missional and pastoral implications.

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