The surfeit of dreams

Prayer and imagination in a multimedia culture

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CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IS ONE VOICE among many in a plethora of interactions and ideologies which offer figurations for our hopes and fears, desires and loathings – one rival among a surfeit of dreams. Interpreted by some to be repressive and inauthentic, Christian spirituality still offers resources for the making of spiritual dreams and fantasies. In exploring some material from contemporary television and music, this article suggests that the sheer overload of images and stimulation from the media stifles spirituality and personal encounter. At the same time I want to acknowledge that the media are often highly reflective in self-understanding and presentation. These ways of re-imagining the spiritual pose a challenge to more conventional Christian understanding. But they do, perhaps, present in themselves a new dream for the Church to dream, new possibilities for the Christian community to re-imagine itself in the service of a diverse and shifting world.

Subversive televisual icons

Let me give just a couple of examples around which to situate these reflections on our multimedia culture. The BBC has created some unlikely and ironical icons of contemporary British social culture: the members of *The Royle family*. The Royles inhabit a typical 'council house' in an unspecified northern town. They are Jim, an obese and foul-mouthed working-class man; Barbara, his chain-smoking wife, kind but largely disengaged, who works part-time in a bakery; Denise, their idle and self-centred daughter, in her twenties and also a chain-smoker; her fiancé Dave, a genial but dozy manual worker who runs a disco in his spare time; and Anthony, their put-upon teenage son (he makes the tea, answers the phone and opens the door to visitors – it's almost always Dave).

This family sit and gawp at the television which is always on. Slumped in the same armchair night after night, Jim controls the remote

and insults in turn members of the family and the people featured on TV. Occasionally Barbara or Denise will start up a conversation about one of the people in the neighbourhood, or compliment one another's appearance. But the conversations rarely last long. Soon they run into the sand of images and sounds from the screen and, once again, all the family are glued to the set. Much of the small amount of conversation centres on what comes across from the screen. They answer questions in the quiz shows, criticize the programming and make comments about what the stars are wearing. Sometimes they will sing along with a jingle or join in together in reminiscing about an advertising slogan or a memorable TV scene or character. Their culture is almost entirely televisual. Their heroes, mythologies, music, memories, enthusiasms – these are drawn from programmes they habitually absorb.

There are semblances of deeper values. In early programmes Denise dreams of how she will care for Dave and their children when they are married and in a house of their own: fantasies of decoration and cooking, domestic efficiency and genuine care (though once they are married her culinary skills do not progress beyond cheese on toast). She spends her pregnancy in indolence – partly in exploitation of her family and partly in terror at the prospect of motherhood. While the men in the family resent the emotional demands of Denise's pregnancy, they do join with Barbara in giving support and affection at crucial times. These practicalities of mutual support within the family show that love and fidelity within the relationships which make up the Royle family are sincere values, even though such love is often reluctant and rarely without self-interest. In all the physical closeness and habitual contact there is a crippling lack of engagement.

For example, Barbara longs to be attended to by Jim, to be engaged in conversation, to be heard, cherished, respected as a person in her own right by her daughter and son. She is loyal to her demanding mother, the desperately lonely and soap-obsessed 'Nana', whom Jim affects to detest. Their dreary neighbours value Barbara's kindliness, but ultimately she is a person who is taken for granted, unable to assert herself beyond complaint. When his wife becomes distraught with her homely boredom and in an acute moment of angst walks out of the house, Jim gets out of his chair and, exceptionally, makes a pot of tea. But this is a one-off act of heroism on his part, a gesture of love which defies transformation, depicting the utter emotional poverty of masculinity and the chasm that lies between men and women in the family.

The Royles are unusual in that their common life shows a rare level of interaction. For instance, they all watch the one TV set in the same

living-room; they sometimes eat a meal together at the same table, and seem to be without a mobile phone, computers, radios, TVs in the bedrooms; nor are they obsessed with the National Lottery twice weekly. Nevertheless, they are spectacularly representative of a people fixated on the powerful images of the media in a commercial culture. Their existence is governed by its values and promises: material satisfaction, mass stimulation, synthetic interaction, to the detriment of personal and interpersonal life. The spiritual, the imaginative, the risks and pleasures of a deeper engagement, all these are neutered by the constant pull of the screen's alluring tide. It is not that they are without virtue or the capacity for sincere love and affection and moral sense. But all these impulses towards community, relationship and the construction and sustaining of meaning are shaped by the dominant values of a market-driven popular culture in which they immerse themselves night after night.

It is the Royle Family rather than the Royal Family who represent in grotesque caricature what many people in Britain experience in the everyday multimedia age. They are swamped with electronic images and media stimuli which feed them dreams and fantasies: consumer goods, the winning of vast fortunes, impossible physiques, sexual excitement, all in abundance – a plethora of communications demanding interpretation and response, mediated dreams upon which to fantasize, but which dull the spirit and foreclose on the spontaneous imagination so that little is generated from within or from among themselves. They do not think beyond the boundaries set for them by television, even as they partly despise what it presents. What they inhabit is a dynamic of cynicism and resentment which is pleasurable even as it is unfulfilling. As people glutted with images but with their imaginations dulled, merely consumers of dreams devised by others, all spiritual sense suspended, the Royles are an icon of what many of us already are, a warning of what many more may become: the godless products of a media age.

It is within a media-saturated culture such as that represented by the Royles that Christian spirituality must function. If the Royles are in any sense representative of beliefs and values within that culture, then this is the milieu of Christianity's dysfunction as a formative spiritual influence. The Royles are, as far as we can tell, in the majority ranks of Britain's unchurched. The cultural reality which they characterize is a culture in which popularity is the measure of success. What is true is to be assessed by the extent to which it is consumed or rejected, whether that be through market sales, opinion polls or church attendance fig-

ures. The churches continue to give much attention to the last of these. But a significant discourse about spiritual values as they are present in mainstream popular culture may be discerned in the others too – even in disputes about the meaning and value of the market itself as it operates in popular culture.

The cultural market as a gauge of social values

On the brink of the third millennium, headlines in the British tabloid newspapers blazed with reports of a row between pop stars. One fabulously successful singer is alleged to have publicly deprecated the music and performance of another. Nothing so unusual in this perhaps, except that this particular row was about prayer.

'GEORGE: "CLIFF'S NUMBER 1 HIT IS VILE" – Star in Prayer Blast' announced the front page of Britain's best-selling daily, *The Sun*, one Saturday in December 1999. Picking up on George Michael's interview with the London radio station, Capital FM, the previous morning, the paper reported that he had 'branded' the veteran pop star Sir Cliff Richard's number one hit song 'Millennium Prayer' as a 'heinous piece of music'. Michael's dismissal of Richard's song was not on musical grounds alone. This version of the Lord's Prayer, set to the tune of 'Auld Lang Syne', which had been the best-selling single in Britain for over three weeks and seemed set to remain so into the third millennium, was 'exploitative of people's religion'. In George's view the marketing strategy around 'Millennium prayer' had been to foster a 'Christian conspiracy'. By promoting among Christians the notion that sales of a record with an explicitly Christian theme would make it to Number One in the charts at Christmas and the New Year, the most obvious gauge of British pop culture (record sales) would work to promote the new millennium as an event of overwhelmingly Christian significance.

In other words, the otherwise sincere desires of Christians in Britain to witness to their faith were being manipulated for commercial gain. Sir Cliff's recording company was cynically persuading them that it was as important to have a Christian prayer as best-selling record as to have prayers said in the Millennium Dome at Greenwich and bells in the churches rung at midnight, as important a witness as their own prayers at home and the lighting of millennial candles. Such a demonstration of the power of Christianity in the cultural market would point to Christianity as a vital force in the hearts and minds of the British public: Christian witness through sales figures.

As a critic of the British-American music industry, George Michael's comments carried credibility. Michael is a singer with a long-running and successful career. Not so long ago he fought a costly landmark legal case with Sony Records to be released from what he regarded as an exploitative recording contract. This he considered a matter of artistic freedom as well as of remunerative justice. His criticisms of the commercialism of 'Millennium prayer' were similarly high-minded. 'I think there are people out there who feel it is their duty to buy this record on the eve of the Millennium. That is a really horrible reason for a No 1 record.'[1] He is reported to have gone on to commend John Lennon's song 'Imagine' (re-released in the British market that very week) as a 'worthy' Number One single for the millennial charts.

The purity of the cultural market: ideology and spirituality

In commending Lennon's 'Imagine' as a rival to 'Millennium prayer', George Michael was attempting to safeguard the role of the market in popular music as a major public gauge of social values. Such a commendation asserts that success in the charts is more than a recognition of popular musical appreciation. A Number One record is to be interpreted as an expression of the values and beliefs which characterize contemporary culture. A Number One record is the song which sings the dreams of a significant majority of the people, articulating their social and personal aspirations and loathings, their hopes and fears, ambitions, failures, desires and laments.

In Michael's view, for Lennon's 'Imagine' to displace 'Millennium prayer' at the outset of the third millennium would be to signify the values of British society as non-sectarian and post-religious, but yet spiritual and altruistic, a song sung by a heroic artist who epitomizes freedom of expression and cultural liberation. As a one-time member of The Beatles John Lennon represents the social, personal, sexual and artistic liberalization which is associated with the emergent pop culture and youth culture of the 1960s. In his post-Beatles solo work, and particularly in his exploration of Eastern mysticism and music, and in his celebrated relationship with Yoko Ono, Lennon is an icon of Western culture entering a new age – free from the Christian hegemony of centuries and its repressive eurocentric and élitist culture. 'Imagine' is sung out of a post-Vietnam, Cold War cultural context in which artistic values celebrate a shift towards personal autonomy, ideological and ethical diversity, which embraces racial tolerance, women's liberation and gay liberation as well as anti-war, and pro-ecological

awareness. For George Michael, 'Imagine' is a song celebrating freedom, inviting those who hear it to sing along with it and share its vision of a world united and without prejudice, injustice and exploitation.

> Imagine there's no heaven.
> It's easy if you try.
> No hell below us,
> Above us only sky.
> Imagine all the people
> Living for today . . .
> Imagine there's no countries.
> It isn't hard to do.
> Nothing to kill or die for,
> No religion too.
> Imagine all the people
> Living life in peace . . .
> Imagine no possessions.
> I wonder if you can.
> No need for greed or hunger,
> A brotherhood of man.
> Imagine all the people
> Sharing all the world . . .
>
> You may say I'm a dreamer
> But I'm not the only one.
> I hope some day you'll join us
> And the world will live as one.

Not dreaming, just praying

For George Michael, these words speak of dreaming as a creative act, a work of solidarity which contributes towards the building of a better world in defiance of cynicism, sheer self-interest and isolation. The lyrics play with social and personal longings as dreams of a more just and peaceable existence for all – fantasies which the Lord's Prayer set to 'Auld Lang Syne' does not inspire. Surely Michael's commendation of Lennon's song as more 'worthy' springs from a sense that Cliff Richard's 'Millennium prayer' fails to stimulate the imagination – and, in this sense, even the spirit. 'Millennium prayer' is by comparison uninspired, merely a sentimental cover version of material from the Bible set to a tune heavily associated with the past. In Michael's view, it colludes with commercial interests seemingly set on exploiting reli-

gious feelings for financial gain rather than promoting a spiritual vision which is challenging and uplifting. It represents, therefore, no more than a reassertion of values which are exclusivist, backward-looking, and disconnected from current concerns and moral issues. This is a song which fails to foster the dream of a new world and so is irrelevant to the dynamic social, sexual and personal transformations of contemporary culture which, in Michael's view, the charts and music industry in general ought to articulate and even promote.

What Michael appears to be asserting is that the Lord's Prayer is no longer, if it ever was, the form of words which appropriately sums up the present social and spiritual reality of Britain. For Christians to distort the market by swelling sales of the 'Auld Lang Syne' version is to prostitute religious allegiance to commercial gain. But – more crucially for the artist – it is to hijack the social fantasy of the pop star as cultural high priest who sing-dreams the song-dreams of a post-credal individualism of a coming millennium uncramped by the repressive restrictions and orthodoxies of denominational religion.

It would appear that the Lord's Prayer in its popular 'Millennium prayer' guise is regarded as socially destructive and antithetical to the spirit of popular culture. Some radio stations refused to play it; pundits were bemused as to why so many customers had bought it. Michael himself went so far as to denounce its explicit theology because as a competitor in the cultural market it seemed to forfeit any status as the expression of human hopes and aspirations. In being marketed as a pop song the prayer manifested its spiritual redundancy by gaining commercial success through a corrupt marketing strategy which marshalled vested religious interests rather than by moving hearts and minds by its artistry and spiritual power. Even though the song has proved to be highly popular, the rumpus it has generated represents, surely, a profound challenge to those who are considerate and reflective about Christian spirituality. Does not Michael's assertion that the song's sales success was a triumph in marketing rather than an expression of 'real' Christian belief and practice propose an artistic vision of authentic spirituality, a vision which demands a more imaginative interpretation of prayer, a vision in which the resources of the Christian spiritual tradition are opened up and extended beyond their present constituency?

Re-imagining prayer in the vision of the artist

This controversy suggests that Christian prayer, or indeed any 'religious' spiritual practice, cannot assume an unchallenged primacy in the public sphere. The role of Christian spirituality as a language for expressing the hopes and longings of individuals and communities cannot be taken for granted – however 'successful' the best-known of traditional prayers may seem to be in terms of public approval. What Michael asserts is that Lennon's dream is the lyric of promise, untroubled by the social divisiveness of religion. The Lord's Prayer is fine for Christians to say privately – among consenting adults in their churches. But it is unworthy as the bearer of popular hopes and aspirations. Christian prayer fails to offer a shared dream of the future in which all people may identify and participate and from which all may draw some stimulus and sense of inspiration.

What of Michael's own lyrics? A few examples show how much they are shot through with religious references. Songs in his album *Older*,[2] dedicated to Antonio Carlos Jobim and Anselmo Feleppa, two friends who had died prematurely, celebrate love between men in sustained spiritual language – of soul, forgiveness, Jesus, God, belief, heaven, spiritual presence. For example, in the song 'Jesus to a child', the look of kindness, beauty and grace in the lover's eyes is the look of Jesus to a child. To have experienced the mutuality of sexual love in its affection, spiritual grace and comfort is to have known the presence of the divine.

> Kindness in your eyes
> I guess you heard my cry
> You smiled at me
> Like Jesus to a child.
> I'm blessed I know.
> Heaven sent and heaven stole.
> You smiled at me like
> Jesus to a child.
>
> Well I've been loved
> So I know just what love is
> And the lover that I kissed is always at my side
> Oh the lover I still miss . . . was Jesus to a child.

In another song, 'You have been loved', which meditates on the loss of his lover, the grieving artist finds a kind of enduring spiritual strength in the experience and memory of love.

Take care my love, he said.
Don't think that God is dead.
Take care my love, he said.
You have been loved.

Whose is the voice that gives him the spiritual assurance 'you have been loved'? His own psyche? Is it a memory of what his lover said as he died? Is it the divine voice of the Comforter? Perhaps all three? Maybe the implication for Christians is that the voices are indeed one and the same, a profound affirmation from within the self, from another – from the Other. What finds expression here is the divine indwelling, incarnate in an other person. The divine which is beyond comprehension, known and experienced in the encounter of love, is articulated in lyric form as celebration and consolation. And maybe we also find here a celebration of divine reality in and through the beloved in defiance of formal religious structures which outlaw gay love as unspiritual and unfruitful. Is this not a dream of a different spirituality known and expressed in and through human love and not policed by the religious authorities?

The lyrics of *Older* interpret the experience of human love as divine encounter, and human encounter – though tragically foreshortened – as divine encounter. Michael's dream is that in these human encounters prayer is re-imagined as the dream of a strange meeting with the divine in blissful, powerful, passionate form. Just as Jacob encountered God in the dream-wrestling with the angel in Genesis, so today God is encountered in the needs, longings, desires, sorrows which find expression in the dreams of those who love and those who grieve.

Cherishing the gift of authentic spiritual expression

In 'The strangest thing' Michael sings of a peace which comes from beyond his own resources. He longs to be loved in the way that he dreams and to be held by another rather than held up to public scrutiny.

Take my hand
Lead me to some peaceful land
That I cannot find
Inside my head.

Take my dreams
Childish and weak at the seams.
Please don't analyse.
Please just be there for me.

The song articulates a spiritual need which centres on the personal and relational, which seeks release and transformation within a relationship of unconditional acceptance and understanding. The challenge for Christian spirituality in a world of diversity, reflexivity and ceaseless stimulation is to find ways of renewing and offering the resources and practices of the tradition. To do this Christians have to learn how to accept and attend to the expressed spiritual needs which are found in Michael's songs – needs which may have no doctrinal or formally religious element, and which may arise from life situations beyond the accepted ethical norms of the community. To cherish such needs, to foster them as spiritually vital and precious, may require a certain loss of control by formal church authority, and a genuine willingness to accept that the Spirit blows where it wills.

That Christian iconography and the values and practices of Christian spirituality continue to feature in popular art, films, music and literature is a sign not only of residual Christian belief within our culture, but that the Christian vision continues to inspire and articulate spiritual realities – at least for some. *The Royle family*, and George Michael's critique of 'Millennium prayer', demonstrate that the media culture is creative and reflexive, able to generate ideas and forms which criticize and challenge its own cultural dominance. It is, after all, the creative resources of TV comedy drama which has devised through the Royles a media-generated deconstruction of its own dehumanizing addictions and distractions: the media mind reflecting on its own mindlessness and stifling of the soul.

Taken as spiritual commentary, both examples remind us that churches may not be alone in their lament for the loss of soul, spirit, prayerfulness – a lament which is both eloquent and yet barely articulated among the general consumers. As an artistic creation *The Royle Family* offers an image of the spiritual wasteland of contemporary culture. Michael's challenging critique of 'Millennium prayer' insists that no glib and populist repackaging of Christian piety will recreate the wasteland as a garden. The Lord's Prayer sung to 'Auld Lang Syne' is a marketed spirituality which might appeal to people like the Royles, but which would inspire in them no dreams beyond sentimentality, no pleasure beyond the satisfaction of consuming another cultural product, and therefore no authentic prayer and no spiritual transformation. Michael's notion that 'Imagine' is any less consumerist and any more spiritually authentic than 'Millennium prayer' may be naïve. But, understood in the light of his own lyrics, his search for spiritual values in popular music begins to seem like the artist dreaming

of dreams of the spiritual which may attract and inspire within the surfeit of dreams now on offer.

Although from some perspectives unappealingly bizarre and outrageous – from others, compellingly so – artists often subvert the conventional ethics associated with Christian piety. They may also reappropriate the particular virtues, vices and vulnerabilities to be celebrated and transformed among those whose lifestyles are perceived to be outside the norms of religious toleration. In these terms, given the ever-tightening boundaries and sectarian tendencies of the churches, might not the Royles be regarded as a representation of the spiritually excluded, the spiritually illiterate and undernourished, those for whom unreconstructed Christianity offers no compassion, let alone relevance? For where are the Christian spiritualities which can foster intimacy, pleasure, respect, self-realization and self-sacrifice in among the delights and demands of personal choice, sexual freedom and seemingly endless material availability? Where is the authentic Christian witness to the divine in among the surfeit of dreams?

Something similar can be said for Michael's unconventional piety. Untouched and cast out by conventional Christian spirituality, it requires a reinterpretation of the nature of the spiritual and the divine within the Christian theological tradition. Is the artist playfully offering to the Christian community a vision of spiritual renewal for mission and discipleship? A dream, maybe, that when the churches learn how to embody the generosity and diversity of the Spirit's wanderings they will represent to the world a truly spiritual community, one which contributes to and participates in the market of dreams, but never seeks to control it.

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NOTES

1 *The Sun*, 11 December 1999, p 4.
2 Aegean Records, 1996.