

Mediating the Mediator: A Cultural Theology of Culture

PETE WARD

In *Consuming Religion* Vincent Miller argues that a consumer culture represents a significant challenge for the Christian faith.¹ Consumer culture, he says, commodifies religious symbols and practices. This is corrosive because commodification unhooks practices and symbols from historic traditions and communities of faith (13). As a committed Catholic, Miller is concerned that religious cultures and communities should attempt to resist the negative effects of consumerism. Yet he is also highly critical of theological engagement with consumer culture. Theologians, he says, prefer to discuss consumerism in relation to the history of ideas and anthropology. For Miller this is a mistake. “Whatever the origins of consumer desire in modern metaphysics and anthropology, it is currently sustained not primarily by an incorrigible commitment to pernicious ideas but by a host of economic, social and cultural structures and practices” (115).

Consumer culture, he argues, is not really a culture at all. It is not wedded to any particular worldview or ethos. Rather it is a “set of interpretative habits and dispositions supported by a variety of practices and infrastructures for engaging elements of any culture” (194). The habitual response of theologians to consumerism is to attempt to wrestle the issue onto familiar philosophical grounds. Thus they seek to engage consumerism through questions of cultural content and ontology (4). These strategies miss the mark, says Miller, because they fail to recognise the nature of consumerism and the way it operates both in the church and in the wider society. This does not mean that such concerns are irrelevant, simply that they require methods and ways of seeing that engage more directly with the nature of contemporary culture and society. “There are certainly connections to be made between one’s theology of creation or understanding of the incarnation and the practice of daily life, but such correlations are seldom direct applications” (13).

A cultural theology of culture must be particular. This means that it must be situated in the historical and the social. Miller’s pessimism concerning the impact of consumerism on contemporary religion is a starting point for such a cultural theology. This essay is a dialogue with the two points raised by Miller: firstly, his largely pessimistic evaluation of the impact of consumer culture on the church, its symbols and practices; secondly, his sense that theologians need to develop new methods of analysis and understanding of the way that contemporary consumer culture operates. A cultural theology therefore must not only focus on particular communicative and social practices in contemporary culture, it also needs to utilise ways of reading and understanding culture. At the same time I believe that theology should be about God. A cultural theology therefore sets out to explore the mediation of God in culture. Such an enterprise sits within a tradition or canon of theological debate and creativity. A cultural theology therefore does not rest with the interpretation of the cultural as mediation, but it sets this within a wider Christian discourse. Engagement with the tradition functions primarily as a creative resource for this cultural theology. Insights from previous periods and cultural situations are used to develop a persuasive, situated, and committed account of the mediation of God in culture.

Theology as Sociology

This treatment of the theological and mediation echoes John Milbank’s call for a theology as

sociology. The general perception of the argument in *Theology and Social Theory*² is that theologians need no longer engage with social science or cultural analysis.³ I believe this is to misread the direction of his thinking. Milbank's starting point is that theology either positions or is positioned by secular discourses (1). The timidity of theology has meant that it has frequently borrowed a "fundamental account of society and history" and then sought theological insights that "cohere with it" (380). This enterprise is mistaken, argues Milbank, because no such account, which is "neutral, rational and universal," exists (380). In these circumstances, he says, theology must itself act as an account of the social. This involves a fundamental shift in what it means to think theologically. So he argues that "the claim here is not that theology, conceived in broadly traditional fashion, can now add to its competence certain new, 'social' pronouncements. On the contrary the claim is that all theology has to re-conceive itself as a kind of 'Christian Sociology': that is to say as the explication of a socio-linguistic practice, or as the re-narration of this practice as it has historically developed" (381).

Milbank's notion of theology as sociology is highly suggestive. He envisions the expansion of tools of analysis and ways of seeing traditionally linked to theology. Where his perspective is problematic however is the way that "Theology" appears to be disembodied and reified. A cultural theology would not accept the continuation of such assumptions because "Theology" in the way it is used here by Milbank simply doesn't exist. What does exist are theologians, academics, church officials, and preachers who make use of ideas and texts and conventions for their own ends. A cultural theology therefore must be situated and particular. A similar problem with Milbank arises from his location of theology as the dominant discourse. In place of a rather triumphalist air I would locate theological discourse within communities and identities. Here identity and ideas about God are linked by the social. A cultural theology is engaged in by people for certain ends and purposes. It is this commitment that situates social theory in relation to the traditions, canon, and interpretative conventions and practices of Christians and the churches. It is within this community, and to further these aims and purposes, that the social and the theological are to be negotiated.

Mediation and a Cultural Theology of Culture

Cultural theology accepts that the transcendent is mediated within culture. In his treatment of popular music, Keith Negus says that mediation operates in three ways: first, mediation as intermediary action; second, mediation as transmission; and third, mediation as evident in social relationships.⁴ Mediation as intermediary action relates to the activities of individuals and organisations such as record companies, music producers, publicists, and festival organisers. Corresponding to the idea of "production within the cultural circuit, the action of intermediaries can be read as "producing," but at the same time by engaging in the process of production as affecting what is mediated. Mediation as transmission refers to the role of media in distributing and making available popular music. The internet, the radio, and the compact disk are a means of transmission. In transmission it is recognised that something "passes between" or bridges a gap between parties. Transmission enables, but it also limits the range of expression. Thus there are conventions and limitations to television formats and the popular concert. Finally mediation, says Negus, is situated within social relationships. The consumption and the cultures that characterise the agency of fans mediate popular music and situate it in the social in ways. The activity of groups of people in relation to popular music rearticulates songs with other arenas of meaning-making and significance.

Negus takes his account of mediation from Raymond Williams's *Keywords*.⁵ In his account of the usage of mediation Williams draws on early English uses of the term in Chaucer where the mediation of an intermediary refers to a reconciling action between two adversaries. Mediation, says Williams, also carries the sense of the means of transmission or agency. The notion of an intermediary is "repeatedly used of the intercession of Christ between God and man" (171). In addition, through German idealist philosophy, says Williams, mediation also came to carry notions of reconciliation between God and humanity (171). From this it is possible to begin to see a connection between ideas of mediation and the specifically theological. Following Williams's lead it is possible to see how the idea of mediation holds the potential for a dialogue between contemporary understandings of popular culture and rich theological themes. In particular, in the concept of mediation lies not only a Christology, and along with it an implicit doctrine of the Trinity, but also notions of soteriology. When these themes are articulated with the complex reading of mediation offered by Negus a theological/cultural perspective emerges. This synoptic view offers the possibility of a cultural theology of culture.

This cultural theology of culture is developed first through particular accounts of mediation. To "embody" and situate this treatment of culture I have chosen six short case studies where the practices and symbols of the Christian Church are commodified in a consumer culture. I want by this means to extend the discussion with Miller through particular accounts of mediation. Following the case studies I develop a threefold cultural theology. The first section deals with discourse and the Trinity, the second section is soteriological, and the third ecclesiological.

Case One: Iris DeMent. On *Lifeline* the country singer Iris DeMent delivers stripped-down and passionate renditions of old time gospel songs and hymns. These include Fanny Crosby's "Blessed Assurance" and William Walford's "Sweet Hour of Prayer." DeMent introduces the songs in the sleeve notes of the CD through her own family biography. She describes how when times were tough and life was too much, her mother would sit down at the piano and sing these songs. The songs seemed to bring resolution and calm to her mother, explains DeMent. Recently she herself has undergone bad times, and in a phone call her mother told her what she should do: "Well Iris! You gotta get to a pe-yan-a!" DeMent explains the significance of this advice: "These songs aren't about religion. At least for me they aren't. They're about something bigger than that. There was an urgency in my mother's voice when she sang that came out of desperation, a great need. When I called her that day and she heard the sinking tone in my voice she did what any compassionate person would do, she threw me a lifeline."⁶

Robert Wuthnow's observation that growing numbers of Americans appear to identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious," and similar insights from Lyon and Roof, can be read as a direct challenge to the survival of the church.⁷ Clearly for Iris DeMent these songs have been disconnected from an immediate ecclesial context. At the same time her story offers a tantalising sense that while she may prefer to keep a distance from "religion" the transformational impact of the practice of singing hymns has not died. Indeed it is precisely because these songs offer a "lifeline" that she wishes to share them with the rest of the world. For Miller the commodification of hymns on a country music CD might well be problematic because it bypasses ecclesial life. This seems to me to miss the point. The real question concerns transcendence and transformation. In the singing of these hymns, and in the resolution that such a practice entails, can we assume that the absence of an ecclesial context automatically means the absence of God? Put in more personal terms, when Iris is singing these hymns is God actively present to her and for her? The practice of singing sacred songs in church we might

regard with some confidence as an occasion for divine encounter, especially if accompanied by a testimony similar to that given by DeMent. When we meet this affective dimension of faith outside of the church (rather like Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10) I suggest we are similarly challenged to expand our horizons.

Case 2: Vivaldi. Country music has a long tradition of Christian songs. When we shift genre to the classical tradition, sacred music has a long and distinguished place in the canon of accepted works. There is something of a revival at present in the performance and recording of liturgical music. The classical music charts are a testament to the continued popularity of ecclesiastical music. I estimate that at least half of the CDs on sale in my own local music store in Oxford are in the genre of church music. An edition of Vivaldi's vespers is a fine example of these developments.⁸ Recorded in 2003, the musical score has been reconstructed from a number of different fragments of previously lost manuscripts. The reconstruction is designed to present the liturgy as it would have been conducted by Vivaldi in Venice at the convent church of San Lorenzo (sleeve notes, 21).

What is interesting is how the record company represents what is clearly sacred music. Most sacred music is represented through the use of ecclesiastical imagery: stained glass windows, a pietà or similar statue, or perhaps a renaissance painting of a crucifixion or another religious scene. In contrast, the Italian company Naïve have packaged Vivaldi's work with a striking image of a young girl. She is clothed in white with a garland of white roses around her blond hair. Her eyes are closed, yet she appears to be looking down as if in a moment of reflection. Her slightly parted lips are colored pink, and they are set in relief by her pale complexion. The impression is something of a cross between one of Zeffereli's film stars and a young Gwyneth Paltrow.

The image is sexy and contemporary, but it articulates with the sensuous nature of Vivaldi's score and the performance of the Concerto Italiano and the featured soloists. It locates the religious and the mystical in a new frame. Again here is an example of what Miller may see as the commodification of the Catholic tradition. The question here is similar to that at play in DeMent's account of the significance of religious music in daily life. The music as text, and the encoded nature of its representation, give no clue as to the significance of this music for those of us who consume it. The question is the same: "Is God absent or present to us when we listen to this music? If God is present what are the theological implications of such agency?" Clearly the intention is to dislocate this music from its ecclesiastical context, but does its re-articulation locate it in another space? Alessandrini argues that even in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy the ecclesiastical context of music such as Vivaldi's was so elided with the aesthetic as to be ambiguous in its theological significance (sleeve notes, 26). If this is the case within an ecclesiastical context, could not the opposite be also the case when this music is consumed outside of the church and apart from its liturgy?

Case 3: Vineyard music. The first in a series of recordings featuring worship leaders from the UK and Ireland, *Hungry* represents the extent to which the charismatic church has embraced a commercial culture.⁹ I first encountered this CD while on a trip to South Africa. Vineyard had just released the recording through its South African distribution company. My hosts in Johannesburg told me that this was "the latest thing," and—despite being from the Baptist Church—wherever I went the music from the Vineyard was being used in their meetings. The songs, which were written and developed in congregations in Dublin and London and other parts of Britain, were travelling to another continent and a new context and situation. This is of

course the intention of the Vineyard Church; they have their own linked company, Vineyard Music, whose aim is to package and distribute the “products” that arise from the distinctive culture of their local church congregations.

Inspired by this recording I started to use one of the songs, “Be the Centre,” in my own local church where I was occasionally invited to lead worship. The song has a Celtic feel, and comes from the Vineyard Church in Dublin. It speaks of Jesus being the fire in our hearts and the wind in our sails. This song meant a great deal to me and to those of us in our local church. We were one of the new initiatives in the Anglican Church, and our focus was the desire to be a church for young people. For the five or six of us gathered in the cold empty church this vision of a church open and welcoming to young people seemed a long way off. “Be the Centre” offered a focus and vision in worship for our hopes and endeavours.

I give this personal illustration because I want to convey a sense that our ecclesial context had its own authenticity. In this rather gritty and testing context the commodification of religious culture enabled our worship. This was only possible because of the way that the song had been recorded and sold. So, against Miller, I would argue that for the charismatic tradition the commercial development of record companies and the commodification of worship music is the tradition, or at least it is the means by which the tradition circulates and reproduces itself.

Case 4: Taizé. In a tiny French village in Burgundy close to Cluny, Brother Roger founded his ecumenical community.¹⁰ Its origins lay in a concern for reconciliation and ecumenical relationships following the Second World War. Every summer thousands of young people travel to this remote part of France to join the community of brothers, who now number around a hundred, as they sing their songs, spend time in silence, and share their vision for the church and the world.

With its ecumenical perspectives and concern for reconciliation the Taizé community has always charted a precarious course between and among ecclesial traditions.¹¹ The liturgy combines symbolism and practices from the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions. The more recent addition of Orthodox-style domes to the Church of the Reconciliation at Taizé is a conscious borrowing of tradition, as is the display of icons inside the church. From this “bricolage” something distinctive and new has arisen. Taizé has produced a distinctive religious culture.

The way that this culture is distributed is through products, in particular through the songs that Taizé uses in worship. In the community’s shop CDs, DVDs, music-only recordings, and various music books are on sale. Through the use of the songs individuals are able to transport something of Taizé back to their home communities and churches. Taizé is a male-only monastic community; it has not established a lay community, as exists for instance among the Franciscans. As a result, while young people visit them there is no easy way for them to “join” Taizé. Of course women cannot be a part of the community at all. Taizé is not a church or a substitute for church. Its ecumenical vision is about reconciliation and renewal from within. Thus it operates as a movement or a network sustained by pilgrimage, through the songs and liturgy generated by the community, and increasingly through the use of the Internet. Taizé has had an enormous impact on the Catholic Church and I am sure that Miller would feel at home there. This familiarity might mean that the commodification and consumer-based nature of the culture of Taizé might be somewhat disguised. Taizé feels like church, but on closer inspection it

is every church and no church. In trying to be ecumenical it has become postmodern.

Case 5: WWJD bracelets. The WWJD bracelet represents a unique event in what Colleen McDannell calls “material Christianity.”¹² The WWJD phenomenon was probably the first teen craze within the Christian Church, with millions of these bracelets and other fashion items being sold in the US and the UK. WWJD stands for “What Would Jesus Do?” For Miller, I suspect WWJD would represent the worst of commercialised religion and commodification. Again I would like to take issue with this reading.

For the younger teenager identity is closely linked to style and image. Fashion is therefore more than simply clothes. A sense of self and a sense of belonging are constructed using “things.” We might identify this creative activity of young people as necessary work. It is necessary because it is linked to selfhood and community. The commodities of consumerism are therefore the stuff out of which identities are shaped—or rather the meanings that are associated with them are the stuff from which identities are shaped.

WWJD is significant because the Christian faith is largely absent from the material world of the younger teenager. Churches do not speak the language or share in the discourse of style, image, and fashion. An exception to this might be the cross when it is worn as an earring or a necklace, but the cross as a symbol has become somewhat ubiquitous, and this may be a point in support of Miller’s thesis, because the cross has been devalued by its use. It may be an urban myth, but a young woman was overheard in a jewellers asking for a silver cross on a chain. When she was asked which one she said she wanted the one with the little man on it. WWJD bracelets, however, sit alongside the white “Make Poverty History” and the BBC sponsored blue anti-bullying wristbands as a potent signifier in the world of the younger teenager.

Case 6: The Cretan labyrinth. The labyrinth has a long and much mythologized place in the history of religions. The Cretan labyrinth in particular is rich in pre-Christian and Christian symbolism. Interest in labyrinths has grown apace in the last few years. In particular, evangelical Christians have appropriated the symbol and the practices of making and walking labyrinths as part of a wider move towards spiritual practices. Alternative worship groups in the UK, in particular a gathering of young Christians in London linked to Vaux and Grace congregations, have reframed the labyrinth combining a series of prayer stations with their own labyrinth design. Those walking the labyrinth are guided along their journey by wearing headphones with a CD that has prayers and music to help with meditation. This innovative creation was picked up by the organisation Youth for Christ, and a tour was organised around the main cathedrals and churches in the UK. In the US the publishing company Group have marketed this version of the labyrinth giving it the name “Prayer Walk.”

The contemporary Christian use of the labyrinth is an example of the way that symbols and practices circulate in religious traditions. Miller of course may be critical of the way that this symbol is dislocated from an original context by these processes. The marketing of the “Prayer Walk” in the US is obviously a commodification of this ancient symbol. Yet here again the productive processes associated with a publishing company’s selling this item should perhaps be seen as the means whereby this symbol becomes re-embedded in a new ecclesial context. The combination of an organisation such as Youth for Christ taking the labyrinth to places such as Canterbury Cathedral and York Minister is potent in symbolism. Having groups of young people, and even the curious tourist, walking the labyrinth in these places suggests a new articulation of this symbol. What is happening in the spiritual journey of individuals is not accessible without a

more in-depth analysis of this practice, yet it still poses the question: is God absent or present within this new cultural formation? If God is present how is this to be understood theologically?

The case studies as a starting point for theological creativity. These six case studies are a brief snapshot of the way that contemporary cultural change and communication are being utilised within and beyond the Christian community. Through consumer culture symbols and practices are circulated and carry meaning. A cultural theology needs to be able to travel beyond the “thing” to the significance invested in the symbol. For example, in the representation of the Vivaldi vespers we see the way that the record company has tried to reframe music that had its origin in the liturgical life of the Catholic Church in a contemporary frame of reference. The meaning of this recording, however, does not rest with the encoding of the marketing department of Naïve records or the imagery of the cover. The music itself and its text afford a diverse range of interpretation. To travel into the significance of this recording we need to gain an insight into the affective dimensions of this music. Representation cannot simply be reduced to a theory based on the manipulation of consumers by commercial companies. The integrity of the text, and the score and its performance on the recording, indicate that meaning is open for those of us who listen to the music. Meaning needs to be sought in the articulations made by the audience. The sonic space of the recording affords a connectivity to a Christian text and sensibility.

Similar observations pertain to the adoption of the labyrinth by evangelical Christians in the UK and the US. The meaning of this symbol cannot be read from its previous historical contexts. Its re-articulation means that its representation shifts with cultural reference points. This is a new discursive context. The symbol operates within a network of other symbols. The effect of this is to create a new context for meaning linked to the symbol. The link between the evangelical youth organisation Youth for Christ and the ecclesial context of a cathedral creates a new discursive formation within which individuals may locate a specific practice of prayer and meditation. The way that the commodification of this symbol and practice operates indicates that through discourse a new tradition emerges. A person once said to me that in a rural congregation tradition was fluid. If you tried something new and people liked it then it became traditional and they expected it to happen again. If they didn't like it, it was regarded as an unwelcome innovation and generally resisted. Tradition understood as discourse is not static; it is in a constant flux. Representation is the way that symbols and practices are dislocated and relocated within structures of meaning.

Increasingly information and communication technologies are shaping how meanings are circulated within the Christian community. For charismatic churches such as Vineyard these processes have been enthusiastically adopted as part of their ecclesial life. Yet charismatics are not alone in their use of the media to generate a religious culture. The influence of the Taizé Community extends way beyond rural France through its music and its promotion as a place of pilgrimage. Record companies and worship leaders, religious communities and pilgrimage, combine in the production of religious culture. Yet discourse is articulated through the agency of consumers. The meaning of Vineyard or Taizé does not lie solely in the texts of the music, or in the institutions that they generate and from which these texts emerge. The meaning of Taizé also lies in the identifications made by thousands of young people, and those of us who are not so young, who are making sense of ourselves and encounter God as we sing the songs. Similarly with Vineyard, we cannot interpret the songs through their lyrics alone, or even through the strengths and problems of the charismatic communities from which they emerge. The songs are

carried within discourse and are relocated through the identification made by individuals and communities around the world.

For critics such as Miller these accommodations with consumer culture may be less problematic because of their ecclesial context. The case of Iris DeMent's recording *Lifeline* may be more problematic. Yet here also I would argue that the songs and the way that they are performed contain their own integrity. They operate affectively outside of their ecclesial context in much the same way as they do within the church. Of course the dislocation of divine encounter from specific ecclesial relationships means that something different is taking place. The question this prompts relates to the activity of the Spirit in individuals as they listen. The case studies focus the attention on the complexity of mediation. Within this complexity the starting point for a cultural theology of culture relates to the presence or absence of God. This question emerges not simply in relation to meanings which might be inscribed by productive processes, for instance the ecclesial context from which the Vineyard songs have come. Neither can the question be answered entirely in relation to their textual richness and content. So the recording of Vivaldi's vespers as liturgical text does not in itself suggest an answer to the question. Nor can it be read solely from the social relationships and practices within which symbols and practices are consumed. Singing worship songs and walking labyrinths do not in themselves constitute an encounter with God. The question of the presence or the absence of God relates to the complexity of mediation in all of these ways. This means that the theological question of mediation needs to be addressed in a multi-layered way.

Bureaucracy and Epiphany

The presence and absence of God in mediation can be addressed in a variety of ways. The omnipresence of God might suggest that God is always and everywhere near. An appreciation of the world and human making as aspects of creation sustained within and around by the Spirit of creation might also be a fruitful source of a theology of culture. Similarly notions of the *imago Dei* afford an understanding of human expression as akin to the life of God. Fruitful as these avenues of thought may be, they introduce a mechanistic or inevitable or natural dimension into a theology of culture. They develop a bureaucratic reflex that can downplay the relational, the intimate, and the particular. As such they represent background lighting rather than the ray of sunlight, the hum of the bass amp as opposed to the punchy riff. The bureaucratic has its place but it does not set the world alight. Epiphany however speaks of the revealing moments, the places where God is powerfully present, mediated in culture rather than naturally or automatically there. This is mediation where through revealing intimacy is achieved. It is mediation that reconciles. The case studies focus attention on the way that consumer culture operates as mediation. The theological challenge of these particular texts and social practices rests in the possibility that God might be revealed and present. Mediation mediating the mediator.

In many ways this is the same question addressed in Karl Barth's opening volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. For Barth the church has a commission to engage in talk about God. Preaching and the sacraments are distinctive as proclamation because of this commission. The distinctiveness of proclamation comes from the Word of God.¹³ Preaching is not necessarily proclamation. It must "ever and again" become so. It is this becoming which makes the church the church (88). Proclamation is not distinctive because of a particular message or set of values. God's Word is the content of proclamation and as such it becomes an object for human study, but as

proclamation it can never be objectified. In proclamation it “presents and places itself as an object over and against us” (91). “We have it as it gives itself to us” (92). This is an event of revelation. A revealing—or, as I prefer it in the context of the present discussion, an “epiphany.” In this encounter the humanity of those who proclaim, says Barth, is not cast aside because proclamation becomes itself an event among other human events and can be read on this level. As Christ became a true man and his humanity continues throughout eternity, proclamation exists as a human acting and making. Yet there is a new “robe of righteousness thrown over it” and its earthly character takes on another kind of event. Real proclamation is an event where human talk about God becomes a place where God speaks about himself (95). Talk about God rests on the canon of Scripture, but Scripture, like the proclamation of the church, is itself a human recollection of revelation (102). The Bible is the means by which the church remembers past revelation and is “called to an expectation of His future revelation and is thus summoned and guided to proclamation and empowered for it” (111). As such the Bible is not God’s past revelation. Both proclamation and Scripture are conditioned by the Word of God revealed. God with us (116).

Revelation as a revealing is conditioned by the act of revelation. What this means, says Barth, is that “revelation in fact does not differ from the person of Jesus Christ nor from the revelation accomplished in him” (119). By talking of revelation we inevitably speak therefore of the God who was made flesh and dwelt among us. This takes us to the Trinity. The Word made flesh is the will of the Father and the sending of the Son and the Spirit. It is the knowledge of God from God and of “light in light” (119). It is God who reveals Godself (296). God’s speaking is not to be distinguished from God. Revelation is a personal address that confronts humanity. The Word of God is always “mediated” and so if the Word of God is God’s self then Scripture and the preaching of the church are not to be taken as self-evidently and inevitably revelation. Rather they become so as an event, as a free act of God’s grace. “It is in this freedom and through grace that God reveals himself as the Lord” (306).

Barth’s treatment of revelation connects mediation with a Christologically articulated Trinitarian theology. The preaching of the church is acknowledged as mediation. It is human speech, and in our sense cultural. At the same time it is the place where God reveals himself. God’s revelation is an event and act received in faith. Revelation is not inevitable; it is not negotiated or deduced from a specific content of what has been revealed in Scripture or in past proclamation. Revelation is dynamic and personal; as such it is focused in Jesus Christ and in the reconciliation he brings. Mediation mediates the mediator. The case studies suggest that mediation can be a place of revelation. Here attention focuses on the freedom of God to be present as event. The case studies suggest that at a particular place God may be present. What Barth brings to this is the sense that such “epiphanies” are located in God’s self. Revelation is Trinitarian and its content is Jesus Christ. God’s freedom to be present is a Trinitarian event. The freedom of the Spirit is an epiphany and event.

Discourse and the Trinity

The case studies show how ecclesial life is being extended through consumer culture. An example of this is seen in the way that Vineyard Churches use their record company as a way of circulating not just music but a particular expression of charismatic worship. This embodied intimacy manifested at a local level is transmitted through mediation from community to community and from continent to continent. Technology and commodification enable these

relations within which individuals and groups participate in the life of God. Communion is mediated in commodification.

From a quite different ecclesial position John Zizioulas develops his discussion of the church and of God through categories of ontology, but he locates this ontology in ideas of relationship and community. Thus for Zizioulas ecclesial identity, or ecclesial being, indicates an ultimate reality that rests on God mediated in communion.¹⁴ So he can argue that “the mystery of the Church, even in its institutional dimension, is deeply bound to the very being of man, to the being of the world and to the very being of God.”¹⁵ As a member of the church the believer is in the “image of God,” says Zizioulas (15). It was this ecclesial experience of communion that generated and directed the thinking of the Fathers. Ecclesial identity and communion were of particular significance for Athanasius and Irenaeus in their consideration of the being of God. “This experience revealed something very important: the being of God could be known only through personal relationships and personal love. Being means life and life means communion” (16). So, argues Zizioulas, the ontology of the Fathers emerges out of the eucharistic life of the church. Communion and being are therefore dynamically and relationally connected. Thus he asserts that “God has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion” (17).

Communion therefore makes things be. Without communion nothing exists, including God. In communion, in the Eucharist, the church contemplates the life of the Holy Trinity as communion. In such contemplation lay the realization of humanity’s true being as an “image of Gods own being” (21). Thus the Eucharist is not the practice of a church that already exists; rather it is the Eucharist that constitutes the church’s being (21). Participation in communion is participation in the very life of God. “The life of the Eucharist is the life of God himself . . . It is the life of communion with God, such as exists within the Trinity and is actualised within the members of the Eucharistic community” (81). Thus, says Zizioulas, “Knowledge and communion are identical” (81). This, says Alan Torrance, is the strength of Zizioulas’s position. “Divine communication in the context of faith is an event of communion and demands to be conceived, therefore, in terms of participation within communion (and hence the ‘mutuality’) of the triune life.”¹⁶

Zizioulas is not alone among contemporary theologians in making the link between ecclesial identity, the being of the church, and the being of God. Whilst he expresses reservations about Zizioulas’s understanding of communion in the church, Miroslav Volf does approve of what he calls “a social understanding of salvation.” He identifies this version of “social salvation” as being held in common within the Catholic and the Orthodox traditions of the church as exemplified by Zizioulas and Karl Rahner respectively.¹⁷ David Cunningham is also in general agreement with these judgments. He observes that despite differences over the meaning and the use of terminology the link between relationality and the being of God advocated by Zizioulas is widely shared in contemporary Trinitarian theology.¹⁸

A relational understanding of the Trinity is widespread. At the same time these views have often been utilised by theologians to combat perceived notions of individualism in modernity. Volf’s assessment that in modernity the ecclesiological community is being eaten away by the “worm of modernity” is a common theological position.¹⁹ Zizioulas’s assertion that modernity has eroded a theological conception of the person should also be set in this context (27). This resistant position, which seems to be characteristic of contemporary theological interpretations of culture, may be going somewhat against the direction of the deeper flow of communitarian

and communicative notions of the Trinity

In his discussion of mission and participation Paul Fiddes utilises the notion of “representation.”²⁰ Representation, he says, lies at the heart of Zizioulas’s work. It is in the Eucharist that the believer encounters and is taken up into the holy life of the divine. Communion and communication are integral to a relational and participative Trinitarian theology. Torrance also makes this kind of link between communion and communication. He argues that in the debate on analogy Zizioulas’s theology of participation, his “analysis of capacity and incapacity, and his relating of communion and communication, personhood and truthfulness,” are profoundly significant (*Persons*, 305). If, like Fiddes and Torrance, we want to make use of Zizioulas’s theology, then we are forced to move from ontology to a more operational theology. Thus notions of relationship in communication and representation are present as culture. Liturgy should therefore properly be understood as participation in God and also as practice and discourse. At the same time ecclesial relationships are both representational and discursive, and they are also mediations of divine life.

Contemplation and Cultural Capital

Communion is mediated through the practices of representation and identification. A cultural theology of culture recognises that in mediation practices of faith operate in discourse. At the heart of a Trinitarian reading of the cultural life of God lies an interaction between epiphany and attention. What is at stake in the case studies is the extent to which the practices of mediation create an occasion for contemplation. Contemplation must not be routinised or bureaucratised into a general possibility; rather it should be located in the particularity of epiphany.

For Athanasius the image of God in humanity rests not only on the creative imprint of the Logos, but humanity through the creative work of the Word shares with the Word the same reason that shaped the world.²¹ The image of God is not seen by Athanasius as a “natural” or inherent gift. The divine imprint must be maintained and sustained through a continual attention and contemplation of the Word. “By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing; but he bears also the Likeness of Him Who is, and if he preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt” (30).

With corruption this constant contemplation was interrupted and humanity became “bereft of grace” (33). For Athanasius mortality is reinforced through a turning of attention from the things that are eternal to those that are corruptible. The shift of attention towards the corruptible leads in turn to corruption, and the effects of mortality are unchecked by grace (33). It is for the restoration and rescue of humanity that the Word “entered the world.” The Word had of course not been far from the world, for, says Athanasius, “no part of creation had ever been without Him Who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are” (33). Now however the Word enters the world in a new way, “stooping to our level in His love and Self-revealing to us” (33). The recreation of the image of God in humanity required that death and corruption be addressed. Redemption operates firstly as a renewal of mortality through the Word which takes our flesh upon himself. Like a king entering a city his glory transforms it from within (35ff). Secondly, through his death and resurrection death and corruption are “utterly abolished” (49). The restoration of the image enables a renewal of attention and contemplation. This contemplation is itself aided by the incarnation of the Word. The Saviour of the world, seeing that people were focused on “sensible things,” became himself an object for the senses

(44).

“There were thus two things which the Saviour did for us by becoming Man. He banished death from us and made us anew; and, invisible and imperceptible as in Himself He is, He became visible through His works and revealed Himself as the Word of the Father, the Ruler and King of the whole creation” (44–45).

Recreation through the restoration of humanity in the Word of God is linked to the sustaining dynamic of contemplation. The visibility of the Word enables the dynamic to recommence in the renewed creature. Restoration and contemplation lead to participation in the divine. The incarnation operates at a number of levels to bring unity between humanity and divinity. “For He was made man that we might be made God; and He manifested Himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and He endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality.”²²

Mediation relocates the practice of attention and contemplation. Through its operations the symbols and practices of the church are transmitted beyond understood ecclesial frameworks. The fluid nature of practice stretches ecclesial life. Contemplation however has its proper object. Mediation by definition relates to sensible things. This does not mean, however, that attention to mediated practices and symbols will of necessity turn towards the corrupting and the corruptible. In the incarnation the Word enters the world of the senses. It is in mediation that the Word is mediated. In mediation the Word becomes the object of contemplation. An example of this can be seen in how the case studies illustrate the way that songs and hymns may mediate Christ. Such a proposal seems appropriate. The content of the songs clearly afford the interpretation that they might mediate Christ. There is a correspondence between text and the one who may be revealed.

With the labyrinth this correspondence clearly becomes more problematic. The Cretan labyrinth is a pre-Christian symbol. Among contemporary Christian groups labyrinths such as this are being re-appropriated as part of a widespread turn to practices and rituals. Unlike the case study of the hymns, the labyrinth, as symbol and text, cannot be read as corresponding to Christian revelation. This does not however preclude the possibility that in its use it might not provide the occasion for epiphany. The labyrinth is mediated through the social relations and practices of those who use it. In other words, it is mediated by the pre-knowledge or theological capital that are brought to it. Theological capital, to adapt Bourdieu, acknowledges that those Christians and non-Christians who walk the labyrinth bring to the practice particular understandings and ways of being. Theological capital allows individuals to re-position rather than be positioned by what might be transmitted through mediation.

Capital and the mediation of social relationships suggest that texts must be read in relation to their use. Texts may afford, or indeed not fund, particular readings. Yet the mediation of texts must be located in particular ways of using and understanding. A good example of this might be the assumption that many contemporary charismatic songs are based on repetition and void of theological content. Such a conclusion might be justified based solely on the lyrics of some of the songs. The notion of capital, however, means that the practices related to charismatic worship must be read through the pre-knowledge brought by individuals to the song. Theological capital might, for instance, locate the ambiguous and anonymous “you” of charismatic worship in a coherent framework. Just as with the labyrinth so also with charismatic worship, attention and contemplation must be linked to the ways that individuals and groups

embody and indwell practices and symbols.

Identification, Transformation, and Habitus

Identification refers to the way that individuals construct identity in relation to representation and discourse. These identifications are internalised in structuring structures that can be observed as people engage in sacred practice. Attention and contemplation are a participation in the life of God mediated in discourse. Participation is not just affective. Epiphany leads to intimacy and intimacy to transformation.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians transformation is linked to the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul's assertions concerning the freedom of the Spirit form part of a wider struggle over authority and leadership. At its heart this is a struggle for the content and meaning of the Gospel, and it turns on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, says Gordon Fee, is "presuppositional" to the faith of the early church. As is often the case with what is presupposed, he says, these areas often remain theologically unexamined.²³ This means that in Paul's writing this experience of the Spirit often underlies or is utilised in the context of quite separate debates. Yet it remains true that "in the case of the Spirit we are dealing with the essential matter of early Christian experience. Here was how the early church came to appropriate the salvation that Christ had brought" (2). Douglas Campbell also identifies pneumatology as the effective heart of Pauline theology. The work of the Spirit, he says, is linked to "a radical ontological transformation of the person; something only a creator can effect (anticipating this for creation as a whole)."²⁴ Second Corinthians 3:17–18 and 4:5–6 should be located within this wider social and theological matrix. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17–18).

This verse brings together a complex discussion from the preceding section of the letter concerning the relationship between Old Covenant and Gospel. Paul's argument relates to the glory of God reflected in Moses' shining face and the fear of the Jews who insisted that Moses should cover his face with a veil. The ministry of the Spirit, says Paul, is also characterised by glory, but this is the glory of the Lord, and believers may gaze upon this glory "unveiled." Sinai was a scene of glory, but this is surpassed by the Spirit; there is no comparison between the two occasions.²⁵ This is the glory of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord is also the glory of the Gospel. "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

Glory denotes the presence of God. For Jacob Jervell the divine *doxa* is the way God exists and acts. The *doxa* of Christ therefore refers to the presence of God in Christ.²⁶ Thus the glory of the Lord speaks of the presence of God in Christ and through the work of the Spirit in the believer. Knowledge of God comes from a shining glory seen in the face of Christ, and Christ is the *ikon* of God (2 Cor 4:4). This is the freedom brought by the Spirit, for the believer may see with an unveiled face. The Spirit is the presence of God and the transforming power of God.²⁷ Paul's soteriology therefore is made effectual through the work of the Holy Spirit, but it also patterns a Trinitarian economy.

In Second Corinthians 3:8 we see a culturally expressed theology. It would be possible to describe the debates between Paul and the Corinthian church solely in terms of power and

social relationships, but this would be somewhat reductive. Talk of glory and the Spirit, of the Lord who is the Image of God, and the Gospel that shines in the light of Christ, could be seen solely as rhetoric or the symbolic exchange of the community, and yet this would appear to impose an interpretation that goes against the grain of the text. At the same time clearly these ideas are embedded in the practices and experience of the early Christians. The power of Paul's rhetoric lies in the appeal to a theological capital. This "knowing" is generated by the working of the Spirit and in practices of faith in which the glory of the Gospel is seen in the shining face of Christ. This is an embodied faith, which has a resonance in the Christian community through its traditions and liturgical practices. This is seen in the way that commentators, whilst locating the ideas in different theological micro-climates and pursuing different projects, have identified with the energy of this Pauline Trinitarian theology of glory. Thus Saint John Chrysostom can speak of the cleansing of the Spirit in baptism as the light of the glory of God, and the believer as like silver reflecting the sun. "For as soon as we are baptized, the soul beameth even more than the sun, being cleansed by the Spirit; and not only do we behold the glory of God, but from it also receive a sort of splendor."²⁸

John Calvin's commentary on this passage also reveals a resonance of this imagery for his own understanding of the faith. He writes that "the purpose of the gospel is the restoration in us of the image of God which had been cancelled by sin," and that "this restoration is progressive and goes on during our whole life, because God makes his glory shine in us little by little."²⁹

Karl Barth makes a similar use of Second Corinthians 3:18. "And therefore we ourselves are a mirror in whom the Lord sees himself and in whom he discovers his own image, so that confronting us, he takes and uses us as a mirror and we are actually changed into his image. His glory becomes our glory and his image our image."³⁰

Writing in the 1960s Philip Hughes speaks in very similar terms of this passage. He says that "to contemplate Him who is the Father's image is progressively to be transformed into that image. The effect of continuous beholding is that we are continuously being transformed into the 'same image,' that is into the likeness of Christ."³¹

What is interesting about these passages from Chrysostom, Calvin, Barth, and Hughes is the use of "we." There is an identification here with the experience of Paul and the community to whom he speaks. The work of the Spirit is part of an enduring identification. Of course this is a cultural identity, and as such cannot be abstracted from the social and relational. Yet the function of these ideas is to animate spiritual longing and ecclesial practice. Fee talks of his study of Pauline pneumatology, and an identification of his own "urgencies" with the urgencies of Saint Paul (*Empowering*, 5). Michael Ramsey forges links between a theology of glory and the liturgical practice of the church. He argues that this notion of glory is integral to the structure of the Christian faith.³² For Ramsey, and for the other commentators, this structuring is located in the practices of worship common within the Christian church. In other words, a theology of glory is located in places where the veil may be lifted, where the Spirit is active, where glory is made manifest, where the Gospel shines, and where the face of Christ is seen.

In mediation, to speak of the Spirit is to express the freedom of God to be present as Lord. In representation, the light of the Gospel shines in the face of Christ. Mediation however is transformative. It structures the *habitus* of the believer who is transformed by glory. The presence of God is imprinted through contemplation and attention. Epiphany leads to intimacy and participation to transformation.

Liquid Church

Communion with God, as Zizioulas says, is not a practice of the church; rather it is communion that constitutes the church (*Being*, 81). Mediation extends this encounter and as it does so it liquefies ecclesial life. Zizioulas imagines communion and the Eucharist in fairly defined and predetermined ecclesial ways. Barth similarly locates proclamation within the four walls of the local church. The case studies indicate the extent that ecclesial meeting, relationship, and expression are shifting in a mediated consumer culture. The circulation of representation in mediated discourses lifts encounter from the fixed context of the church service.

The church finds itself in this new context somewhere between Pandora and Saint Peter— Pandora in that much of the innovation comes from the activities of Christian communities themselves. A community like Taizé is committed to the existing life, traditions, and institutions of the churches. Vineyard is a movement that is strongly committed to growing local congregations. Yet both of these indicate the extent to which belonging and identity are extended and made more fluid through representation and discourse. Cultural expression and the circulation of products allows a belonging and sense of self that are more fluid and diverse than the local expression. We may try and close the box by insisting on communion and revelation as preaching and the Eucharist performed within an understood ecclesial setting. The challenge of mediation relates to the freedom of the Lord who is the Spirit. Like Saint Peter, the Christian community faces a challenge to think beyond its own assumptions. The life of God, epiphany, intimacy, and transformation, are mediated beyond the walls, and indeed the social relations, of the congregation. This is the Liquid Church.³³

Liquid Church is characterised by an embracing of mediation. Through representation and discourse new ecclesial identities and relations are brought into being. These relationships can be described as networks of communication. What distinguishes these networks is that they are fluid. Connections are established through the circulation of symbols and practices as mediation. What this means is that connectivity is based on the flow of discourse. In traditional patterns of church, discourse circulates within existing social patterns. In the network established by the fluid mediation, connectivity follows the circulation of representation. Similarly, identities are relocated in mediation. In traditional patterns of church, belonging structures not just the discursive flow, but it also precedes identification with aspects of representation. Mediation reverses this order. Here identification follows the flow of representation. In terms of the case studies, this is illustrated by the place of worship songs in the charismatic movement. In the early days of the renewal movement, charismatics sang worship songs as a part of belonging to the wider renewal movement. For the generation raised on the music of the Vineyard Churches and Soul Survivor, belonging has been restructured and made more fluid. Now the worship songs themselves establish belonging. You belong if you sing the songs rather than the other way round. The songs in themselves however do not constitute identity. It is epiphany, intimacy, and transformation in the glorious freedom of the Spirit mediated by the songs that constitute belonging.

The significance of mediation in contemporary culture is that the church—like Peter in Acts 10—is faced with the dilemma of having to adjust to the fluid movement of the life of God. For just as the Spirit moved in advance of Peter's framework of reference, and rested upon the gentile Cornelius and his household, the circulation of Christian practices and symbols in the representation and discourses of contemporary culture mediates encounter with God outside of

the accepted frameworks of the church. In discourse the symbols and practices of faith are in play, and through the freedom of the Spirit the life of God may also be mediated.

While some may welcome this fluid context and accept that the Spirit is active outside of particular ecclesial boundaries, there is also some hesitancy to embrace these developments. It is accepted that people may encounter God in prayer and spiritual practices outside of the church, but how can faith grow and develop beyond the relational context of the Christian community? This is a significant critique of the idea of a Liquid Church. The challenge here relates not so much to the individuals and groups who encounter God in mediated culture, but it rests with those charged with the ministry of the church itself. Like Peter, the Spirit has moved beyond their frame of reference, and they must in turn face the challenge and find ways to catch up. The current interest in contemporary ecclesiology expressed as Emerging Church in the US and Fresh Expressions of Church in the UK indicates that all is not lost in this respect.

However I feel that the focus on new forms of ecclesial life needs to be informed by the changes that are already taking place in churches. The case studies show how through mediation ecclesial life becomes more fluid, and through representation and mediation new forms of belonging and identity are already being formed. Through mediation symbols and practices are lifted from one context and relocated in another. Mediated through social relations, they suggest the fluidity of tradition. At the same time meaning is constructed through the exercise of theological capital. Capital is built up within social relations. Transmission of theological capital therefore depends on developing sites where individuals and groups may accrue capital and develop *habitus*. The challenge for the Liquid Church is how to allow the freedom of the Spirit to enable individuals to move from epiphany to intimacy and then to transformation. That Christ the mediator is mediated is cause for celebration rather than condemnation, but the spread of mediated symbols and practices in a consumer culture is no excuse for complacency. The Liquid Church must find ways to develop appropriate networks through which the mediated freedom of the Spirit may flow.

ENDNOTES

1. Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion* (London: Continuum, 2004), 72.
2. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
3. For an example of this see Mark Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 1, n 32.
4. Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 67–69.
5. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976).
6. Iris DeMent, *Lifeline* (FlariElla Records, 2004), sleeve notes.
7. Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2; see also David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2000), ix; Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 33–35.

8. Antonio Vivaldi, *Vespri per l'Assunzione di Maria Vergine*. Concerto Italiano, Rinaldi Alessandrini (Naïve Op 30383).
9. Vineyard Music, *Hungry - Live from London* (Vineyard Music BIC 02).
10. For an account of the origins of the Taizé community see J. L. G. Balado, *The Story of Taizé* (Oxford; Mowbray's, 1980).
11. Balado, *Taizé*, 40 ff.
12. Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1975), 47.
14. See Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 113.
15. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 15.
16. Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1996), 288.
17. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 172.
18. David Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 26–30.
19. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 11. See also Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 115; Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1993), 69, 226–7; and Cunningham, *These Three*, 170.
20. Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: DLT, 2000), 52.
21. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996).
22. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 54, trans. Archibald Robertson (Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers 2/4; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978), 65.
23. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 3.
24. Douglas Cambell, *Do Pauline Theology and Apocalyptic Belong Together?* (unpublished paper, 2002), 9.
25. See C. K. Barrett, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 117.
26. Jervell, *Imago Dei*, quoted in Barrett, *Commentary*, 132.

27. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 309.

28. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Second Corinthians* 7.5 (Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers 1/12; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 314.

29. John Calvin, *Commentary on II Corinthians, Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1948), 50.

30. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1958), 204.

31. Philip Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 117.

32. Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London: Longmans, Green, 1949), 83.

33. See Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996).

Dr. Pete Ward is senior lecturer in youth ministry and theological education at King's College London. He is the author of Liquid Church and Selling Worship, published by Hendrickson.