

Choosing Life or Second Life? Discipleship and Agency in a Mediated Culture

By the Revd Gary P Hall, Methodist Tutor for practical Theology at Queens Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education.

Abstract

Liberationist theologies gave rise to a re-emphasise on Christian life as being primarily historical life, and Christian spirituality as rooted in faithful and honest attention to the immediacy of historical reality. But for many people living in media-saturated, overdeveloped societies, any distinction between actual reality and a mediated pseudo-reality is blurred. Another facet of life in a media-saturated context is that of being regularly confronted with impressions of destitution, violence and ecological degradation whilst at the same time being further distanced from the realities represented through communications media and their ‘virtualizing’ tendency. This rapid change in our relation to reality has, I suggest, profound theological and missiological consequences.

The ways in which electronic media have modified life – including religious life – are complex and varied. Consumption of electronic media does not seem to have replaced religion as such, but has tended to shape religious life in its own image.

With particular reference to Slavoj Žižek’s reading of “the Real” after “9/11”, I have attempted to sketch how some of these sweeping social and cultural changes might impact on interpretation of Christian discipleship and mission. In the end, either the Christian life is vulnerable to potentially disruptive reality, or it is at risk of collapsing into a version of the pursuit of happiness mediated by and through late-capitalist culture.

The Problem with Reality

In light of certain Latin American realities of the 1970s and early 1980s, Jon Sobrino identified three prerequisites of a genuine spirituality which might maintain and foster the vitality of faith: “(1) honesty about the real, (2) fidelity to the real, and (3) a certain ‘correspondence’ by which we permit ourselves to be carried along by the ‘more’ of the real.”¹

By “the real” Sobrino is simply meaning actual, historical experience - life as it is lived, rather than the kind of alienating idea which “spiritual life” can become if detached from its historical foundation. There are times and places where historical realities demand attention: In the face of widespread poverty and oppression across Latin America, Christian life “gradually came to be seen as a practice *in the midst of the poor*,”² and a “re-discovery of the real life of the impoverished majorities.” This real life experience is not only a necessary starting point: rather, “honesty with and fidelity to reality is more than a prerequisite for spiritual experience of God. It is its very material as well. Apart from and independent of this honesty and fidelity we neither grasp revelation nor respond to it.”³

To someone embedded in a context of committed pastoral practice amongst impoverished or disenfranchised people, the meaning of “honesty with and fidelity to reality” may need little explanation. But is the same true for people who, in a media-saturated context have become accustomed to experiencing reality as simulated, recorded or “shifted”? There is a problem with Reality – a problem which simply did not exist in the 1970s when Liberation Theology was maturing. Much of humanity now lives with unprecedented access to information about life on

¹ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Towards Political Holiness* Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988, 14

² Sobrino, *Spirituality*, 3 [*his emphasis*]

³ Sobrino, *Spirituality*, 21

earth, including unprecedented awareness of critical human and ecological conditions. This information, these impressions and images, are however not experienced with the kind of immediacy Sobrino was describing. Inhabitants of a media-dominated, globalizing society are not so much living Christianity “as a practice in the midst of the poor” as living with an array of persistent impressions of the poor, of violent conflict, ecological crises and endless contradictory images and entertainments. If, as Sobrino states, we can neither grasp revelation nor respond to it apart from fidelity to reality, then the recent and rapid shifts in our relation to the real have profound theological and missiological consequences.

Context-less Life

The supposedly three-dimensional virtual world *Second Life* (www.secondlife.com/), which was born in 2003, had by early 2007 attracted an official population of more than eight and a half million residents.⁴ The way in which *Second Life* meshes with first lives becomes increasingly sophisticated (in form rather than content) as computers evolve and participants collaborate. One social commentator predicts that if, in virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, “potential sources of growth, leisure, education and commerce take off together, then the distinction between virtual and real worlds will become hazy to the point of disappearance.”⁵

The experience of virtualization is not just about participation in virtual online worlds or similar pursuits. Those of us who live in a media-saturated world have, claims Thomas de Zengotita, “been consigned to a new plane of being engendered by mediating representations of fabulous quality and inescapable ubiquity, a place where everything is addressed to us, everything is for us, and nothing is beyond us anymore.”⁶ Whether intentionally spending time in virtual worlds or not, many people have experienced a relatively rapid virtualization of everyday life which continually modifies (and arguably confuses) our sense of the world and of life itself. Although the experience of virtualization or media saturation is far from universal, the implications extend beyond the immediate worlds of those directly impacted. De Zengotita acknowledges the limitations of his own thesis, whilst highlighting its implications:

... millions of human beings are trapped in realities so restrictive, so desperate, that the possibility of applying to them what I have to say... does not arise at all. But the issue of the trend remains, for it is global. And *so does the issue of mediated reality in relation to the immiseration of those millions, not as it is lived, but as it is experienced by the rest of us*, by privileged citizens of the overdeveloped world who can choose to deal with it. Or not.⁷

The global trend towards ever greater media-saturation and virtualization changes the way in which we conceive of and participate in urgent or critical realities. That trend is symptomatic of a technological evolution and dominant social-political currents which together paved the way for a media-saturated culture and its endemic virtualization.

Is Discipleship Different in a Media Culture?

Stewart Hoover deduces that in present-day late capitalist societies “media and religion have come together in fundamental ways. They occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity. Today, it is probably better to think of them as related than to think of them as separate”.⁸ There are many people for whom this would clearly not be true, as de Zengotita implies. The point is not made explicit by Hoover, who also tends to identify “religion” as protestant Christianity in the USA. Nevertheless, his work does illustrate the complexity of thinking about religion and of living religiously in a media-saturated context. He

⁴ The meaning of *Second Life* ‘total residents’ numbers are regularly queried and disputed.

⁵ Victor Keegan, ‘Virtual Worlds and Second Lives’, *Prospect Magazine* Issue 133 (April 2007), 53

⁶ Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shape Your World* London: Bloomsbury, 2005, 11

⁷ de Zengotita, xi. [*My emphasis*]

⁸ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2006, 9

describes a new paradigm - in both media scholarship and religious scholarship – based on the discovery that religion "remains 'vital,' at the same time that its form, location, and practices of meaning-making no longer occupy the traditional spaces".⁹ From his analysis of the convergence of religion and (mostly electronic) media, Hoover notes significant trends in the personal and social practice of interviewees:

- The pervasiveness of television is not questioned, but assumed;
- e-media mesh interactively and in continuity with the rest of life;
- e-media are deemed important in as much as they deal in important symbols and powerfully present a common set of symbols, ideas and information (or "infotainment");
- they convey a "common culture," a "norm" which is both challenging to faith and alluring;
- media reception is religiously significant, but doesn't replace religion.

Hoover describes, on the basis of this research, the way in which media practice enables people to be what he calls "fluid, yet grounded" where:

the "fluidity" is in the *process*, whereby it is possible to always be on the lookout for new insights and resources. At the same time, "grounding" is important, and the resources of tradition, history, doctrine, "shared memory" and "imagined community," as well as resources from unconventional places and of unconventional types, such as those available in and through media, are important touchpoints to this "grounding".¹⁰

Evidently there are people who interpret life and make meaning with reference to a variety of cultural resources including, for Christian people, specifically Christian resources and practices. In overdeveloped cultures and contexts, people simply do not (cannot?) imagine living without electronic media, but experience the world through media images and impressions in a way not readily distinguished from immediate experience. At the same time, a range of everyday virtualizations shape our sense of the world, a process accelerated in recent decades by the rapid evolution of television culture, followed by a more rapid evolution of the internet. Virtualization is but one dimension of the endless range of effects whereby sophisticated media technologies can distance or distract us from what Sobrino describes as the real. Neil Postman, following in the tradition of Marshall McLuhan, described one of those effects in his seminal work of more than twenty years ago (that is, before the advent of domestic internet and widespread use of mobile technology), claiming that we have reached "a critical mass in that electronic media have decisively and irreversibly changed the character of our symbolic environment".¹¹ Even print media such as newspapers and magazines are designed to look like television screens and, particularly through advertising, continually deliver impressions of idealized, artificial worlds – impressions which fuel both aspiration and general dissatisfaction whilst effectively hijacking attention. Postman laments the decline of print into a "residual epistemology", with the concomitant decline in rational, linear thought. With careful focus, he argues that "a television-based epistemology pollutes public communication and its surrounding landscape, not that it pollutes everything."¹² He then goes on to describe the reception of ever more information which *has no impact on our living* and rarely provides insights which impinge directly on our lives. Under these circumstances, how can a person be honest with and faithful to the real? Even if media-consumption as an activity is restricted, the effects of mediatisation persist: Postman decries the trivialization of public information, a process which he points out is not all achieved *on* television, but rather is influenced by television becoming the *paradigm* for the conception of public information. In short, a television-based epistemology can undermine our sense of the world as a serious or as a hospitable place, whilst the medium itself

⁹ Hoover, *Media Age*, 71

¹⁰ Hoover, *Media Age*, 281

¹¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* London: Heinemann, 1986, 28

¹² Postman, *Amusing* 29

can create a sense of displacement. “The damage is especially massive to youthful viewers who depend so much on television for their clues as to how to respond to the world.”¹³ Referring to Daniel Boorstin’s description of the “pseudo-event”,¹⁴ Postman suggests that:

a more significant legacy of the telegraph and the photograph may be pseudo-*context*. A pseudo-context is a structure invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use. But the use the pseudo-context provides is not action, or problem-solving, or change. It is the only use left for information with no genuine connection to our lives. And that, of course, is to amuse. The pseudo-context is the last refuge, so to say, of a culture overwhelmed by irrelevance, incoherence, and impotence.¹⁵

We might note in passing that another use created for fragmented and irrelevant information is to win money on almost-interactive television quiz shows such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, a global flagship of late capitalist media culture. More seriously, we might ask whether some forms of church also function as a kind of “pseudo-context”, inadvertently retreating from engagement with the real to tinker with inconsequential fragments of nostalgia. Postman pessimistically concluded that the world into which we (media-engrossed society of the mid-1980s) emerged was not so much like George Orwell’s tyrannical vision of Big Brother (which ironically became the name of another flagship of late-capitalist self-consuming culture), but more like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* in which people grew to *enjoy* their oppression:

All that has happened is that the public has adjusted to incoherence and been amused into indifference. Which is why Aldous Huxley would not in the least be surprised by the story. Indeed, he prophesied its coming. He believed that it is far more likely that the Western democracies will dance and dream themselves into oblivion than march into it, single file and manacled.¹⁶

It is not immediately self-evident that the public has in fact been amused into indifference, though our collective inertia does indicate widespread disengagement from critical aspects of historical reality.¹⁷ Huxley’s intuition hovers over attempts to nurture or promote the kind of genuine Christian spirituality described by Sobrino in relation to the real. How in fact is a person to respond to mediated information about the relentless suffering of desperate and ensnared people, or to urgent concern about ecological disruption? Indeed, how to choose what to respond to at all? Sustaining daily life is effort enough; in which case, what is the effect of other people’s misery, “not as it is lived, but *as it is experienced by the rest of us*, by privileged citizens of the overdeveloped world who can choose to deal with it”? How indeed can those of us with choices about commitment, action, lifestyle and so on actually *know* something at a level which catalyses action in the world, such that we “permit ourselves to be carried along by the ‘more’ of the real”?

What we experience as reality

In a world becoming accustomed to the disappointments as well as pleasures and opportunities of virtual reality and electronically-mediated relationship, it may be no surprise that people seek “something more real” than what is experienced as the thin, fake, unsubstantial nature of much of our existence and the commodities which accessorize it. But the situation is more complex and

¹³ Postman, *Amusing*, 107

¹⁴ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961) New York: Vintage, 1992

¹⁵ Postman, *Amusing*, 77

¹⁶ Postman, *Amusing*, 113

¹⁷ This state, if true, may be either a symptom of or contrast with what Ulrich Beck has described as the ‘risk society’, where low-probability / high-consequence interventions in the natural world have led to a sense of inescapable fragility and uncertainty regarding our common future. Slavoj Žižek’s reading of the postmodern condition (as below) is influenced by Beck’s reading of the Risk Society.

nuanced than this quest for reality might imply: the more-real life people seek may have little to do with the "more of the real" that Sobrino describes. Slavoj Žižek can perhaps explain why. Philosopher, psychoanalyst, cultural critic, Žižek scrutinizes ordinary life with the theoretical tools of Jacques Lacan, blended with Hegel, Marx and uncompromising wit. Hailed by Terry Eagleton as the most formidably brilliant exponent of cultural theory to have emerged in Europe for decades, Žižek has been dubbed "the philosopher of the real", not only for his delightful vernacular style and attention to ordinary life, but primarily because he is steeped in the Lacanian system which categorizes mental activity according to three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. In contrast with common usage, the "real" in Lacan (and in Žižek) has a precise definition: that which exists prior to interpretation, prior to meaning. It is the world before language describes and thereby "knows" it. Žižek's "real" is not quite Sobrino's "real", but Žižek may provide a bridge between Sobrino's earlier context and our present postmodern one.

In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*,¹⁸ written in the aftermath of the events of September 11th, 2001, Žižek attempts to analyze the public reception of those events and the public discourse in which terms such as "war on terror", "human rights" and so on only served to obscure public perception rather than enabling people to think it creatively. What did it mean that the traumatic attacks were dreamed in endless disaster movies before the event? How did the media-disseminated options for response disregard and work against more differentiated alternatives? Žižek's essay is an extended meditation on "what Alain Badiou has identified as the key feature of the twentieth century: the 'passion for the Real',"¹⁹ which paradoxically "culminates in its apparent opposite, in a *theatrical spectacle*."²⁰ Analyzing the complex effects of the growing virtualization of life experience in an over-developed, electronically-mediated culture, Žižek points out the inadequacy of the simple conclusion that "the experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to an irresistible urge to 'return to the Real,' to regain firm ground in some 'real reality'."²¹ In the aftermath of that September 11th a more complex effect became the shared experience of many:

The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition.

In other words, the traumatic WTC explosions were not, as often implied, the intrusion of "the Real" into an illusory world, but were for most people a "fantasmatic screen apparition" which "entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic co-ordinates which determine what we experience as reality)."²² As implied in de Zengotita's preface, our reality - the world in which many of us lived, moved and had our being - included the perception of human tragedy, war, disaster and "Third World horrors" *as distant, not actually part of our social reality*, but "something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen." Our reality included *images* of other realities, enough to inoculate us against what would be the overwhelming emotional impact of those realities face-to-face. Yet they come at us with increasing realism as technology evolves, whilst being received in an epistemological framework conditioned by what Postman called the "now... this" culture. At 9/11²³ - uniquely effective as it was witnessed "live" (as we say) - most people affected by the WTC attack experienced another semblance, so traumatic and excessive as to defy integration into a

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* London and New York: Verso, 2002.

¹⁹ Žižek, *Welcome*, 5

²⁰ Žižek, *Welcome* 9

²¹ Žižek, *Welcome*, 19

²² Žižek, *Welcome*, 16

²³ This North American nomenclature had to be explained time and again in our English context, where dates are written in the order day/month, and where the emergency telephone number is 999 not 911.

familiar reality. This was more than inoculation or “infotainment,” but was experienced as a kind of nightmare which rendered the public vulnerable to reactionary interpretations of one kind or another. “The ‘terrorists’ themselves,” concludes Zizek, “did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it.*”²⁴

Zizek concludes that, rather than being cautious about mistaking fiction for reality, “*we should not mistake reality for fiction* – we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it.” If this is the case, and if theology is in this sense a “fictionalizing” of experience (and a fictionalizing which sustains the hard kernel of the real), then a vital question seems to be how theology functions as a vocabulary through which we “grasp revelation” (as Sobrino might put it) and respond to that revelation with meaningful presence and action. Apart from this will to grasp revelation and response, a kind of theological and ecclesial virtual reality functions instead as a veil or shield to protect threatened privilege or emotional vulnerability. In other words, theology may constructively fictionalize intense reality in such a way that we are carried along by “the more of the real”, or it can have the opposite effect.

What do we really, really want?

Zizek challenges the simple notion that people seek “something more real” than their everyday reality, even if that reality is experienced as thin or virtualized – and especially if they are haunted by anxiety as a result of trauma. Many inhabitants of the overdeveloped world experience extreme human suffering as something distant, rarely impinging directly – and would presumably choose to keep it that way. It is quite acceptable to seek out stimulating, adrenalin-pumping, exotic, even risky experiences which vivify but in no way threaten the co-ordinates within which life is experienced; but to seek a more real experience of hunger, pain, poverty or severe restriction would in late capitalist culture generally be considered eccentric, possibly psychotic. But isn’t this the meaning of Sobrino’s “more real”, spoken out of his 1970s/80s Latin American pastoral context? Honesty about and fidelity to the real conditions, struggles and longings of disenfranchised people *might* coincide with a yearning for a more authentic and full-bodied life - but does not necessarily. Sobrino describes a Christian spirituality which sustains a liberationist faith commitment, but his talk of “the real” and the “more” of the real is experienced differently within the virtual bubble of a media-saturated culture than it is in a context where harsh realities are less avoidable. Zizek’s discussion of the “twentieth-century passion for the Real” goes some way to identifying the problem, and the way in which relatively secure populations generally experience other people’s harsh realities as distant apparitions, whilst the “more reality” we want is generally pleasurable rather than disruptive.

The title of Zizek’s essay is an ironic line in the 1999 blockbuster film, *The Matrix*.²⁵ The film (which became a trilogy of films, much discussed) is set in the aftermath of a global war which people no longer remember, as they are living wholly in a virtual reality generated by the victorious machines, to which they are all in reality attached and drained as sources of energy for the machines’ own continuation. A small resistance group has broken away from this grand illusion, and battles against the domination of the machine. One theme therefore deals with the risks inherent in developing technologies without constraint; but the core thread is about perception, illusion, reality and the extent to which ‘experience’ can be trusted. When the film’s hero, Neo, a skilled hacker, has his suspicions confirmed that life is founded on illusion, he receives the news with palpable relief. We might usefully pause at this moment: Though the implications of the confirmation to Neo are enormous and harsh, he is nevertheless relieved and grateful. The information *makes sense* to him, whereas another person might wish their eyes had never been

²⁴ Zizek, *Welcome*, 22. Though not the first time that destructive power had been exercised for its spectacular, provocative effect, this was a turning point because globally witnessed in “real time”. But why this event rather than, say, School Number One, Beslan, September 2004?

²⁵ Writers and Directors were Andy and Larry Wachowski. *The Matrix* was released 11 June 1999 (UK). See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/>. There are blatant religious allusions throughout the film.

opened in this way. Is not this the threshold of a typical conversion experience? Considering for a moment audience reception rather than the narrative itself, the film evidently resonated with a postmodern mood. The script chimes emotionally and intuitively with a feeling that there *is* something more substantial, more real, hidden from our eyes. *The Matrix* fictionalizes an instinctive suspicion of the potential of sophisticated electronic media to manipulate a person's experience of the world. The film itself seems to have been received with a sense of relief and gratitude by a section of its audience, not unlike the response of the hero Neo when his own suspicions about the world were confirmed.²⁶ Is this kind of audience response in any way equivalent to Christian talk of religious experience?

Another character in *The Matrix* opens up the question of why indeed anyone might *choose* "more reality". Cypher, a member of the resistance, knowing full well that he lives within a computer-generated illusion, chooses to betray his comrades because *he prefers the sensations* of the illusory world to the harsh barrenness of the actual landscape. Digging into a juicy steak whilst ruminating that his experience of the steak is only simulation, he confesses to the agent of The Machine that after years of resistance he has discovered that "ignorance is bliss." Meanwhile the faithful and insightful remnant press on in their war for liberation which means, in essence, not being manipulated and controlled, not being enslaved to The Machine. It is too easy to read Cypher as representative of those people who literally lose (and re-create) themselves through an internet-based *Second Life*. He surely stands for any of us who knowingly inhabit and help sustain a fabricated existence which masks less hospitable realities, perhaps at the expense of other people and of the very fabric of existence. When the symbolic co-ordinates of one's regular reality are disrupted, one option is simply to collude with what causes least distress or disruption, to choose the self-consistent illusion which, though known to be a simulated experience, is nevertheless more pleasurable than the alternative "real reality."

The Pursuit of (Virtual) Happiness

A negative question: In the fictional circumstances of *The Matrix*, why would a person *not* choose to collude with the illusion and its simulated happy state? Why not choose the virtual world over the harsh Desert of the Real? Cypher may be plugged in, but it doesn't hurt and "ignorance is bliss." The trouble is, Cypher is not ignorant. He knows about the "real" desert. He is - and will remain - continually aware of that reality. And awareness changes things. The fictional Cypher manages to suspend his knowing because his impulse for pleasure is stronger than the insistence of actual (as opposed to virtual) reality. There is, I suggest, an equivalent tension within which we work out our spirituality and mission in a twenty-first century overdeveloped world. For a self-aware subject who senses that *something is wrong* with the impression of the world portrayed through dominant media (for example), the prospect of casting solemnity to the wind in favour of a pleasurable collusion may indeed be appealing – but nevertheless seems unreal and prone to frustration *in as much as* it requires the suppression of a deeper impulse which calls for some resolution. Any of a range of psychotherapeutic or theological interventions might achieve the subject's adjustment to the world, but the price may be betrayal: "In psychoanalysis, the betrayal of desire has a precise name: happiness," writes Žižek. He goes on to describe such happiness as "a *pagan* concept: for pagans, the goal of life is to be happy (the idea of living 'happily ever after' is a Christianized version of paganism)." He concludes that happiness "belongs to the pleasure principle," and is undermined by the insistence of something beyond the pleasure principle:

²⁶ I came across an example of this kind of response in a review of de Zengotita's book: '*Having just finished reading this explosive book, I am about to do something I have never done with any other - immediately start it again. After what is at heart a pessimistic and rather fatalistic vision of our present and future, I feel strangely uplifted and inspired. Maybe it is the feeling that a crucial truth is being unmasked.* (dubleducer from Walthamstow, posted Sept 22, 2005. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Mediated-Media-Shape-Your-World> Accessed 07/02/08.

In a strict Lacanian sense of the term, we should thus posit that “happiness” relies on the subject’s inability or unreadiness fully to confront the consequences of its desire: the price of happiness is that the subject remains stuck in the inconsistency of its desire. In our daily lives, we (pretend to) desire things which we do not really desire, so that, ultimately, the worst thing that can happen is for us to get what we “officially” desire. Happiness is thus inherently hypocritical: it is the happiness of dreaming about things we do not really want.²⁷

On this basis, Zizek notes, conservatives are “justified in legitimizing their opposition to radical knowledge in terms of happiness: knowledge ultimately makes us unhappy.” The Philosopher of Ecclesiastes would doubtless agree. The missiological question is whether a Christian community (implicitly, even unintentionally) discourages the pursuit of a full-bodied “grasping of revelation” - thereby curtailing full-bodied response - in favour of a pursuit of the kind of virtual happiness promoted by and through late-capitalist culture. That which Zizek describes in Lacanian terms as “desire” might be interpreted in a Christian framework as “calling” or as the impulse to conversion. The question then is whether ecclesial communities can permit our being “carried along by the ‘more’ of the real.”

A Christian community (church) or faith-talk (theology) can under certain conditions mimic or mirror a culturally-legitimized notion of happiness which disallows that honesty with and fidelity to a reality experienced most directly “in the midst of the poor”. Where this happens, Christianity is functioning no differently from other instruments of the virtualizing culture of late capitalism. By contrast, an adequate multi-dimensional theological vocabulary can deal with what Zizek calls the necessary “fictionalizing” of experience such that even harsh or threatening realities can be borne without continuing to “insist,” fictionalized in such a way that the “hard kernel of the real” can be sustained in collective mind and body rather than held at bay and constantly feared. In this possibility lies a constructive mission which contrasts sharply with the kind of reactionary posturing or violent nihilism evident in the events of 11th September 2001 and its aftermath or, on the other hand, the lingering depression and apathy described almost thirty years ago by J B Metz:

Everyone can see the signs of this looming social apocalypse: the atomic threat, the arms race madness, the destruction of the environment, terrorism, the global struggle of exploitation, or North-South conflict with its attendant danger of a worldwide social war. And yet the catastrophe remains mostly an awareness “in the mind”, not in the heart. It generates depression but not grief, apathy but not resistance. People seem to be becoming more and more the voyeurs of their own downfall.²⁸

The burden of Metz’s *The Emergent Church* is that a “cultural Christianity” which does not adequately distinguish itself from what he describes as bourgeois religion generates an identity crisis by failing to realize and manifest its difference from that bourgeois religion. And, he claims (in West Germany in the late 1970s) “the messianic religion of the Bible has been largely changed into bourgeois religion,” the function of which is to safeguard its adherents’ happiness.

Disrupting the “merely-believed-in” faith

Despite the radically changed social, political, technological, globalized context, it would be interesting to test out a suspicion that the current stream of literature on Emerging Church has by and large ignored the *cri de coeur* addressed by Metz back in 1979 to the West German church, asking whether Christianity in West Germany was ultimately *only* a bourgeois religion – a religion (he acknowledges) which may have great value for society, but which is essentially devoid of any messianic future. By which he meant that, when the church talks about the reign of God and of God’s future, “it is speaking primarily in this case to people *who already possess a future*. They

²⁷ Zizek, *Welcome*, 59-60

²⁸ Johann Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a PostBourgeois World* London: SCM, 1981, 9

bring their own future, as it were, into the church with them – the powerful and unshakably optimistic to have it religiously endorsed and uplifted, the fearful to have it protected and confirmed by religion.”²⁹ Metz describes an ecclesial world which, in resisting any disruption of its symbolic co-ordinates, manages also to resist “the messianic future proper to Christian faith” which never merely confirms or reinforces a preconceived bourgeois future but necessarily *disrupts* it:

The meaning of love cuts across the meaning of having. “Those who possess their life will lose it, and those who despise it will win it.” This form of disruption, which breaks in from above to shatter the self-complacency of our present time, has a more familiar biblical name: “conversion,” change of heart, *metanoia*. The direction of this turning, the path it takes, is also marked out in advance for Christians. Its name is *discipleship*.³⁰

The kind of disruption described by Metz is quite unlike the traumatic disruption which was our distant experience of the WTC attack - though both could have the effect of shattering complacency. The violence we vicariously witnessed shattered the symbolic co-ordinates of an ordinarily mediated life in a way which, for many people, simply could not be integrated into an interpretation of the world but which continues to linger as a phantasm which renders the once-familiar world a more frightening and unstable reality. One reasonable response to such an experience might be to seek out a “virtual world” which can be more closely controlled, which is reassuringly predictable and where threats cause no real harm. That virtual world may be electronically mediated. Or it may be a train set. Or it may be a church.

On the other hand, the disruption of divine love, the “resurrection experience,” the “call to conversion” experienced as grace, reconfigures the coordinates by which all of life is interpreted – not in a threatening way (though there may be some trepidation) but in an integrating and enervating way. The experience will not be one of superficial “happiness” though it may involve a profound sense of *relief* and a good deal of laughter and dancing. If church can adequately describe or enact *this* kind of experience of God, then Church will be the context where such liberating “disruption” is known to be welcomed and sustained. Metz describes one way in which a bourgeois form of Christianity is not only impotent in face of critical realities, but actually works against the flourishing of vital, liberationist faith, by simply adopting the mores and attitudes of a prevailing culture whose portrayal of undisrupted happiness may be altogether different:

the absence of this change of heart is being further concealed under the appearances of a merely *believed-in faith*. Are we Christians in this country really changing our hearts, or do we just *believe in* a change of hearts and remain under the cloak of this belief in conversion, basically unchanged? Are we living as disciples, or do we just *believe in* discipleship, continue on our old ways, the same unchanging ways? Do we show real love, or do we just *believe in* love and under the cloak of belief in love remain the same egoists and conformists we have always been? Do we share the sufferings of others, or do we just *believe in* this sharing, remaining under the cloak of a belief in “sympathy” as apathetic as ever?

As “bourgeois theology” conceals the absence of *metanoia* beneath the appearance of a merely-believed-in faith, so mediated “news” and (pseudo)events can effectively conceal the absence of actual engagement with historical realities. This process is not merely achieved on television or online, but media-saturation determines the paradigm for engagement with – or disengagement from - the real. The risk for Christianity in a mediatized society is that theology and mission follow the same trend, and deal with potentially disruptive experiences (such as an irruption of grace or a call to discipleship or the presence of the poor) in a way modelled on public reaction to the very different kind of disruption which was “9/11”. In other words, efforts at self-protection and building against anxiety actually undermine the possibility of honesty with and fidelity to reality

²⁹ Metz, *Emergent*, 1

³⁰ Metz, *Emergent*, 3

which, according to Sobrino, is the very material of spiritual experience of God, and essential if we are to recognize and respond to revelation.

Metz notes how in a bourgeois theological discussion of the last things, “the messianic future has long since been relieved of all apocalyptic tensions: no dangers, no contradictions, and no downfalls remain.” Apocalyptic theologies are regularly evoked in a perverse reaction to anxiety and to compensate for uncertainty about the future, so we tread carefully. But as Metz continues, he seems to offer a clue as to why a spirituality which echoes the secular pursuit of happiness never quite satisfies:

.... hope within bourgeois religion repeatedly conceals from itself its own messianic weakness, the fact, namely, that it is still awaiting something.... Hope becomes a power without expectation, and hope without expectation is, in its essence, hope without joy. This, I think, is the root of the joylessness of so much of what passes for joy in bourgeois Christianity.³¹

Metz follows in the footsteps of Kierkegaard who railed against a civic Christianity indistinct from the “natural” existence of the bourgeois at the price of “the abolition of Christianity itself, the Christianity of discipleship.” If Huxley’s intuition was accurate, the way of Jesus Christ won’t be abolished, but will simply be ignored in favour of the pursuit of a virtual happiness. Or it will simply be re-packaged as the same.

³¹ Metz, *Emergent*, 4