

Shopping, Desire and Our Deepest Selves

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The Church is still struggling to express a vision for Christian desire and vocation that naturally integrates love for God within and through the raw, erotic earthiness of human longing...¹

“Advertising does not aim to reach our better selves, but our inner idiot.”²

Liquid Church and Shopping.

Andrew Butcher in a review³ of the Jamieson, McIntosh and Thompson co-authored book *Five Years On*, notes that:

“In New Zealand, Kevin Ward advocates the possibility of a “liquid church”, by which he means, a way of existence as followers of Christ which allows for flow and flexibility, which enables the construction of Christian identity outside of formal structures, which gives reign to spiritual desire rather than manufacturing need, and which invites participation instead of policing boundaries.”

This got me wondering about the place of desire, the activity of the Spirit, and how we might work better with both in the life of the church. Indeed, it seems particularly important in the midst of these challenging economic times, where the easy option is to stay on the surface of things⁴ and thus to miss the deeper questions that are asked of us around desire and consumption. It seems important too, to think about the significance of desire in our work as spiritual directors and as churches.

Kevin Ward’s advocacy for a “liquid church”, if indeed that is what he is advocating, is drawn from Mike Riddell’s very useful essay, *Beyond Ground Zero: Resourcing Faith in a Postmodern Era* (2003)⁵, an essay that includes mention of another “Ward”; this time Pete Ward, who in agreeing with sociologist Zygmunt Bauman – “that shopping is the fundamental metaphor of identity formation in the present world” – suggests that churches should likewise be shaped around the metaphor and practice of shopping.⁶

¹ David Runcorn, *Choice, Desire and the Will of God*, London: SPCK, 2003, p. 99.

² Kathleen Norris in *The Secret Ingredient*, in *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century: Where Do We Go From Here?* Edited by Patrick Hart. Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2006, p.44.

³ *Stimulus*, Nov. 2006.

⁴ And so for example, following 9/11, former President George Bush could advise American’s to recover from 9/11 by going shopping, and by taking vacations.

⁵ *Beyond Ground Zero: Resourcing Faith in a Post-Christian Era*, pp. 215-230 in *The Future of Christianity*, ed. J. Stenhouse, B. Knowles & A. Wood, Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004.

⁶ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002.

“Liquid Church would reshape itself around worshippers as consumers. Spiritual life would recognise that shopping is the natural way of interaction with all aspects of life including the spiritual.”⁷

Welcoming and working with Desire

In this brief reflection then I'd like to attempt two things. Firstly, I'd like to encourage the rehabilitation of the importance of desire in our formation as Jesus-followers. And, secondly, I'm interested in encouraging churches to learn how to nourish and nurture the intrinsic human *desire* for identity, freedom, meaning, wholeness, community, and God⁸.

While recognizing that not all desire is life-giving or humanising⁹, churches have much to do if they are to be in a position to help people in this essential human quest. In rightly calling for new forms and ways of being church Pete Ward has implicitly highlighted the importance of desire, but runs a risk in having it partnered *uncritically* with consumption.¹⁰

In giving too much ground to consumption and consumerism we are easily distanced from our own inward realities and the deeper dimensions of freedom, hope and longing that reside there.¹¹ It is these deeper places, more than any other, that need our attention if we are to become more fully human, more whole, and increasingly alive and *free* after the example of Jesus.

James Joyce has written of one of his characters, that “Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.” This provides a useful image by which we might begin to imagine what it is that contemporary consumerism encourages. It can and does encourage us to live at a distance not only from our deepest selves and others, but also at a distance from God who creates us for relationship. I think this point is underscored by a line of dialogue from the Wim Wenders film, *On the Wings of Desire*. One of the characters, a woman, is heard to say, “That’s what makes me clumsy, lack of desire.” One gets the sense that somehow a lack of desire, or perhaps better, the inability to recognise and name the deep desires in her life, means that she is less than who she should be or wants to be – she’s unbalanced and not fully present.

Sadly too, many churches seem clumsy in the ways they engage desire, and as a consequence end up simply feeding addiction, dysfunction, individualism and compulsion through their programmes and their approaches to worship¹². Churches which implicitly

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ St. Augustine, “our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.”

⁹ “Running through Ignatius of Loyola’s spirituality of desire is the quest for [holistic human] freedom from misplaced or superficial desires that imprison us (what he called ‘disordered attachments’) and an ever greater ability to centre authentic desire on God. Authentic desires arise from the essential self rather than immediate reactions to situations and experiences...” Philip Sheldrake, *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, pp. 231-233.

¹⁰ Since the publication of Ward’s *Liquid Church* he has now published *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (2008) which engages with gospel and its relationship to culture.

¹¹ Anne Wilson Schaefer in her book *When Society Becomes an Addict* notes (rather direly some might think), “when you are fully alive you are constantly saying “No” to many of the processes of society, the racism, the polluted environment, [materialism, violence etc]...Thus it is in the interests of society [to keep us “numb” by promoting] those things that take the edge off, keep us busy with our fixes, and keep us slightly numbed out...In this way our modern consumer society itself functions as an addict.” In reinforcing notions of human beings as “consumers” churches, in my view, only extend and reinforce what Schaefer calls human “numbness.”

¹² I’d recommend David E. Fitch’s book *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and other Modern Maladies*.

and thus uncritically embrace the practice of shopping as their organizing principle give too much to culture. They become sellers and distributors of ‘spirituality-lite’ goods and services, goods and services that largely leave untouched the deeper reaches of people’s lives – the places that are really crucial if “gospel” is to be received as “good news”, particularly in affluent Western contexts.

A church that simply sees “shoppers” sitting in its pews, or upon its chairs, runs the very real risk of dispensing a gospel that is no gospel at all, for none are freed, none receive new sight, none are healed, and none are raised to life (Lk. 4:18-19).

“In a culture of consumption, [churches too easily fall into the trap of presenting] the gospel [and spirituality as] ... consumer products to acquire...”

Too many people come to church desiring comfortable and prosperous lives, and too many congregations respond with a gospel of [happiness] health and wealth that does not probe how those consumerist desires should be challenged and transformed by the Christian faith.¹³

Many too, within churches, struggle with the place of desire in Christian spirituality¹⁴, even though I would argue that our ability to discern, focus and work with desire lies near the heart of missiology and our formation as Jesus-followers. When we take desire seriously and work transformatively with it, we begin to touch and work with what is so often neglected and left untouched – the deepest self, the addicted, the dysfunctional, the compulsive, the broken, the creative, the life-giving, and the passionate within both our own lives and the lives of others. We would do well to learn how to work with and *nourish* what’s already happening beneath the surface of people’s lives, taking seriously the already present activity of God.

So, What Is Desire?

Desire, Philip Sheldrake observes, “is at the heart of all spirituality. It is an *energy* that powers spirituality”, a spirituality that *is* concerned with *how* people discern God’s invitations within desire and longing. Christian spirituality, he argues, embodies the sense that fundamental to what it means to be human is a deep restlessness that can only be satisfied in God.¹⁵ Desire is a central reality in what Sheldrake calls “the human search for God, and God’s search for humanity.” Christian spirituality doesn’t just have a passing interest in desire, it *centers* on desire.

Sheldrake tells us “desire is best understood as our most honest experience of ourselves, in all our complexity and depth as we relate to people and things around us.” *Authentic* desire arises from what Thomas Merton called our ‘true selves’ rather than as hyper-stimulated responses to the “wants” encouraged by marketing and advertising. This kind of ‘shallow-consumption’ most often only encourages our continuing dislocation from the authentic, the deep and the *real*.

Importantly for those working as spiritual directors and/or pastors, and thus intentionally with human desire, longing, and hope, Sheldrake puts his finger on the truth that “desire

¹³ Bryan Hollon, *St Benedict in the City*. © The Centre for Christian Ethics, Baylor University, 2006.

¹⁴ And to that degree we remain at the level of the superficial, or what Ignatius of Loyola calls ‘disordered attachments’.

¹⁵ Philip Sheldrake, *Desire* in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* edited by Philip Sheldrake, London: SCM, 2005, p. 231.

implies **incompleteness** because it speaks of what we are not, or do not have” (don’t marketers know that well?).¹⁶ It speaks to our sense of being broken but repairable. It speaks to our sense of being incomplete.

So when a church (and this is a wonderful opportunity for new, transitioning or emerging expressions of Church) works at deeper and more fundamental levels with human need, restlessness and longing, it creates the kinds of spaces where gospel and desire can be brought into life-giving conversation.

And, to what end? *Orthopathy* (heart-work). Healing. Wholeness. Transformation and growth. Peacefulness. Deep Happiness. Progressive obedience to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Holiness. Contentment with what is. Authenticity. Aliveness. Turning from self-will. Deeper Union with God. The list could go on, drawing from the hopes and aspirations of the rich Christian Spiritual tradition, including the monastic tradition, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Medieval Spirituality etc, etc.

A Role for Spiritual Directors...?

I feel strongly that the help of Spiritual directors and a more widespread practice of spiritual direction within church communities (whether individually or as group work) will help churches learn how to more fruitfully accompany and encourage people as they stretch and explore. It will help them nurture *in* people the confidence they need to look more deeply into their lives, their false-selves, their passions, fears, loves and anxieties; all the while trusting that when they do face these dimensions of their humanity they will find God inviting them onwards toward the perfection and full expression of all that is most deeply human about them.

Spiritual directors and direction will help churches learn how to honor the deeper places, the unspoken or unnoticed questions and absences that so many are seeking to answer and fill.¹⁷

*“...Searching beneath anxiety, one will find fear. And beneath fear hurt will be discovered. Beneath the hurt will be guilt. Beneath the guilt lie rage and hatred. **But do not stop with this,** for beneath the rage lies frustrated desire. And, finally, beneath and beyond desire is love. In every feeling, look deeply. Explore without ceasing. At the bottom, love is...”¹⁸*

The practices of Spiritual direction can help resource and encourage the use of the kinds of practices of discernment that will be required in churches that take seriously the place of desire and longing, and the work of the Spirit amongst them and beyond them. It will help us ask God, with St. Ignatius of Loyola, “for what we individually and communally long for and desire.”

¹⁶ Indeed, we are on dangerous ground when our self-image and our self-worth become dependent upon what we can afford to buy, what we own, the size of our house, the type of car we drive etc.

¹⁷ Isn’t it interesting that a song like U2’s *I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For* still resonates so strongly with many people of a certain generation in the West?

¹⁸ Gerald May.

Further exploration...?

How about trying Diarmuid O'Murchu's recent book, *Transformation of Desire: How Desire Became Corrupted - and How We Can Reclaim It*.¹⁹

Also worth reading and reflecting on is William Cavanaugh's excellent 2008 published book, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*. And, *Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness* by Australian-based Elizabeth Farrelly, published in 2007 (a contemporary cultural study). *Contentment: A Way to True Happiness* by Robert A. Johnson and Jerry M. Ruhl (writing from a mythological / Jungian perspective). *Finding Happiness: Monastic Steps for a Fulfilling Life* by Abbot Christopher Jamison. *What Matters Most: Living a More Considered Life* by James Hollis (writing from a Jungian perspective). *The Seven Deadly Sins: Their Origin in the Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius the Hermit* by Angela Tilby, published 2009. *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* by Vincent J. Miller. *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are With What We Buy* by Tom Beaudoin.

¹⁹ Orbis Books, 2007, pp. 200.