

Contemporary Culture and the Reinvention of Sacramental Spirituality*

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Thirty years ago, it was more or less taken for granted that by the end of the twentieth century the Christian church - along with organized religion in all its forms - would be relegated to the lunatic fringes of society, if not extinct altogether. The secularization thesis prevailed, and it seemed as if nothing could stop the inexorable march of civilized people towards a non-religious future. Though that opinion still has its exponents,¹ they are a diminishing minority, for one of the most remarkable and unexpected features of life in the twenty-first century is what has been referred to as ‘the desecularization of the world’.² In the Christian context, the church is not only surviving, but thriving and growing, largely under the influence of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, which did not even exist until a hundred years ago.³ Paradoxically, however, though more than three-quarters of the English population declared themselves to be ‘Christian’ in the 2001 census, that allegiance (if that is the right way of describing it) does not translate into any significant level of religious observance, whether Christian or any other.⁴ The same phenomenon is present throughout the western world, and it has become a cliché to observe that while people may be less ‘religious’ they are apparently more ‘spiritual’. My aim here is to reflect on this trend in relation to the ongoing life and mission of the church. Crisis is not too strong a word to describe the predicament of the church in the West. Desperate days call for desperate measures and, as Michael Riddell counsels, ‘This is a time which calls for courage and experimentation.’⁵ In following that advice, I quite deliberately present some ideas that may be less than fully formed, in the effort to identify new directions that may be worth further exploration and reflection.

Doing Theology

In the title of his book *Who we are is how we pray*,⁶ Charles Keating reminded his readers of an inescapable reality of all reflective enquiry, namely that the interpreter and his or her subject can never quite be separated from one another. The notion of the autonomous rational individual pursuing knowledge in a disinterested way is not only unworkable, but actually diminishes the value of human experience and in the process produces an impoverished epistemology which ignores some of the most important questions of all. It is therefore entirely appropriate - indeed necessary - to begin with the

* A lecture given at a symposium on sacramentality, held at Windsor Castle in 2003, and subsequently published in Geoffrey Rowell & Christine Hall (eds), *The Gestures of God: explorations in sacramentality* (London: Continuum 2004), 37-55

¹ Notably Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell 2002).

² Peter Berger (ed), *The Desecularization of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999).

³ Cf. Allan H Anderson & Walter J Hollenweger, *Pentecostals after a century : global perspectives on a movement in transition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999); David Martin, *Pentecostalism: the world their parish* (Oxford: Blackwell 2001); Murray Dempster, Byron D Klaus, Douglas Petersen (eds), *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: a religion made to travel* (Oxford: Regnum 1999).

⁴ Cf. Peter Brierley, *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 4* (London: Christian Research 2003).

⁵ Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future* (London: SPCK 1998), 2.

⁶ Charles Keating, *Who we are is how we Pray* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications 1987).

prior experience that I bring to this topic.

As a practical theologian, I regard theology not as an intrinsically cerebral affair, but first and foremost as something to be ‘done’. There is a substantial ongoing debate about the nature of this discipline and though there is no absolute consensus, most would locate it within a praxis-reflection method with roots in the insights of liberation theology, feminist theology, and other approaches which prioritize the experience of people as the launching pad from which new questions might be addressed to the Christian tradition in order to articulate appropriately theological perspectives on today’s world.⁷

My own hermeneutical frame of reference has been shaped by several personal factors. For twenty-five years I taught in the Religious Studies department of a secular university, where students typically expressed a profound distrust of institutional Christianity, while being intensely curious about what they often described as the ‘real’ meaning of the Gospel. The latter – insofar as it could be identified - might play a significant part in their own search for spiritual meaning, while the former was invariably dismissed out of hand. That experience convinced me that we cannot meaningfully talk about Christian sacramentality without also valuing the faith journeys of those who belong to no particular tradition, and whom Christians and social scientists alike might regard as ‘secular’. Over the same period, my Christian ministry became increasingly ecumenical, in every sense of that word - reminding me that any narrowly sectarian view of faith (including my own) was bound to be limiting, if not distorting. Then in my personal life I had to cope with the death of my daughter, which forced me to ask questions in a completely new way. Traditional arguments about theodicy became irrelevant, as I found my worldview turned upside down by the way in which my wife found healing in that situation. Having been a medical researcher, she became a clown - more than that, a clown minister - and as I witnessed the power of this form of Christian ministry not only to inspire but also to transform her own life and that of others,⁸ I began to question the entire rational undergirding of what I thought I was doing, ending up less confident in the power of words, and more conscious of the importance of image, relationships, and emotions as intrinsic aspects of what it means to be human and whole.⁹

Influenced by all these factors, I have chosen to take a broad view of the topic under consideration here, combining threads from disparate parts of contemporary culture, each of which has its own specialized scholarly discourse. In the process of doing so, I inevitably make generalizations that might require more careful qualification, or may even be unsustainable when placed alongside actual situations or viewpoints. At the same time, however, my prior experience suggests that this is a creative way of gaining some sense of perspective on the emerging sacramentality of popular culture. What is offered, therefore, is a compass, not a detailed road map - suggesting a general sense of the territory rather than focusing on specifics. Tom Beaudoin succinctly expresses the theological assumption behind this approach with his observation that ‘people who

⁷ On the nature of practical theology, see Paul Ballard & John Pritchard, *Practical theology in action: Christian thinking in the service of church and society* (London: SPCK 1996); James Woodward & Stephen Pattison (eds), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwells 1999). This is not the place to justify my own approach, except to note that it is similar to that of Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: descriptive and strategic proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991).

⁸ Cf. O M Fleming Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples* (Oxford: BRF 2002).

⁹ A wider cultural trend eloquently described by Mitchell Stephens, *The rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998).

profess to know little or nothing about the religious, may indeed form, inform, or transform religious meaning for people of faith ... The kingdom of God is constantly revealed and enacted through the least likely person or circumstances. If the first are to be last and the last first, then popular culture itself, as a quintessential instance of what counts as "last" in importance for many cultural high priests, may be granted its moment of significance.¹⁰ Andrew Greeley is even more explicit: 'If one believes that people are sacraments of God, that God discloses himself/herself to us through objects, events, and persons of life, then one must concede the possibility that in the sacramentality of ordinary folk, their hopes, their fears, their loves, their aspirations represent a legitimate experience of God, legitimate symbols of God, and legitimate stories of God.'¹¹ More recently, Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor have tantalizingly suggested that 'sacramental churches are poised for a comeback'¹² - a claim that might sound like good news for at least some Christian traditions, until we reflect on their further recommendation: 'It is time to take the consecrated bread out of the tabernacle and place it in the hands of ordinary people, offering them a new portrait of holiness. Popular culture continues to redefine the relationship between the sacred and the secular, the holy and the profane. People of faith should do the same.'¹³

Popular Culture

Before returning to these questions, we must take time to reflect on contemporary popular culture, which is both the product of and the catalyst for an enormous upheaval of norms and values throughout the Western world (and thence, through the influence of globalization, to everywhere else). The academy tends to regard this move from modernity' to 'post-modernity' (with or without the hyphen) as a philosophically determined shift, but that understanding is the product of a 'high' culture that assumes things will change as intellectuals promote new ideas, which then percolate downwards and ultimately affect the lives of ordinary people. There are obviously connections between post-modern philosophy and the experiences of everyday life, but one does not necessarily lead to the other. Many people live without having - or feeling any need to have - a framework going beyond their own experience and what 'feels right'. For centuries, a common language was provided by Graeco-Roman philosophical categories which, because of their nature, required intellectuals to interpret the world authoritatively on behalf of others. That shared language has gone, replaced by a fluid worldview rooted not in high culture but in the popular media culture which is now the everyday language of the street and the home - and which is not determined by 'those who know best' but is open to change and constant reappraisal by every individual to suit their own circumstances and life experience. Zygmunt Bauman captures this well with his image of 'liquid modernity', contrasting the 'solid modernity' of previous centuries as 'an era of mutual engagement' with what he calls 'fluid modernity' as 'the epoch of disengagement'.¹⁴ When the two are compared at a pragmatic level, it is clear that 'post-

¹⁰ Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: the irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1998), 34, 32.

¹¹ Andrew M Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago: Thomas More Press 1988), 15.

¹² Craig Detweiler & Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: finding God in pop culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2003), 301.

¹³ *Matrix of Meanings*, 291

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2000), 120.

modernity' (or whatever other label is given to today's emerging culture) is about much more than a loss of shared understanding in the face of new questions: it is a completely different way of understanding what the world is about - and in spiritual terms, represents a new model of sensory-religious imagination in which 'the ways of being religious are moving out of the protected sphere of religious institution and tradition, and into the open ground of the symbolic marketplace.'¹⁵ In a presentation to the Catholic Theological Society of America in 1998, Lynn Schofield Clark argued passionately that Christians cannot afford to ignore the reality of this popular culture as the 'source' and 'primary language for meaning' in today's world.¹⁶

Several characteristics of popular post-modernity are of particular significance in relation to the emergence of new forms of sacramentality. Foremost among these is an increasing sense of self-reliance, which is the natural outcome of the experience of living in a culture which is increasingly characterized by untrustworthy persons and institutions. For 44 days during September and October 2003, illusionist David Blaine was suspended in a glass box by the river Thames in London, with only water to sustain him. Though some derided his endeavour, even using criminal means to try and bring it to a premature end, many more found themselves strangely attracted by this spectacle and what it represented. For here was a man pushing himself to the limit, to test how far he could trust himself in a world where everything else was unreliable. The essentially spiritual nature of his attempt becomes clearer when understood in the context of his previous stunts. One of these involved being frozen in a block of ice for almost three days, while another one required him to stand for two days on top of a pillar only 22 inches in diameter and 109 feet from the ground, without food, water, sleep or physical support. All these things can find precedents, if not exact parallels, in the behaviour of mystics within the historic Christian tradition. Extreme sports are increasingly popular for similar reasons: they offer opportunities for individuals to assess their own trustworthiness in a world of mutual suspicion.¹⁷ The rise of the so-called 'New Age' is another manifestation of the same concerns. The view that this kind of self-defined sacramentality is pathologically destructive and ultimately meaningless is shared by people as diverse as religion scholar Paul Heelas, neo-fundamentalist Carl Trueman, and journalist Roland Howard,¹⁸ while some Christians regard it as dangerously occult, and its practitioners as demon possessed.¹⁹ I regard all these opinions as theologically indefensible and missiologically suicidal.²⁰ Reliance on oneself is the inevitable outcome of a worldview that in the last two or three centuries has systematically removed the

¹⁵ Stewart M Hoover, 'Religion, Media, and the Cultural Center of Gravity', an address to the Trustees of the Foundation for United Methodist Communications May 7, 1998. See the website of the International Study Commission on Media, Religion, and Culture:

<http://www.colorado.edu/Journalism/MEDIALYF/analysis/umcom.html>

¹⁶ Lynn Schofield Clark, 'Building Bridges between Theology and Media Studies', on the International Study Commission on Media, Culture and Religion website:

<http://www.jmcommunications.com/english/clark2.htm>

¹⁷ See Shirl J Hoffman, *Sport and Religion* (Champaign IL: Human Kinetics Books 1992), 63-75.

¹⁸ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell 1996); Roland Howard, *Shopping for God* (London: HarperCollins 2001); Carl Trueman, 'Boring ourselves to Life', in *Themelios* 28/3 (2003), 1-4.

¹⁹ Constance Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow* (Lafayette LA: Huntington House 1983); Douglas Groothuis, *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press 1988); Alan Morrison, *The Serpent and the Cross* (Birmingham: K & M Books 1994).

²⁰ I am not alone in this: cf. Richard Harries, *God outside the Box* (London: SPCK 2002).

possibility of transcendence from our lives, leaving us with nothing but ourselves as the touchstone of authenticity. Once that worldview itself no longer makes sense, and when we then look within we find nothing but emptiness and meaninglessness, it is only natural to explore anything that looks as if it might offer help with our existential questions. This is not a self-centred choice, representing the ultimate hubris of human beings who believe themselves to be in the place of God, but is the ultimate despair of a race that is bereft of meaning and identity - less sinning, and more sinned against by its inherited culture which has promoted what David Hay evocatively calls 'the social destruction of spirituality'.²¹

This in turn has produced a growing impatience with all rational ways of being, since they appear not to have delivered what they promised. People are not happier and more fulfilled than previous generations, indeed they feel increasingly trapped in 'McDonaldized' systems.²² Nor is the world perceived as self-evidently a better place through the development of science and technology. Moreover, the inherited Western paradigm is widely regarded as fractured and disconnected, highlighting the need for holistic ways of being that can deal with personal fragmentation as well as larger cosmic, cultural, and even scientific understandings.²³

Michel de Certeau has emphasized the importance of practices of everyday life in understanding the spiritual search of today's people.²⁴ Several practices, or attitudes, are worth noting before we move on to consider how this affects the Christian tradition. Because we no longer trust prescriptive ways of being, we find it difficult to trust religious institutions and the rationalized sacramentality which they offer.²⁵ Alongside this is a profound questioning of the nature of truth as propositions, for that in itself can too easily become a fragmenting influence. 'Faith' is more likely to be understood as a verb rather than a noun, and non-rational experiences (tactile, visual, emotional) are likely to be prioritized over the exclusively rational. There is a concern for relational wholeness, searching for personal healing and community in the midst of life's brokenness, but developing new forms of both rather than accepting what already exists, which tends to be seen as false and meaningless, and quite possibly controlling and exploitative.

If the self is the only core essence left to us, it is only natural for people to desire a new

²¹ David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Fount 1998), 21-39.

²² Cf. George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: The Reader* (Thousand Oaks CA: Pine Forge Press 2002).

²³ An analysis first presented by Jan Christiaan Smuts, *Holism and Evolution* (New York: Macmillan 1926), and more recently popularized especially through the writings of a new breed of knowledge entrepreneurs who recycle discrete specialist perspectives into whole-systems views that go beyond the bare facts to explore what the facts might actually mean to those wishing to see the bigger pictures. Cf. for example, Gregory & Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear: towards an epistemology of the sacred* (New York: Bantam 1988); Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: a new synthesis of mind and matter* (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1996); Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: a history of man's changing vision of the universe* (London: Hutchinson 1959); Rupert Sheldrake, *A New Science of Life: the hypothesis of formative causation* (London: Flamingo 1995, 2nd ed); Danah Zohar, *Rewiring the Corporate Brain: using the new science to rethink how we structure and lead organizations* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers 1997); Shoshana Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine: the future of work and power* (Oxford: Heinemann 1988).

²⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984).

²⁵ On the rationalized spirituality of the church, see John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman and Todd 2000).

connection with primal instincts and intuitions, on the assumption that 'if there is something out there, it will be accessed in the first place by my experiences in here'. What is personal becomes a gateway to the transcendent, and therefore sacramental in a very precise sense.²⁶ This is often accompanied by a questioning of dualism as a useful category of understanding, though monism is not as widespread in popular spirituality as some commentators assume.²⁷ All this might sound like a re-emergence of what Aldous Huxley called 'the perennial philosophy'²⁸ but whereas for him it was essentially a speculative, rationally focused project, for today's spiritual searchers it is more experientially based, an effort to identify spiritual tools to overcome one's hurts and realize one's hopes, to empower people to live effectively through a spiritual awakening - all of which might be accomplished by sampling from a range of spiritual tools or disciplines so as to create sacramental experiences.

Everyday Sacramentality

To illustrate the nature of the challenge faced by the Christian churches, we must consider some specific ways in which people are searching for sacramental meaning without the constraints of rationalized structures. There are many examples to choose from, such as aromatherapy (a form of chrisim?), psychotherapy (confession?), rebirthing (baptism?), or any number of other 'alternative' therapies, while a leading practical theologian has recently characterized 'spiritual caregiving' as a 'secular sacrament'.²⁹ But one of the most accessible expressions of popular sacramentality is in club culture and pop music. Those who never frequent clubs tend to regard them as a young person's habitat, though in reality they represent a widespread 'alternative' culture unrestricted by either generation or social class. When Sheryl Garratt claimed that 'Clubs are the churches of the new millennium' she was not exaggerating.³⁰ Many clubs in the UK are housed in former church buildings, and often use that fact to create a sacramental ethos. In Scotland alone, I have personal knowledge of clubs with names like 'The Church', 'Joy', 'God's Kitchen', 'Angel', 'Spirit', 'Paradise', 'Ministry of Sin', 'The Sunday Service', and 'Ascension'. Though few clubbers would have any idea what most of that means, the use of symbolic language drawn from an otherwise meaningless Christian past serves to impart a sense of 'mystery' if not 'sacredness' to the experience. Conversely, the clubbing experience itself offers most of the ingredients of church at its best: regular attendance at events with no other purpose beyond themselves, rituals of preparation (choosing appropriate clothes, arranging transportation, putting money aside), and a sense of belonging, participation, acceptance and openness to others that is quite different from what is on offer in any other social context. Clubbers can even have the equivalent of the mystical experience that the church offers through the Eucharist, encountered in this case

²⁶ In applying the term 'sacramental', I am adopting the definition proposed by James F White, *The Sacraments in Protestant practice and faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1999), 13 as the idea that 'the outward can convey the inward and spiritual' in such a way that physical actions become a meeting place with the transcendent.

²⁷ Cf. Paul Greer, 'The Aquarian confusion: conflicting theologies of the New Age', in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 10/2 (1995), 151-166.

²⁸ A Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper 1944).

²⁹ Ray S Anderson, *Spiritual Caregiving as Secular Sacrament* (London: Jessica Kingsley 2003).

³⁰ Sheryl Garratt, *Adventures in Wonderland: a decade of club culture* (London: Headline 1998), 305.

either through an ‘oceanic experience’ (the atmosphere)³¹ or through the use of drugs (most notably Ecstasy which, like the wafer of the Eucharist – and unlike most other recreational drugs - is ingested through the mouth and comes with a mystical symbol embossed in it).

It would be easy to dismiss these parallels between church and club culture as the exaggerations of an over-active imagination were it not for the fact that much dance music specifically articulates such concepts. One of the most outstanding examples of this is the album *Sunday 8pm* by Faithless.³² As well as songs alluding to Biblical stories, with titles like ‘The Garden’, ‘Hour of Need’, ‘Take the long way Home’, or ‘Hem of his Garment’, ‘God is a DJ’ explicitly identifies club with church, describing the experience as one of healing, community-building, and transcendence. Though we celebrate the collapse of those traditional institutions which offered us safety and security, we are apparently terrified of the prospects for individual survival - let alone flourishing - in a world that has as a result become depersonalized and in which, instead of being at the mercy of accountable systems, our lives are now determined by the needs of multinational corporations and market forces. This societal meltdown is creating ‘an unholy trinity of uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety’³³ but because of our distrust of rationalized structures, we deal with these needs on an occasional basis, and the club offers an appropriately impersonal vehicle for transcending personal fragmentation at that moment in time. By offering a glimpse of the meaning and spiritual purpose that we believe ourselves increasingly unlikely to achieve in this lifetime, the sacramentality of the club also offers an eschatological dimension.

Christians are not absent from this scene. An accessible example of creative Christian engagement is the Clubbers Temple, a website operated by a UK group which sends teams of Christians to work among the clubbers at the Spanish resort of Ibiza, widely regarded as the club capital of Europe.³⁴ The website is designed as a virtual community for those who are engaged in the spiritual search but would be unlikely to connect with a local church. Entering the Temple creates the experience of going through the doors of a real club with music, dance, and so on. It describes itself as a place of search, feeling, and experience: ‘Clubbers Temple is for those who know there’s more to life ... for those who believe the truth is out there and the invisible is more real than the visible.’ It would be hard to improve on that as a description of what we mean by ‘sacramentality’! The site then offers an invitation to enter three separate rooms, ‘Thirst’, ‘Beach’, and ‘Words’. ‘Thirst’ is ‘a place for you to re-connect with the divine source of all life’, and on entering it one encounters a room with a picture of a desert on the wall, which turns out to be a hyperlink to a visualization that then leads the visitor through the desert, to discover an oasis with warm, dirty water before encountering ‘the guardian of the pool’ who offers fresh sparkling water, and invites the curious to drink from his bottle, which turns out to be another hyperlink that takes the bottle back to the original room and places it on the table. A statement links this to Biblical themes (‘The spiritual water that Jesus

³¹ The expression of Ben Malbon, *Clubbing: dancing, ecstasy and vitality* (London: Routledge 1999), 106. Theologian Tex Sample similarly describes the experience of dance as ‘a kind of transcendence ... One is taken out of the ordinary, routine world ... It is another time and place. It has a spiritual and meditative quality about it.’ Cf. *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World* (Nashville: Abingdon 1998), 71.

³² Faithless, *Sunday 8pm* (London: Cheeky Records 1998).

³³ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 181.

³⁴ <http://www.clubberstemple.com>

offers will refresh and replenish your body, soul, mind and spirit.’), followed by an invitation: ‘If you choose to follow Jesus, your spiritual thirst will be quenched, you can experience Jesus right here, right now, if you desire.’ By choosing the option ‘more’ (rather than ‘exit’), one can empty the bottle while seeing these words: ‘Jesus I am thirsty, I need to drink your living water. Please come and refresh my life now.’ The next question is: ‘What happened? What did you feel?’ Whatever one might think of all this, it is unquestionably offering a sacramental experience. Like the sanctuary of a church (and a club), the website itself is consciously designed to be a spiritual space. Moreover, there is an intentionality about creating a sacramental experience: one of the other rooms invites visitors to ‘let the music take you deeper into God’s presence’. It is also aiming to build community online, as can be seen by the chat rooms and bulletin boards on the site. To complete the picture, it seems to ‘work’. On the day I visited the site, one of the comments on the bulletin board read: ‘I logged on, and wow, I can feel God through this’.³⁵

It hardly needs to be said that not everyone is self-consciously interested in searching for spiritual meaning in life.³⁶ But there is undoubtedly a significant - and expanding - group of such people within Western populations, who offer a particular opportunity - and challenge - to the Christian church, for several reasons. For one thing, they are well represented, maybe over-represented, by personalities who feature in the media, and that in itself means they are taken seriously and their views are widely disseminated. They apparently include establishment figures such as Cherie Blair, wife of the British prime minister, who has been reported connecting with spirit guides, alternative healers, and undergoing a rebirthing ritual (in the latter case accompanied by her husband) - and before her, Princess Diana was devoted to much the same things. They are joined by various Hollywood movie stars, whose stories of spiritual search are well enough documented, not to mention post-modern novelists such as Douglas Coupland.³⁷ These spiritual searchers also tend to be people who, in socio-economic terms, would have been most actively involved in the life of the church in past generations. Indeed, many have themselves been members of the church at one time or another, but find it no longer meets their spiritual needs.³⁸ No longer lay leaders in local congregations, they put their energies into single-issue pressure groups, as well as engaging in more overtly ‘spiritual’ therapies and self-defined sacramental activities.³⁹ Surprisingly, perhaps, the more their claims are subjected to scientific scrutiny, the more support they attract. Scientists promoting an overtly sacramental view of life include mystic Fritjof Capra who claims that physics is merely a branch of eastern monism,⁴⁰ along with the less sensational - though probably more influential - medic Andrew Newberg, who believes that we are all

³⁵ Another example of a similar Christian effort to connect with club culture and popular spirituality can be seen in 24/7 boiler house prayer rooms. See <http://www.boiler-rooms.com>

³⁶ In *McDonaldization of the Church*, 55-84, I identified seven people groups, half of which would by definition not match this profile.

³⁷ E.g. Douglas Coupland, *Generation X* (New York: St Martin’s Press 1991); *Life after God* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1994); *Polaroids from the Dead* (London: Flamingo 1996); and several more.

³⁸ Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (SPCK 2002).

³⁹ Cf. Paul Vallely, ‘Evangelism in a post-religious society’, in *Setting the Agenda: the report of the 1999 Church of England Conference on Evangelism* (London: Church House Publishing 1999), 30-43.

⁴⁰ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: an exploration of the parallels between modern physics and eastern mysticism* (London: Wildwood House 1975).

genetically programmed to be 'spiritual'.⁴¹ Then there is David Hay, whose mentor Alister Hardy claimed that spirituality is in some way biologically conditioned, if not determined, and whose own recent research has itself highlighted the spirituality of those who operate outside traditional faith communities.⁴² This kind of research poses a particular challenge for the church in terms of knowing how to recognize and affirm those sacramental meeting points between the material and the transcendent. For 'sacramentality' is, in this sense, a universal human quality, seen in sports, shopping and many other apparently 'secular' activities, some of which parallel the sense of awe and wonder of the holy days of the liturgical calendar.⁴³ In terms of the church's mission, it emphasizes the importance of asking, not 'how can we make people spiritual?' (because they already are) - but rather, 'how can we connect with their innate spirituality and point them towards Christ?'

Opportunities for the Church

It would take an entire book to unpack all the challenges this presents to the churches. Here I simply list some of the key areas that Christian theology must address. First and foremost must be the rediscovery of some kind of creation-centred spirituality. Beaudoin observes that Gen X-ers (the particular subject of his study) 'live a theology revolving around the incarnation ... and express religiosity with *sacramentals* which can evoke the religious depth of the most common objects or experiences.'⁴⁴ A similar argument for a re-orientation of theological priorities in favour of the doctrines of creation and incarnation has, of course, been most forcefully advanced by Matthew Fox,⁴⁵ though he misses what Beaudoin emphasizes, namely that 'sacramentals' are a way of dealing with pain. By marginalizing, if not eliminating, the fall/redemption trajectory, Fox tends to downplay the reality of suffering and the cosmic nature of sin.⁴⁶ In a post-9/11 world, that is no longer possible: the two need to go hand-in-hand.

Alongside this, and running parallel with it, is a need for a missiological reorientation in the church's attitude to the innate sacramentality of those who are not Christians. There is a Biblical precedent for this in the account of St Paul's visit to Athens (Acts 17:16-34), where the apostle regarded such activities in a positive light as 'altars to the unknown god' whose story he then proceeded to share. But there is also a historical sense of déjà-vu here, for in the early centuries a multiplicity of experiences could be regarded as sacramental. Augustine, for example, described the ashes of Ash Wednesday as a 'sacrament', though by the thirteenth century that was no longer possible, and in the post-Reformation period the options were even more severely limited. This observation highlights what is perhaps one of the most fundamental questions of all for Christian

⁴¹ Andrew Newberg, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books 2002); cf. Eugene G D'Aquili & Andrew B Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Augsburg 1999).

⁴² David Hay & Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of people who don't go to Church* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham School of Education 2000).

⁴³ See Ira G Zepp, *The New Religious Image of Urban America: the shopping mall as ceremonial center* (Niwot CO: University Press of Colorado 1997, 2nd ed); Shiril J Hoffman, *Sport and Religion* (Champaign IL: Human Kinetics Books 1992).

⁴⁴ Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 74.

⁴⁵ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co 1983).

⁴⁶ For a critique of Fox, see John Drane, 'Fox, Matthew' in Trevor Hart (ed), *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2000), 218-220.

theology in the context of popular culture, namely, what is the appropriate starting point for doing theology? To put it simply, which comes first: Christian discipleship (following Jesus), or cognitive propositions about God? Though it might be over-optimistic to imagine that in the earliest centuries spiritual experience was the only influence shaping the sacramental life of Christians, it is certainly the case that by the sixteenth century, in Protestantism most obviously, but also to a lesser extent in the Roman Catholic tradition following the Council of Trent (1545-1563), it was increasingly supposed that believing should shape behaviour, and that abstract theology would determine the nature of experience rather than the other way round. Though the Reformers generally held to some transcendent understanding of the sacraments, when all this was combined with the philosophical rationalism of the Enlightenment, it was virtually inevitable that the notion that material objects and actions might have spiritual connections should be dismissed as nonsensical. Kant was not alone in regarding such a notion as ‘religious illusion which can do naught but work counter to the spirit of religion’.⁴⁷ Whether intentionally or not, most Protestants have allowed this approach to dominate their understanding of the sacraments, preferring to regard them as moralistic reminders of the past work of Christ rather than offering any kind of direct encounter with him today. The early Methodists, with their understanding of baptism in terms of regeneration and Eucharist as a converting ordinance, were the exceptions, though that emphasis disappeared over time. In theory, the Pentecostal tradition should be in a position to engage with this, though in the understandable effort to make itself acceptable to historic mainstream Christianity it has adopted the same rationalistic outlook, and in the process has tended to minimize the importance of the symbolic and ritualistic in favour of the cognitive and propositional.

There is also an opportunity for the church to reconnect sacrament and story in order to establish meaningful connections with the kind of sacramentality represented by the self-determined spiritual pathways mentioned above. In his critique of Protestantism, Paul Tillich issued what might now be regarded as a prophetic call for ‘a rediscovery of the sacramental space’ as the key to the very future of the church, insisting that this should involve the recognition that ‘natural objects can become bearers of transcendent power and meaning ... by being brought into the context of the history of salvation.’⁴⁸ For the one thing that is missing from self-defined sacramentality is an awareness of the bigger story which gives meaning to it all. Though the philosophers insist that ‘incredulity toward meta-narratives’⁴⁹ is a characteristic of post-modernity, the actual evidence calls for a more nuanced understanding, and suggests that, while we have rejected the traditional metanarrative of Western ‘high’ culture, popular culture is not rejecting the possibility that there might be such a story, but is rather searching for a new one that more closely approximates to the realities of everyday life.⁵⁰ In this context, Christians can usefully echo the question posed by Philip the evangelist (Acts 8:30), and ask of those who are reinventing a sacramental worldview, ‘Do you understand what you are doing?’ – followed up by a creative telling of the Gospel story, within the media

⁴⁷ That is, ‘religion’ as he defined it: cf. his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (English translation, New York: Harper & Row 1960), 188.

⁴⁸ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1948), 112.

⁴⁹ The expression of Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993), xxiv.

⁵⁰ For more on this, see *McDonaldization of the Church*, 133-154.

framework of popular culture.

Finally, any meaningful missiological engagement with so-called secular sacramentality must take full account of the way that so many people are traumatized by social and relational instability. Though the causes are different, we experience at least as much personal pain as all previous generations - some would say more. Though we lack a sense of meaning, we also declare a significant interest in pursuing meaning.⁵¹ Douglas Coupland speaks eloquently for many when he identifies our need 'to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process'.⁵² Christian theology began with the telling of stories, so this invitation should be neither novel nor threatening. It invites us not to explain, but to acknowledge, and perhaps even celebrate, the insecurities of the human condition, something which a reimagined Christian sacramentality ought to be able to accomplish very easily.

⁵¹ Cf. Gordon Lynch, *After Religion* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2002).

⁵² *Generation X*, 8. This is a recurring theme throughout his writings. At the end of *Life after God*, he confides 'My secret is that I need God ...'