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A THEOLOGY OF ENTERTAINMENT AND LEISURE

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The entertainment milieu has transformed the ways in which we believe and are capable of believing.¹

ENTERTAINMENT, LEISURE AND GOD

The dictionary tells us that 'to entertain' carries two meanings:

- to amuse or occupy agreeably (from Latin, *tenere*, to hold or grasp [one's attention]); and
- to receive or treat as a guest.

On these terms it could be argued that God is the best entertainer of all – the one who knows how to catch the attention of his people through the beauty of creation, the events of history, the escapades of people and uniquely by the captivating story and drama of Jesus: from angels and stars over Bethlehem to the deep pathos of a Cross and the ultimate 'sting' of resurrection. God is the ultimate storyteller and dramatist.

God is the perfect host who sets the table for the honoured guest 'in the presence of my enemies'. It is God in Christ who meets friends at table and has made a table of bread and wine the ultimate place of God's hospitality. In eternity God presides at the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb – where the Bride of Christ is royally entertained.

Of course, that Divine gift has been abused. There has been much to amuse and to occupy the attention – a distraction from the true worship of God. There have been many invitations to be guest at tables that serve a delicious poison – seductive and destructive. It may be that the greatest temptation of our entertainment world is to trivialize God-given reality.

Neil Postman in his book, *Amusing ourselves to Death*² suggests we have entered a 'peek-a-boo world' of 'fragments and discontinuities' where

¹ William Kuhns, *Electronic Gospel: Religion and Media* (New York, 1969), p. 165.

² Neil Postman, *Amusing ourselves to Death: Public Discourses in the Age of*

the entertainment medium trivializes reality. The weighty glory of God is exchanged for the lightweight celebrity status of a movie star.

As for leisure, that too is God's gift. The Sabbath rhythm has been given so that, according to the Exodus tradition, we may follow the example of God at rest.³ Leisure is about letting go and realizing that we do not run the world. Those who take to the hills and the garden as their Sabbath are more in touch with this reality than we care to admit. They stand among the hills shaped by millennia of fire and ice and recover a true perspective on life formed by another hand.

In the Deuteronomic tradition, the Sabbath was a reminder that for four hundred years they had been slaves.⁴ Eugene Peterson suggests that because this slavery dehumanized the Hebrew people, the Sabbath was a reminder to treat our neighbours in ways that gave them dignity. 'Sabbath-keeping is elemental kindness. Sabbath-keeping is commanded to preserve the image of God in our neighbours so that we see them as they are, not as we need them or want them to be.'⁵

There is a growing expectation among younger people that the workaholic lifestyle should give way to patterns of life that allow time for friendships and family. The 24/7 lifestyle is being questioned and people are asking for leisure-time that re-humanizes us. Part of the current quest for spirituality is a search for ways to detox the adrenaline addicts. God smiles.

TWO JOURNEYS

The journey through my parish

A theology of entertainment and leisure suggests two journeys – one through my parish and the other through my Bible.

First, let me take you on a journey through part of our parish in the West End of Edinburgh. We stand at the corner of Lothian Road and Princes Street. On the right is No. 1 Rutland square, a pub and eating place, packed on Friday and Saturday evenings. Next to it is the Caledonian Hotel, which stands as one of Edinburgh's top class hotels – top class suites at £800 per night. Move up the street and we pass several pubs – all offering sports matches on a large screen.

Show Business (London, 1987), p. 70.

³ Exodus 20:8-11.

⁴ Deuteronomy 5:15.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2000), p. 71.

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The Nightclubs are packed from 11pm till 3am. The owner of one runs a local sauna and another has a reputation for easy sex. Move around the parish and you will find lap dancing and full striptease on offer.

Until recently we had two cinemas – the popular ABC and the Filmhouse for the connoisseur, with its film club attached. The Usher Hall has been reopened for concerts and the Royal Lyceum offers a wide range of plays. You can eat Scottish, Italian, Thai and Chinese food, with a range of business sandwich bars to serve that non-existent lunch hour for the massive business sector. Our parish has a '2,10,20 Profile' – 2,000 live in it, 10,000 work in it and 20,000 come into it each weekend for some kind of entertainment. That sector is discreetly, but firmly policed.

What does God have to do with all that? In the first weeks of arriving in the parish I walked the parish by day and by night, feeling more and more anxious. I now call it 'ecclesiastical agoraphobia'. I was out of my security zone. The turning point came when I was walking one evening and heard in my mind the words that Paul heard as he experienced the cross-cultural angst of Corinth: 'Do not be afraid.... I am with you.... I have many people in this city' (Acts 18:10).

Those words threw a switch in my mind. I had X-ray vision. I was able to look through the walls of the businesses and the pubs and clubs and see 'God's people'. That shift of perspective, a gift of God, was the beginning of our mission. Mission is the mother of theology.⁶

That was the beginning of a desire to plant a church for the nightclub culture, to which we will return – to a theological quest that challenges many of our inherited assumptions.

The journey through my Bible

The second journey means taking a Bible and flicking through it for clues to a theology of entertainment. I begin at Genesis and end at Revelation, taking a quick survey of surface impressions. My tour through the Old Testament faces me with the opening poetry of Genesis and the reminder of the oral traditions of the patriarchs that must have held people enthralled as the stories were told and retold. Soon I stumble on songs of Miriam and Deborah, not to mention David entertaining Saul and soothing his agitated mind.

Artists, architects and artisans are commissioned for the creation of the Tabernacle and the Temple. Festivals are described with colour and music and engaging participation. Turn to the prophets and we are in the realm of

⁶ Kaehler, quoted by Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelisation* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1989), p. 1.

prophetic imagination – from the almond tree and the potter’s house of Jeremiah to indescribable visions of Ezekiel’s heavenly charioteers.

Of course, the Old Testament tour tweaks another strand. Our eye lights on Sodom with all its reputation for evil, the dancing before the Golden Calf and other altars. The prophetic denunciations of idolatry are about trivial and superficial living where the people have exchanged the weight of God’s glory for the weightlessness of the false gods, and the lifestyles that flow from that de-centred worship. We see very quickly the age-old idols of money, sex and power now re-incarnated and paraded on the screens and stages of our entertainment culture. The dark side is cool.

Move to the New Testament and the sense of recoil is strengthened by the letters that floated across the Mediterranean area to advise new followers of Jesus Christ how to live in a culture shaped by other gods. The circular letter of Ephesians calls for a practical spirituality that is clearly ascetic about any area of immorality and sees life in terms of spiritual conflict with the principalities and powers.

The recurring themes of light and darkness in Paul and John remind us that there is a call to distinctiveness. The famous call to the Corinthians to ‘Come apart and be separate’⁷ has echoed through the Christian world. We may have forgotten the make up of that first Corinthian congregation – women and men whose lives had been enmeshed in destructive lifestyles. This policy of separation was good advice for new converts who have to break the habits of a lifetime and be apprenticed to a new tradition of the Way of Christ.

However, it is doubtful if that was the whole story. How can there be any mission without engagement? Has a corrective and targeted comment become normative and universal, embedding itself in the consciousness of generations of Christians? Has this created in many evangelical Christians a fundamental paranoia that has emasculated our evangelism, turning a good news encounter of celebration into an anxiety-ridden exercise in extraction?

Let me end this scriptural tour in the Gospels. Here we listen to the master of the story and the sound bite. We watch a man who could have people travel in their thousands to hear him on a hillside or by lakeside. His miracles caught the people’s attention. In the life of Jesus we are faced with a holiness that is not a separation from people, but a deep involvement with people. Much of his ministry is around tables with the friends of financial crooks and pliers of the sex trade. This man entertained

⁷ 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

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in both senses of the word: he captured their attention with the word of God and made them feel at home in the presence of God.

THE CHURCH AND THE CLUBS

The story of entertainment is as old as humankind. The interaction of the church and the arts has varied with the doctrinal seasons. There have been seasons of great patronage of the arts by the church, and seasons when art, music and dancing have been expunged from the life of the church. There have been times when all art forms were seen as God's gifts and times when it was thought to be an act of Christian deviation to engage with the everyday entertainment by entering a pub, a club or dance-hall. These were evil places and Christians did not go to evil places.

The divide continues. Since 1999 we have been exploring church for the club culture in Edinburgh. For some that is a contradiction for the nightclubs are seen as centres of recreational drugs and casual sex. An e-mail from a lady in the United States highlights the issues as she speaks of how the 'trend is towards the dark side'. She writes:

I have yet to hear of a society that flourished by answering to their darkest shadow side. It's one thing to recognize that you have one. It's another to 'live there', nurturing it, feeding it, fertilizing it, expanding it, and educating it.⁸

She is deeply concerned about the effects of the club scene on young people and wants to create a 'Get real' club in which she can 'make the Light cooler than the darkness'. There is a passion here that resonates with many of us.

Let me set that against the reflections of one of our club team, currently completing his MTh in Media and Communication at New College. He is equally aware of the darkness in the club scene, but feels it as pain, solidarity. He sees in the club life a search for transcendence and for the intimacy of belonging. He senses its loss of roots and futility about the future. He longs to see a church that would be led by the DJs and the musicians of the culture. There are aspects of the clubbing community that he senses are closer to real church than our inherited patterns of church. He believes that the club culture has as much to teach the church as vice versa.

He speaks of a move from the visual culture to a sonic culture where people pick up information through their bodies. He quotes Tex Sample, 'I

⁸ Letter received from Cynthia Berger Parent, 4 November 1999 about 'The Get Real Club'.

vibrate, and therefore I am.' He longs for an emerging spirituality and community that heals the age-old schizophrenia between body and spirit, and lets the body dance the truth of the gospel. As a South African theologian said, 'If I can't dance it, it can't be true.' His prayer is for discernment for he says that discernment in an electric culture is survival.⁹

TELEVISION: SEEING THROUGH WHAT WE SEE

Discernment is a good theme as we move to the next major area of the entertainment culture. Today we do not need to choose to visit places of good or evil. We have to choose as these places visit us through the all-pervasive medium of television.

Laying aside the issues of explicit pornography and violence, there are many who claim that the entertainment milieu in general, and the television medium in particular, has eroded our capacity to believe and our understanding of belief. William Kuhns has argued that the very concept of faith is threatened by a TV-informed mindset accustomed to incessant visual impact. The notion of absolutes has been eroded by the 'tentative and elastic epistemology of the media'.¹⁰

William Fore draws on the image of boats on the river to describe the undermining effects of television. Fore warns against simply examining the behaviour in the boat while being 'unaware that *all of us are being moved by the river itself*'. He claims that we are 'being changed from what we are to what we will become, by the *process of television itself*'. Television is providing us with a worldview, *which not only determines what we think, but also how we think and who we are*.¹¹

In 1999 the London School of Economics published research on the use of TV, video, books, computer games, music and personal computers by young people aged 6 to 17. The study found that they interact with the media for around five hours each day and pointed to the dominance of a 'screen-entertainment culture'. Television occupies about half of this time and is named as the medium they would miss most.

According to Fore, television has become the 'cultivator of our culture, the great mythmaker of our time'. The key myths are: seeing is believing, life is simple, information overload is inevitable, and there is a free flow of

⁹ I am indebted for these observations to Paul Thomson and, in particular, his unpublished paper entitled, 'God in 3D: Technology and Religious Imagination in Club Cultures'.

¹⁰ Quoted in Chris Arthur (ed.), *Religion and the Media* (Cardiff, 1993), p. 6.

¹¹ William F. Fore, *Television and Religion – the Shaping of Faith, Values and Culture* (Minneapolis, 1987), pp. 21-2.

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information. The myths about society are: efficiency is the highest good, the fittest survive, power comes from the centre and happiness is about limitless consumption.¹²

Where a culture buys into these myths, what happens to faith, mystery, responsibility and truth? What happens to failure as a fact of life, service as a way of life and generosity as a response to life? In other words, what is the place for the Way of the Cross? What kind of Christian community has the capacity to see through the myths and help us live with God's reality? Are we training one another in the art of discernment of these subtle powers or are we still locked into reacting to the sexy scenes and bad language? Or have we even become inured to that?

In contrast to Fore and Postman's pessimism, Professor Stewart Hoover believes that the world of the media and mass entertainment has overtaken the role of the church as the forum of public religious discourse. While the church lives out its privatized gospel, the world is going public on religion. We are entering a 'new paradigm':

In the culture at large, questions of faith and spirit seem to have gone public: TV programmes, novels, magazine stories and newspaper articles now give serious attention to the spiritual and religious questions of a generation that grew up suspicious of the faith and morality handed down to them by their elders.¹³

He issues this challenge to the churches: 'Religious communities do not manage to reproduce the popular modes of community searched for by some and they do not manage to create the meaningful contrast in terms of community that is sought for by others. Religious communities and religious institutions thus become trapped in modernity.'¹⁴

Here is a fundamental theological challenge. Has the arena of religious debate moved beyond our church walls to the cinema and public media? Are we as Christians going to keep our distance or engage and begin to challenge the myths and discern the truths? Instead of holding numerous church meetings, should we not rather visit the local cinema with our friends and chat about the film afterwards in the pub or in a Starbucks café? Is our God big enough – or humble enough – to speak through Hollywood?

¹² William F. Fore, 'The Religious Relevance of Television', in Arthur, *Religion and the Media*, p. 59.

¹³ Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby (eds), *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (London, 1997), p. 224.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

A recent Christmas sermon was based on the film called: 'The Truman Show'. It illustrates the core themes of redemption through grace and truth.

THE TRUMAN SHOW

Truman Burbank does not know it, but from birth he has been enclosed in a TV studio set. Every aspect of his life is being broadcast to the world. It is the ultimate 'real-life docudrama' in which the star is the only one who does not know he is on screen.

His name is an oxymoron (Truman, a true man? Burbank – the home of Hollywood). As the story unfolds we are struck by the superficiality and the strange conventional repetitiveness. Even his wife and best friend are being fed their lines by the Director.

As he begins to suspect something and break through the veneer, his friend is telling him that he could never lie to him – as the Director feeds his words into his earpiece.

There is one incident that disrupts his life. A young woman tries to tell him that it is all a lie. Apparently she has broken on to the set and is promptly removed. However, she has been around long enough for Truman to fall in love. The remainder of the film is his search to get back in touch with this love, which first touched him. It looks like a battle to the death as the Director does everything to prevent him escaping. We are caught up in the drama. Will he? Won't he?

Truth and culture are now artificially controlled and contrived – be it the little worlds of the Teletubbies, Madonna or Rupert Murdoch's media empire. There is a cry for escape... to find reality beyond the artificiality... reality in the face of a love that first loves us....

A DISCERNING RESPONSE

Learning from history

Living Christianly within a media-conditioned entertainment culture is new and yet not new. First it was a Jewish culture, then Greek culture, and then Roman culture and so on through the centuries of missionary engagement.

The glory of the Good News of Jesus Christ is his unique universalism. As once 'the Word became flesh and lived among us' in a Jewish culture of the first century, so he has expressed himself in every culture known to us throughout history. These multicultural translations of the eternal Word always share the same fragile vulnerability of the first incarnation. Often Christ can be hidden in the cloak of the culture.

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In every case, Christ affirms, challenges and transforms the particular cultural expression of our humanity. In the end the culture may crucify him, but he is indestructible and returns in resurrection power. 'In the beginning was the Word.... He came to his own and his own did not receive him.... In him all things hold together.... I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died and behold I am alive for evermore...' (John 1:1, 11; Col. 1:17; Rev. 1:17).

The translation goes on. Today the struggles range from the African recovery of a gospel stripped of its colonial clothing to the Western Enlightenment's rationally organized version of Christianity struggling to connect with a fluid, 'feelings', fragmentary culture. As Peter Horsfield reminds us, we have moved from an original rural context for the gospel to an urban-global-technological context for our task. We must now move to an understanding of expressing the faith and life of the gospel in our media-shaped environment.¹⁵

Marshall McLuhan argues that we have underestimated the effects of our technologies on our psychic and social wellbeing. Just as Postman saw how the invention of the telegraph in the early nineteenth century combined with the invention of the photograph in the late nineteenth century to produce the television to create 'new ways of knowing',¹⁶ so McLuhan sees that two key technologies have affected our sensory priority. Printing catalyzed the visual priority of the eye and electrification catalyzed the sonic priority of the ear. McLuhan suggests that over the last century, much of the West has flipped from left-brain dominance to right brain dominance, from the logical sequential analysis of the West to holistic pattern recognition.¹⁷

That 'holistic pattern recognition' is one reason for the allergic reaction of nearly all people under forty-five to the contemporary church. They react to the sonic 'vibe' of the community long before they hear 'the Word'. That sonic vibe carries messages of power, hierarchy, gender ambivalence of a male institution populated by women, linear thinking, order and control, passivity and conservative collusion with status quo. In short the body language of church contradicts the relational and radical call of Jesus Christ to 'follow me'. Without a relational reformation for this 'Friends Generation', the Word will remain a disembodied irrelevance. Jesus spent

¹⁵ Peter Horsfield, *Teaching Theology in a New Cultural Environment*, in Arthur, p. 46.

¹⁶ Postman, *Amusing ourselves to Death*, p. 70.

¹⁷ McLuhan, Marshall, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* (Toronto, 1999), p. 53. Quoted in Thomson's paper, *op. cit.* p. 4.

30 years of silence before his three years of ministry. That proportion of 10:1 may be the guide to the proportion of our body language as a community to our verbal communication.

Today's generation learn by participation, amuse themselves in the story line of a film or docusoap, immerse themselves in a world of music and dance or find virtual community on the Internet. To let the word become flesh in this generation will mean reclaiming the powers that have been created by Christ and for Christ,¹⁸ but have been hijacked into trivial entertainment. That way we will not amuse ourselves to death, but catch the attention of people with the embodied word of life and invite them into the hospitality of the Trinity, which is eternal life.

Learning from Paul

The key to our response to a culture of entertainment lies in spiritual discernment. We turn to Athens for our role model of response. Like Paul at Athens our first reaction may be one of distance and hostility. Paul saw the Greek idols and 'he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols' (Acts 17:16). Like William Fore, in his passionate outburst, Paul saw the prevailing culture full of signals that went against the grain of his love for God revealed in Jesus Christ. He began reasoning and preaching about Jesus and the resurrection, with little response beyond the Greek fascination with novelty religion.

However, by the time he speaks on the Areopagus, Paul is standing, as it were, alongside Hoover's 'new paradigm' of religious experience, saying: 'I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD"'. Now, what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you' (Acts 17:22, 23).

What follows is a speech that affirms the God who has made them, their common humanity and their cultural distinctiveness. He even quotes from their literature, their contemporary media. Only then does he challenge their views on moral accountability and the destiny of history in Jesus Christ. Into the Greek pluralism of multiple choice mystery and philosophy, he introduces the 'scandal of particularity' about a man called Jesus who has been raised from the dead, and will judge the world.

Learning from Ignatius

In *Clashing Symbols: an Introduction to Faith and Culture*, Michael Paul Gallacher suggests that between Paul's initial reaction to Athenian culture

¹⁸ Colossians 1:16.

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and his famous speech on the Areopagus, he underwent a kind of conversion. He asks: 'How did Paul move from disgust to generosity?'

Drawing on the Ignatian Tradition of spiritual discernment, Gallacher asks, 'Towards what are our hearts moving? That is the key question for spiritual discernment. It asks about the directional flow of our lives: is the culture leading us towards what is profoundly humanizing and creative of love or pushing us towards what is imprisoning, destructive and closed to compassion?'

In another article, on *Theology, Discernment and Cinema*, Gallacher offers a list of key questions that fill out this discernment of 'directional flow'. While written to address particular films, they could equally be applied to the whole entertainment culture:

- Does it open or close our hearts to compassion?
- Does it seduce us into feelings or lead us into mystery?
- Does it help us recognize our vulnerability or feed our fantasies?
- Does it show reverence for the human as in the Incarnation?
- Does it offer a quality of looking and receiving that leads to confession and silence?¹⁹

Gallacher pleads that we adopt a kind of 'double expectation' that 'there will be conflict, ambiguity, anti-values enthroned, but there will also be signs of hope and real hunger, fruits of the Spirit.... Ultimately, discernment means sharing that conversion of disposition of Paul in Athens, and thus being able to recognize smoke signals of hope rising from what may at first seem like a burnt-out desert.'²⁰

If we learn to fine-tune such discernment, we will be better equipped to keep the inner eye of the moral imagination clear without being superficially moralistic. Such discernment will lead not so much to calls for repentance in society, as signs of repentance in the church, as we recognize our imprisonment in modernity and endeavour to relate to the new paradigms of religious expression in our culture. The Unknown God waits to be named.

¹⁹ Michael Paul Gallacher, *Theology, Discernment and Cinema*, in John R. May (ed.), *New Image in Religious Film* (Kansas City, 1997).

²⁰ Michael Paul Gallacher, 'Looking Down on Athens', *Third Way* 20 (1997), pp. 12-14 – an extract from his book *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (London, 1997).