The churches on the Green: A cautionary tale

MICHAEL D. COE

Yale University

There seems to be a belief among the various practitioners of the 'new' archaeology, shared by their disciples, students and other followers, that all of the past is ultimately *knowable*, or will be knowable, through a supposedly scientific archaeology. Lewis Binford (1962:218–219), for instance, flatly states the following:

It has often been suggested that we cannot dig up a social system or ideology. Granted we cannot excavate a kinship terminology or philosophy, but we can and do excavate the material items which functioned together with these more behavioral elements within the appropriate cultural sub-systems. The formal structure of artifact assemblages together with the between element contextual relationships should and do present a systematic and understandable picture of *the total extinct* cultural system.

I have the distinct impression that most of our social anthropology colleagues would regard such a view as disastrously naive. In a stunning critique of the 'new' archaeology, Edmund Leach (1973) finds that its practitioners operate in a nineteenth-century framework by adhering to a unilinear theory of social development and espouse an old-fashioned functionalism of a kind given up long ago by social anthropologists.

Specifically, Leach proposes to the model-conscious, 'new' archaeologists a model that they probably will not like: a Black Box. Under a Black Box model, we can see and measure what is going into the box (the input), and we can do the same for what is coming out (the output) but we cannot observe what is going on inside the box. Leach feels that this model is an appropriate one in the case of archaeologists claiming

to be able to discover a prehistoric social system: social anthropologists know from study of living societies that there are numerous possible social systems (these being unobservable to the archaeologist and thus inside the Black Box) which could be postulated for any particular archaeological assemblage.

In this paper, I am going to present a parable or cautionary tale which points up the truth in what Leach has to say. Some may think this to be an extreme example, but I think it is not. I could have presented many other examples, but this one is particularly well documented and obviously close to home.

THE CHURCHES ON THE GREEN

The New Haven Green, in the center of the town where I live, is graced by three exceptionally fine churches which have come in the minds of the local citizens to symbolize the city itself. All three churches lie in a north–south row with their entrances facing Temple Street. Two of the structures, the United or North Church and the Center Church or First Church of Christ in New Haven, are rather similar to each other, being built of brick and wood, the architectural mode being rather classicizing or Georgian in appearance. Their interior layout is also similar, with a pulpit at the far end facing the door and lacking an altar. The third church on the south, Trinity Church, is strikingly different. It is Gothic in style, constructed from local red sandstone, has an imposing altar at the end facing the front door and stained glass instead of plain glass windows.

Let us suppose that an archaeologist five thousand years hence is poking about in the buried ruins of our city, now no longer dangerously radioactive. Let us also imagine that he has no intelligible documents available to him, cannot (because of circumstances) use isotopic dating methods and has no way of placing buildings in sequence other than by stylistic analysis. He does, however, recognize the remains of the churches (Binford's 'material items') as religious structures similar to those of northern Europe.

I submit that even if our future archaeologist were as brilliant and scientific as Binford himself, he would inescapably conclude (1) that Trinity was built either considerably before or after the other two
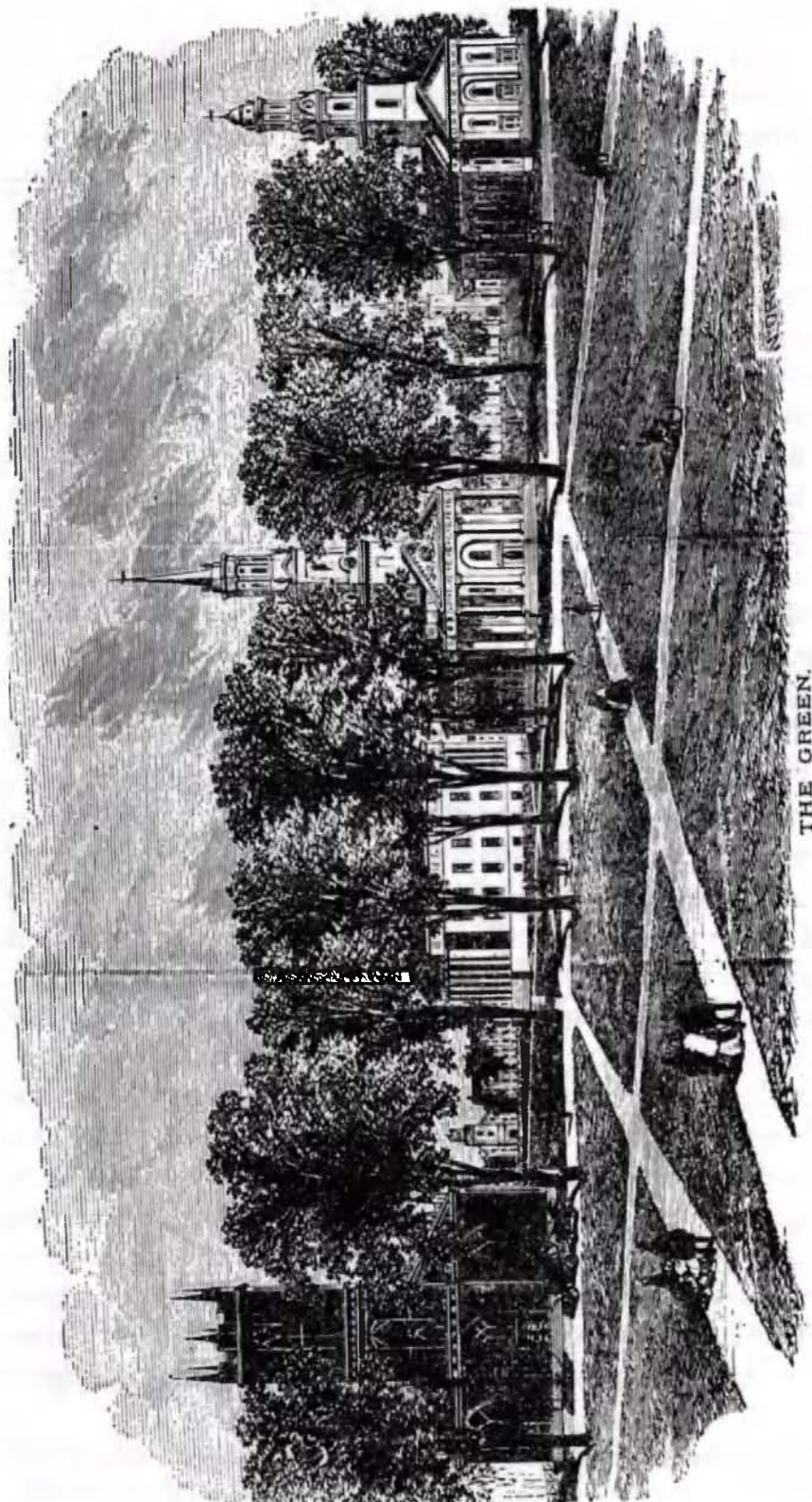
THE GREEN.

Figure 1. *The New Haven Green about 1870*

Trinity Church is on the left, Center Church in the middle, and the United or North Church on the right. The colonnaded building in the background is the old State House, since demolished.

churches, i.e., that it formed a time sequence with the others, (2) that the architects of the North and Center churches were either the same man or closely related, (3) that the religious rites in Trinity were different from those in the other two and (4) that Trinity was somehow connected with the nearby and extensive ruins of a large scholastic establishment, since much of its architecture is also in a Gothic style.

The fact of the matter, based upon documents and present-day observable reality, is that only conclusion number three is correct. All three churches are *exactly* contemporary; Trinity and Center churches were built by the same man and the United Church by another; and it is the neo-Georgian Center Church which has always been closely connected to the scholastic establishment, Yale College.

What is in the Black Box here is what would be unknowable to our future 'prehistorian': a rich and complex mixture of historical, political, social, economic, but above all religious, factors. About the time the War of 1812 broke out, three religious groups in New Haven decided that these three churches would be built. They were thus, in a way, planned as a unit.

How did this come about? Since the founding of New Haven Colony in 1638 by Puritans, the town had been totally dominated by them, under a system known as the Standing Order; today we know this as Congregationalism. The Standing Order of Connecticut has been aptly characterized as a theocracy (Osterweis 1953:108, 196–202). At first, to have any civil rights at all, one had to be a baptized member of a congregation, which meant that one had to have 'convenanted' with God through a personal conversion publicly attested to, and accepted by, the Puritan oligarchy. Somewhat later, the 'Halfway Covenant' tempered this rigid stricture, and the voting membership of the theocracy was broadened. Although the Congregationalists had been non-conformists in their English homeland, their own toleration of other religious groups in the new country, and especially in Connecticut, was notoriously weak. In 1708 they magnanimously put forth an Act of Toleration for dissenters but did not absolve them from taxation. It was not until 1818, under a new state constitution, that non-conformists were released from this burden and the Congregational religion disestablished.

Congregationalism is predicated upon the gathering of believers in Christ's name. Worship of God, by those who have been 'saved',

emphasizes preaching and personal effort, rather than the liturgies and mysteries characterizing the Roman Catholic Church and its spiritual offspring, the Church of England. Because of this, the early Congregational meeting houses were little more than square wooden boxes focused upon the pulpit and the man whom the congregation had selected to be their minister. Since they were basically non-liturgical and the worshippers were definitely a 'gathering', dissatisfactions with the minister could and often did lead to his dismissal, and disputes within congregations could and often did lead to schisms throughout New England. This was again in strong contrast to Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism, where the performance of the liturgy is far more important than the incumbent priest and his personal character.

This is the basic reason for (1) the fact that there are pulpits but not altars in the Congregational churches on the Green, and (2) the strange presence of not one but two Congregational meeting houses side by side. Such a state of affairs would be unknown in the Anglican (or Episcopalian) Church. In the space of this article it would be impossible to give adequate treatment to the historical intricacies, but suffice it to say that the twin churches are the result of a series of ideological, personal and social disputes among New Haven Congregationalists, in part stemming from Jonathan Edwards' revivalistic 'Great Awakening' of the mid-eighteenth century (see Munger and Pardee 1892).

Now why are they in Georgian, or neo-classical, style? I have said that the early meeting houses were basically 'preaching-boxes', following from the ideological and physical intimacy necessary between the faithful and their minister. The increasing prosperity of New Haven and other New England colonial settlements called for something more grand. The classical style introduced from Renaissance Italy into England by Inigo Jones, and refined into the Georgian style by Sir Christopher Wren, found ready acceptance among the New England Congregationalists, mainly because they could achieve an imposing presence upon the town green or common without sacrificing the basic nature of their religion. The lack of any ornamentation other than the non-committal 'classical' orders and the predominance of clear glass windows testify to the Puritan dislike of anything smacking either of the 'popish' religion or the hated established Church of England, from whose supposed tyranny their ancestors had fled.

It is not easy to associate persecution with the Episcopalian or Angli-

can church, since its adherents have dominated American life since the beginning of our nation in a proportion far beyond their numbers. From George Washington through Gerald Ford this has traditionally been the religion of presidents and the chairmen of the board. Nonetheless, in Connecticut and in New Haven, Anglicans were a disliked minority of 'non-conformists' (Purcell 1963:37–40). The position of the Anglican church during the Revolution was especially precarious, since many or most of its members were Tories; the worship by General Washington in a predecessor of the present Trinity Church did little to change opinion among the Congregationalist power brokers. Presidents Ezra Stiles and Timothy Dwight of Yale regarded Episcopacy with abhorrence, and by 1816 there were still no Anglicans on the faculty at Yale, the very seat of Congregationalist orthodoxy.

However, the Episcopalian church in New Haven steadily increased its membership after the Revolution until the War of 1812, when it again fell under attack for dubious loyalty, an irony since the State of Connecticut itself and most of its citizens and leaders were lukewarm to the point of treason about the new war with England.

Let me sum up the situation in New Haven in 1812, when the three religious groups decided in concert that the three churches on the Green should be built. Under the circumstances, it is amazing that accord should be reached among them on use of the Green (with the approval of the Proprietors of the Green, who still exist and act as a body). Although by this time the Standing Order had accepted the Episcopalians as second to the Congregationalists in the state, in New Haven real economic, social, political, economic and religious power was concentrated among an oligarchy of old-settler Congregationalists and confirmed by the teachings and preachings emanating from Yale College, with its 'pope', Timothy Dwight. This oligarchy dominated the Federalist Party in the town. It was bitterly opposed to reform and especially to Jeffersonian democracy, so that even the Anglicans carried on the political and ideological struggle against them and joined the Jeffersonian Party. It was not until 1818, with the new constitution, that the back of the Puritan elite was broken.

The architects whom the various religious bodies chose were Ebenezer Johnson, Jr., for the United or North Church (Brown 1963) and Ithiel Town for the Center and Trinity Churches (Barber and Punderson 1870:24–28). Johnson apparently based his plan on various

unpublished drawings by one James McComb, Jr., but of course these drew upon such English predecessors as James Gibbs. It was started in 1814 and finished in 1815.

Ithiel Town was one of New Haven's most distinguished citizens, being the designer of many of its best buildings and also the inventor of the Town truss bridge, still the most common covered bridge wherever such structures are found. He was a student of the pioneering, classical-revival architect Asher Benjamin, and the model on which he based his Center Church was Gibbs' St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London (1722–1726), one of the finest of all Georgian churches. The meeting house was begun in 1813 and finished in the following year.

The power of ideology in those days can be seen in the circumstance that the wood for construction of the churches on the Green had to be cut inland and brought down the Connecticut River to the coast, which was then being blockaded by the British. Permission to bring this through the blockade was granted by the British commanding officer, Commodore Hardy, who is said to have remarked that 'he made no war with religion' (Barber and Punderson 1870:24–25).

Now why did Ithiel Town build Trinity Church, begun in 1814 and completed in 1815, in the Gothic style? Religious, ethnic and political ideology on the part of the communicants of the church can be the only answer.

As Sir Kenneth Clark (1928:1–2, 16) has pointed out, England's famous 'Gothic Revival' is in a way a misnomer, since the Gothic, or pointed-arch, style had never really died out or disappeared. It did, however, cease to be the dominant national style by the mid-seventeenth century due to the overwhelming influence of Inigo Jones, following his introduction of the neo-classical, Palladian style in architecture. Be that as it may, perfectly traditional Gothic churches, as well as collegiate buildings such as those at Oxford, were erected in the seventeenth and all through the eighteenth centuries. Craftsmen who knew how to construct and embellish in this manner survived in spite of the dominance of Georgian neo-classicism. We have come to think of the 'Gothic Revival' as something stemming from Walpole's Strawberry Hill fantasy (from 1752 on) or Wyatt's 1796 design for Beckford's incredible Fonthill Abbey, but in English church architecture there is an unbroken tradition of Gothic style from medieval times through the nineteenth century into the twentieth. In fact, when the Church

Building Act was passed in 1818 to remedy the appalling lack of churches for the burgeoning population of English cities and towns, of the 214 churches that resulted, no less than 174 were Gothic (Clark 1928:118). It was, and still is, the kind of architectural setting most suited to Anglican worship.

All American Episcopalians, or Anglicans as many call themselves, belong to the worldwide Anglican Communion with spiritual leadership vested in the Archbishop of Canterbury. While many different races and nationalities participate in the Communion, there can be little doubt that historically and ethnically this is a basically English religious group. A perusal of the surnames of the communicants of an Episcopalian church, and especially of the vestry, would disclose that most of the names are English. I have a strong feeling, since I myself belong to this subculture, that Episcopalians still identify with England and its traditions.

Anglicans do not believe that they have left the 'old religion'. Rather, it is the other way around: the Pope and his adherents have left them. Anglicanism is, of course, the established church or Church of England, and the dislike by early Congregationalists of its semi-Catholic liturgies, vestments, altars, occasional incense and supposedly worldly priests was the principal reason for the founding of New England. Anglican worship demands an altar at the end of the nave as the focal point of the liturgy, Holy Communion. Thus, Town's Trinity Church was bound to be built on entirely different principles than its meeting-house neighbors.

So that when the parishioners of Trinity asked Town to design them a new church, he naturally took as his model York Minster, one of England's finest Gothic cathedrals. The church is thus *not* a remarkably early example of 'Gothic Revival', as the local guide books say, but the embodiment of architectural principles that have always formed part of the unbroken liturgical tradition of the English people. It will be remembered that New Haven's Anglicans were overwhelmingly Tory, even into the time of 1812, more than three decades after the founding of the United States. Small wonder that their form of worship and sentiments about the mother country should have taken shape in the southernmost of our churches on the Green.

CONCLUSION

Lacking the documents and other information which have enabled me, or any interested scholar, to unravel the real story of these three churches, our hypothetical prehistorian would be well advised to show more humility before those remains than today's 'new' archaeologists display before theirs. All of that information would be inside the Black Box and therefore largely unknowable. It seems to me that in going beyond the obvious limitations of their data, archaeologists have become not more, but less, scientific. Leach's Black Box model is surely a warning.

But Leach has one further admonition, which throws much light on our 'churches on the Green paradox'. He notes that while today's structural anthropologists pay great attention to ritual symbolism, the 'new' functionalist archaeology concentrates on economic and demographic aspects to the exclusion of religious aspects (Leach 1973: 763–769). He says:

I appreciate that the new archaeology, being functionalist and behaviorist, is practical, down to earth and scientific, so that its practitioners tend to be rather disdainful of symbolic non-rational human activity . . . if one is really convinced that the development of human society is governed by natural laws and the monocausal responses to economic pressures, then this is all very sensible. Yet to a social anthropologist it somehow seems very odd. In present-day ethnographic situations the problems of day-to-day survival seldom loom very large . . . What matters, in the minds of the actors, is religion and politics. Archaeologists who concentrate their attention exclusively on the kitchen aspects of the garbage pit are certainly missing a lot.

My tale about the churches on the Green is therefore designed to have three morals. The first is that there will always be unknowables in any archaeological situation where documents are lacking. The second is that in New Haven, and in every other recorded society, religion and politics (i.e., the ideology) are apt to be major forces in the complex processes that produce art, architecture, settlement planning and important facets of the social and material culture. As an instance, I very much doubt that the entity known as the People's Republic of China would have existed as it is without the prior existence of Marxist–

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Leninist ideology. Certainly New Haven's three churches are the embodiment of the differing theologies and politics of two Christian sects. So my third and last moral is that while ideologies may often be unfathomable for prehistoric peoples, we should still bend every effort to find and reconstruct them insofar as this is possible.

Reducing these complexities to ecosystems, however much embroidered with systems analysis (Flannery 1972), is not going to tell us very much about what went on. I notice that archaeologists who come up with neat models for prehistoric cultural events seem to feel that they are presenting us with some sort of reality. It is lucky for these scholars that the long-dead subjects of their study cannot now contradict them. The obsession by followers of Leslie White with 'explaining' human cultures as adaptations to environments can be taken to ridiculous extremes. I recently heard one devotee try to 'explain' the spread of Christianity across Europe and into the New World in this way: it had been 'de-ecologized' (his term) in the process so that it could be converted into an instrument useful in the bending of New World natives to a new mode of production (by this, he meant capitalism)! Surely the history of anthropology has taught us that there is more to religion than this.

I will say farewell to my poor archaeologist of five millennia hence and wish him luck. I hope that he, at any rate, not only realizes the possibilities of his science but is humble before its limitations and knows that 'pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall'.

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