



Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement

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Airport Lounge or Japanese Garden?

The core idea of the Christian faith is the incarnation: God took on flesh and dwelled among us. To other religions such an idea is considered odd or, worse, inconceivable or, even worse, blasphemous. And yet as centrally as we hold the idea of the incarnation, there is a grave danger that we are leaving the implications of this great idea behind us. Whereas Jesus Christ was God incarnate and his church was called to an incarnational lifestyle, today we find ourselves drifting toward excarnation—the defleshing of our faith. We have been moving through a disembodied process that has left us feeling rootless and disengaged, connected to our world more and more through screens rather than face to face.

Cultural commentator Richard Sennett has claimed that the primary architectural emblem of contemporary life is the airport departure lounge. It's a telling symbol and reveals something of the excarnate nature of things. The departure lounge is full of people who don't belong where they currently find themselves and whose interactions with others are fleeting, perfunctory and trivial. Airport lounges are highly depersonalized spaces. Even those of us who travel a lot have difficulty telling one airport lounge from another. They are bland, liminal places, and their lack of specificity makes us yearn for somewhere real, for our destination. Nobody *belongs* in an airport lounge. Most people make the experience bearable by focusing on their mobile devices thanks to the recent innovation of airports providing free Wi-Fi access (even airports don't want you to belong in their lounges). Travelers' heads are elsewhere, checking email or social media, listening to music or watching films or television programs on tablets or phones. . . .

In a sense the airport departure lounge is the end point in our disassembly line, as we move endlessly, lining up in zigzagged queues, each stage stripping back our sense of belonging, our sense of rootedness in place and culture. This is even symbolized in the removal of various items of clothing, wristwatches and laptops during security screening. By the time we reach our gate lounge we have become less truly present in our own space. But of course, I speak of this not merely as a problem for air travelers. Richard Sennett sees the gate lounge as a symbol for all contemporary life. So too does the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who considers *tourism* as a primary metaphor for modern living. Like tourists, the lives of liberated Westerners are marked by mobility and impermanence, a looseness of ties to place and people. This, Bauman contends, gives way to "grazing behavior," an endless sampling of experience that shies away from strict commitment to any one style, ideology or belief.

In an excarnate world there is a discernible lack of commitment or loyalty to any one worldview. Ever seen tourists returning from a vacation in India sporting a red bindi between their eyebrows and wearing beer-stained T-shirts from Planet Hollywood Mumbai? Why do you think airports are crammed with faux regional restaurants like Bubba Gump's

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Shrimp Co. or On the Border Cantina? We know we’re not on the bayou or in Tijuana, but, like tourists, we’re willing to sample a little hyper-real cuisine while we belong nowhere and have no sense of attachment to our surroundings. In fact, the next time you’re sitting on a fake Brentwood chair in an airport TGI Friday’s under a red-and-white candy-striped awning, surrounded by brass rails and fake stained glass, your meal lit by faux Tiffany lamps, your server wearing a red-and-white striped soccer shirt, remind yourself you’re not actually *anywhere* right now. Your body might be in the airport lounge, but your mind is somewhere else – on social media, playing online games, watching Fox News on the airport screens, dreaming of somewhere else. You’ve realized your primary status in contemporary society as a disembodied one, free to roam, free to stray, free to be, well, free. . . .

On a stopover from Sydney to Los Angeles, I found myself biding time in transit in Honolulu International Airport. It is, to my amazement, set among a series of lush gardens, designed, as I later discovered, by Richard Tongg in 1962. Three cultural gardens display the influence of the Hawaiian, Chinese and Japanese heritages on the state of Hawaii and are connected by meandering pathways, bridges and stepping stones. Goldfish splash about in lakes amid lotus and lily pads in the Chinese garden. Pine and bamboo trees along with other native Chinese flowering trees are strategically placed among craggy rock formations. The Japanese section features a zigzag bridge (which keeps away evil) under which colorful carp create patterns in the ponds surrounded by sculptured pine and weeping willow trees. In the Hawaiian gardens, there are quiet lagoons filled with koi, gurgling springs and waterfalls cascading down lava walls. In the tropical setting, banana, coconut, hala (pandanus) and kukui (candlenut) trees shade ti plants, exotic ferns such as the lauae and monstera, and eye-catching flowers, white ginger, red torch ginger and bird of paradise. At night, luau torches illuminate the garden where glass-ball floats hang from the huge branches of the monkeypod trees.

All this is visible from the windows of the concourse, which is otherwise like any other airport in the world. As my fellow travelers played Angry Birds on their iPads or stared aimlessly into space, I was unable to take my eyes from the gorgeous verdant gardens outside. Real birds flittered about. The movement of fish sent ripples across the ponds. Willow branches swayed in the breeze. A gardener was clipping a pine tree. The grass was tropically green, the soil volcanic black. From my vantage point in the sterile environment of an airport concourse, Richard Tongg’s gardens were like metaphoric oxygen to my soul. Even though I couldn’t smell them or breathe them through the security-glazed and insulated airport windows, the gardens outside were the perfect antidote to the air-conditioned, culturally nonspecific interior of my departure lounge.

Those gardens made me yearn for dirt and worms and compost. They made me hunger for *place*. They reminded me that the grazing life of the tourist is no metaphor for real living, that bouncing across the top of faux Hawaiian culture (or any such culture for that matter) is

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BOOK EXCERPT

meaningless. Those little gardens surrounded by a veritable sea of concrete runways and metallic hangars were islands that cried out to me that embodied truth and faithful habits, and liturgy and enacted morality, and face-to-face relationship were the real stuff.

Like the gardens at Honolulu International Airport, the church is to be just that – dirt and worms and compost compared to the sterility of the departure lounges of the excarnate life. We are to embody faith and life in the company of those who've fallen for rootlessness and grazing behavior, for disengagement and objectification, for screen culture and virtual reality. If we are to be like the Japanese gardens in Honolulu airport, it will require a recommitment to embodied forms of witness bolstered by a profoundly incarnational theology. If we can do this we might just become salt and light in a bland and darkened world.

– Taken from Chapter 1, “Rootless, Disengaged and Screen Addicted”