

DESIRE FOR THE SPIRITUAL IN POPULAR CULTURE

By THOMAS CASEY

Introduction

POPULAR CULTURE IS THE AIR young people breathe. Polluted air but life-giving nonetheless. Popular culture is as shapeless as an amoeba and as intrusive as the tentacles of an octopus. It is the clothes young people wear, the shopping centres in which they purchase, the television they watch . . . pervading it all is the music to which they listen.¹

Young people are spiritual beings, often more generous and idealistic than their elders. Popular culture, despite all its ambiguities and dead ends, does embody a quest for a meaning which goes beyond the visible. The short-story writer Flannery O'Connor once said something to the effect that the Southern United States may not have been present to Christ, but they were certainly haunted by him. Her insight is peculiarly apt for the world of pop culture. Faced with the dizzying spectrum of this mainstream culture, we can be tempted to stay at the level of exasperation which Paul experienced after arriving in Athens (Acts 17) and witnessing this city full of idols. Or we can find our judgements more positive and nuanced as were Paul's by the end of his encounter with the Greeks at the Areopagus. Discernment invites us into this generous space. What we can discern in the pop culture of youth is a desire for the spiritual and for God which does not go far enough.

From the *smorgasbord* of pop culture, I would like to sample the most popular TV series, the top cult films of the 1990s and certain pop music, in order to show this hunger for God which has a lot to teach churchy people. Finally I will ask whether pop culture offers any pointers for the kind of church experience mainline denominations should be supplying.

In June 1997 the youth publication *Sky Magazine* brought out a special 10th anniversary issue. In an article called 'Sky's Poll of the Decade', readers voted *Friends* and *The X-Files* as the most popular TV-series,² and *Trainspotting* and *Pulp Fiction* as the most popular

films in one of their recent issues. I will look at these first and then go on to discuss popular music.

Television

David Schwimmer, who plays Ross in *Friends*, when asked why the show connected so powerfully with its audience, replied that 'it's a fantasy family at a time when family unfortunately is so dysfunctional for this generation'. The family in question comprises a close-knit and charming sextet of good-looking twentysomething white New Yorkers. There is something heavenly about this fantasy world where everything is still possible, with its thrill of discovery, the desire for and fear of commitment, and above all the caring group of friends who provide a secure environment in which to negotiate it all. It is what any teenager would look forward to and what any adult would wish they had had.

Teenagers find *Friends* so compelling because it presents an alternative adult world, where growing up does not mean becoming like the adults they see around them. Of course there are aspects of this alternative world which flee reality. Its world is too attractive and too white. 'I'd like y'all to get a black friend,' said Oprah Winfrey when the stars of this sitcom appeared on her show. Its world is too cushioned. Despite their struggling careers all the characters can afford the Manhattan rent. Monica and Rachel's spacious apartment, in which much of each episode unfolds, has all the trappings of upper middle-class comfort.

The most contagious feature of *Friends* is its sheer joy. Not just the witty quips and one-liners and the fact that everyone laughs a lot. Not only the invigorating sense of the openness and possibilities of life where nobody has made a definitive choice and all are at the exciting time which precedes such fateful decisions. Most of all this joy is tangible in the sheer fun and marvellous rapport between these characters who seem in many ways so like us: Monica, the gorgeous assistant chef and fussy homemaker who is the voice of reason but has boy trouble too; Rachel, the pretty doll who has moved from the cocoon of comfortable suburbia and has never had to worry before; Phoebe, the bohemian and New Age folk singer who is too spacey to be a babe; Joey the actor, the sweet and dim hunk; Chandler, the wisecracking office-worker who hides his emotional side under a dry wit; Ross, the palaeontologist with the hang-dog looks and neurotically funny take on life.

In comparison with this richly human and familial world, Christianity is distinctly sad and disincarnate, lacking the spontaneous joy of true community. Do any young people realize that God is the source of

all joy, that he is exploding with life and energy, like a giant star whose life is never spent? They certainly would never pick up this message from the mainline churches. It could be so different: 'If you knew the gift of God . . .' (Jn 4:10).

The joy of *Friends* is winning – and limited. Young fans of this sitcom might think that this is the summit of joy. They have never come across the extravagant descriptions of joy in the writings of the mystics, who saw that the closer we came to God the more unbearably sweet our experience of happiness could be. Who will open to them the way of the mystics? Of course this is not to suggest that life is one long peak experience (how unfortunate!). But apart from the highs of mystical experiences, there is an abiding happiness in living a life of self-giving love. Too many Christians do not experience this happiness, a fact which throws doubt on what they are committed to; too many others do not believe that joy awaits them in living for others, so they do not try out altruism.

The X-Files costars two FBI agents, Mulder and Scully, whose mission is to expose government conspiracies about alien life. As the credits to each episode begin, a blurred image of a flying saucer can be seen. The leitmotif of the series is the theme of alien abduction, which evokes New Age interests in reincarnation and near-death experiences; tales of secret genetic engineering, bizarre medical experiments, high-tech rapes; and the US government's fearful co-operation in alien designs on the human race.

The X-Files is not cynical about the supernatural. Its motto is that 'the truth is out there'. Mulder is an unusual FBI agent in that he relies on hunches, intuitions, dreams and visions as much as on conventional evidence in pursuing cases. Scully corresponds more to our expectations of a law enforcement official. She believes in objectivity and reason and always looks for a scientific explanation to paranormal occurrences. Practically every episode deals with the paranormal and generally gives a negative image of the FBI as well as of government at large as secretive and manipulative. The superiors of Mulder and Scully often constitute greater obstacles to their investigations than the aliens they are trying to apprehend.

No case is ever satisfactorily solved by the pair. Often when a case is closed, the perpetrator is either still at large or dead or turns out never to have existed in the first place. Sometimes it is possible to figure out the point of an episode. More often it is impossible to explain what exactly is going on. How can such a series be so popular? Its themes – alien life-forms, government cover-ups, etc. – are inherently interesting. That alone is not enough. What makes it especially appealing and

challenging is its mysterious quality in a culture where there is too much apparent understanding.

The openness to mystery and to the supernatural in *The X-Files* can make faith more believable. It does not because young people often perceive religion as concentrating upon the necessity of assent and allegiance to a body of truths, all the while neglecting the spiritual quest. Organized religion plays a similarly ignominious role in the lives of young people as the FBI and government do in *The X-Files*: it blocks their access to spirituality.

However, the portrayal of the paranormal and supernatural in *The X-Files* is uncritical because there is no wider objective group which evaluates it. This realm is seen from the perspective of the co-stars of the series, one of whom is predisposed to it, the other (Scully) who becomes increasingly open to the paranormal as a result of experience. Mulder and Scully, presented as reliable and trustworthy, become our interpreters for the paranormal. Anyone who differs from them becomes suspect. This applies especially to the institutions they belong to and their superiors.

In a similar way, the interest in faith and the supernatural has become privatized to the extent that young people automatically prioritize their perspective over a communal one formed through the centuries. A faith that does not incorporate the person into community easily degenerates into arbitrariness and sentimentality. For certain young people faith has lost much of its transformative power because it has become a private affair of the heart.

The X-Files also taps into a public mistrust of government and big business. This mistrust is more prevalent in the USA with its history of unsolved political crimes and large-scale cover-ups, e.g. the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Watergate, etc. But the UK and Ireland have recently witnessed their own share of major scandals – the arms to Iraq affair, Charles Haughey and the Dunnes payments tribunal, etc. Scandals like these can lead to disillusionment on the part of young people. As we approach the millennium, this disappointment is not being channelled into action for constructive social change. Instead there is a turn towards the inward and subjective. The nineties have been characterized by a lessened interest in politics and current affairs. We prefer to tune into talk shows, watch celluloid heroes or listen to pop stars.³ So the faith we are left with is truncated. Although many young people help out in community service and programmes for the underprivileged, they do not think of tackling the bigger structural issues which lead to poverty and social exclusion.

Films

Trainspotting (1996) must rank as the most popular contemporary film among youth of Britain and Ireland. Its blend of colourful anarchy and deep disaffection could not but attract a young audience. It deals with the socially excluded in working-class 1980s Edinburgh. The film is concerned with what attracts people to drugs and what motivates them. There is a tremendous energy in the film which is powered along by a Britpop soundtrack (groups such as Blur, Pulp, Primal Scream and New Order). The audience is taken on a hellish joyride through the drug world: thieving to support the habit, shooting up, the depressing reality of cold-turkey, of trying to kick the habit while still hanging around with one's old mates, etc. There is a lot of excrement, vomit, screwing and bad language in *Trainspotting*, epitomizing the grim underside of Scotland's premier cultural city.

The film conveniently divides into two sections. The first half is outrageously funny, made up of episodes introducing the characters and placing them in their world. It captures the excitement and risk of starting out on drugs. The second half is much darker – a dead baby, an overdose, AIDS, toxoplasmosis – as the characters stay longer with drugs and their lives begin to disintegrate.

The film-makers do not seek to moralize and so they show the highs as well as the lows of heroin. This is surrealistically conveyed in an early scene where the protagonist, Mark Renton, dives into the most awful toilet in Scotland in search of two suppositories and emerges into an expansive blue undersea world.

The characters are struggling with drugs, with deprivation, with bleak futures and most of all with themselves. They seek drugs and sex and thrills, not for hedonistic reasons but in order to forget. In one early scene, Tommy invites his mates for a walk in the country. Here they cannot forget – nature does not anaesthetize, it only confronts them more starkly with the futility of their own lives. They immediately vote to return to the city and Renton vows to return to drugs as soon as he can – all in the pursuit of oblivion.

In the splendid opening scene, as Mark Renton races down an Edinburgh street, pursued by store detectives, he delivers a sarcastic voiceover:

Choose a life. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a f***ing big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, . . . choose DIY and wondering who the f*** you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watch mindnumbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing junk food into your mouth. Choose

rotting away at the end of it all, . . . nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, f***ed-up brats you spawned to replace yourself.

By the end of the film, this is precisely what he is on the verge of choosing as he runs off on his mates with the cash they have made from selling a consignment of drugs in London. As he walks down a crowded street at the close of the film, clutching his bag of banknotes, there is another voiceover:

I'm cleaning up and I'm moving on, going straight and choosing life. I'm looking forward to it already. I'm going to be just like you: the job, the family, the f***ing big television, . . . game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, . . . getting by, looking ahead, the day you die.

A young person stands at the threshold of adult life. Most want to break the mould in their own lives. Like Renton at the start of the film they do not want to be swallowed up by the mores of conventional life. Is there something better? If not, can they, like Renton at the end of the film, live in society and maintain authenticity and integrity? The Socratic maxim 'know thyself' is not the concern of young people. Their keyword is 'be thyself'.

Can the Church help them to be themselves? Or will they end up with their lives focused on something less than themselves, becoming obsessed with their looks or their status or their wealth? Will their lives become like a caricature of the pop way *Trainspotting* tends to present its characters' lives, skimming the surface a lot but never going deeper?

Quentin Tarantino, the director of the critically acclaimed and commercially successful *Pulp fiction* (1994), spent five years working in a video rental shop. It shows. Not just in the myriad allusions to other movies but also in the omnipresence of the junk culture of which video stores form an integral part. For instance, two hitmen, Jules and Vincent, making their way to kill some drug dealers, chat about the French names for hamburgers and the sexual connotations of foot massage. Later Vincent is given a lesson in TV pilots by his boss's wife Mia as they sit in a fifties-theme restaurant served by waiters and waitresses who look like famous stars of cinema and music. The movie soundtrack also reinforces the sensation of being immersed in this pop-culture world. *Pulp fiction* manages to suggest that low-life culture is producing low-life people.

There is a spiritual happening of dubious quality in this film. Jules, who starts out like a murderous preacher, proclaiming words of

retribution from Ezekiel 25 before dispatching his victims with venom, undergoes what he claims is an experience of miraculous proportions. Shot at by a young man armed with a Magnum, he and his partner Vincent escape injury when all the bullets get embedded in the wall behind them. Jules ascribes this to divine intervention and decides to leave his murderous career behind.

As the film ends, Jules spares the life of a small-time thief whom he would normally blow away with relish. Once again he quotes his favourite passage from Ezekiel 25. This time he interprets it in a more merciful way and concludes by saying, 'I'm trying real hard to be the shepherd'. Is this the beginning of a genuine conversion or is it the desire for self-preservation, the realization that he might not have such a lucky escape from death again? Possibly a bit of both. Tarantino leaves the door to redemption ajar but certainly not fully open. He studiously avoids sentimentality or Hollywood happy endings.

The film flirts with commitment but is too self-conscious and sophisticated to embrace it. It would not be cool. Instead it stands back, comments, and asserts its freedom by arbitrarily withdrawing from situations or experimenting with unexpected twists: e.g., Vincent accidentally blows out the brains of a friend in a car and then drops into a friend's house for help. The friend insists that all traces of the accident must be erased before his wife comes home or else she may file for divorce. The rest of the scene is spent in a panicky and blackly humorous attempt to clean up the car, get rid of the blood, wash away brain tissue from the windscreen, etc.

Pulp fiction represents a way of overcoming social norms, not by altering them, but by refusing to buy into them, by parodying them. Is it an adequate means of expressing the human spirit? It does not have much to recommend it beyond its novelty value. To be a friend, to be a husband or wife, a father or mother, demands commitment. On the other hand adults are not good ads for commitment. Marriages break up, priests fail in their promises. And the so-called successful examples of commitment which young people see around them are cases of adults fitting into pre-existing orders, e.g. the institution of marriage, the pursuit of a career. It is not a matter of creating oneself but of adapting oneself, of fitting into an existence that is too orderly and predictable.

Can religion recover some of the creative, unpredictable and exciting dimensions of the ways of life that appeal to young people in pop culture? Could following Christ be an adventure and a love affair? Could the Spirit blow where it wills?

Pop music

There is an enormous range of pop music to which young people listen. I will be necessarily selective. Firstly, I will look briefly at MTV, which airs pop music worldwide. Then I will take the long-established and successful rock group U2, exploring how they communicate a prophetic message. I will then discuss a couple of striking examples of the attempt to blend sex and spirituality into a sizzling cocktail. After exploring the appeal of chant music I will briefly look at Oasis and the Spice Girls.

The world of young people is unstable. Their moods fluctuate rapidly. They try out different personas. Describing young people of his generation in an interview, Kurt Cobain, the brilliant and tormented leader of Nirvana who killed himself in 1994, said: 'They're sarcastic one minute, caring the next'. Nirvana's greatest hit, 'Smells like teen spirit', expresses this well: 'I found it hard, it was hard to find/Oh well, whatever, never mind'.

It is not surprising, then, that the narrative of MTV, the music channel, reflects this fragmentation at a musical and visual level: it deliberately includes annoying features such as grainy footage, distorted images and incidental acoustic racket. Indeed such features have now become an established trademark of youth-style programmes on mainstream TV.

Andrew Goodwin has pointed out that there are in fact two MTVs: 'One MTV discourse is the nihilistic, pastiche-making, essentially pointless playfulness that is invoked in postmodernist accounts of MTV. The other is responsible, socially conscious, satire and parody based, vaguely liberal.'⁴

Does MTV adopt an anti-establishment stance in order to gain young viewers for advertisers? I doubt if its motives could be so cynical, though I am sure that those who run MTV are glad that youth-oriented companies do choose to invest substantially in advertising on their channel.⁵ But what is worth stressing is that although MTV gives a lot of airtime to junk programmes with demeaning images of human sexuality, it is also consonant with the justice-component of authentic Christian faith in promoting human rights, animals, the environment, anti-war issues and so on.

Last February U2 gave a press conference in a K-Mart store in New York to launch their new album *Pop*. In response to a question from a French journalist, Bono said, 'We still have the same ideals, we've just learnt to look like we don't'. The early U2 was often regarded as

spiritual, if over-earnest. The current U2 has been attacked for jettisoning this youthful zeal in favour of a cynical display of ego and self-aggrandisement.

The truth seems to be that U2 has realized the message cannot be preached directly or transparently today. You cannot tell people about spirituality as a teacher might give a student the solution to Euclid's theorem. The pupil can take the solution offered by the teacher and usefully apply it to other mathematical problems. Not so in the realm of spirituality. In spiritual matters people need to go through the tortuous process of finding a solution for themselves. They cannot live by the solution offered by somebody external such as the Church. If they try to do that, they end up with unhelpful clichés.

The question then is: how can you get people to choose what is good today? U2's current world tour provides some clues about how they are approaching this question. The tour kicked off in Las Vegas, a city which is a parody of greed and consumerism. The stage set they use for each concert includes a seven-storey yellow arch, suspiciously like the McDonald's logo, an enormous inflatable lemon and a massive television screen that rains pop art from artists such as Roy Liechtenstein and Andy Warhol.

This ironic celebration of pop culture is the first step they use in motivating people to choose the good. In order to choose the good, people must first see the emptiness of the alternatives on offer. This involves exposing the dominant pop culture to a process of critical questioning. There is no point simply telling people that consumerism is ultimately empty. Instead, U2 dramatize this emptiness through their stage sets, costumes and most of all through their music. At the same time they are not watering down the difficulty of finding faith as the twentieth century and current millennium end in uncertainty. In the song, 'If God will send his angels' from *Pop*, Bono sings: 'God has got his phone off the hook, babe, would he even pick up if he could?' In the song 'Wake up dead man', Bono calls on God to do something. Frustrated, he sings: 'I'm alone in this world/and a f***ed up world it is too'.

The disadvantage in this approach is that U2's audience may fail to understand the hints and intuitions they disseminate, especially when these take an ironic form. If they say one thing yet mean another, their audience may get it wrong. Jesus ran a similar risk in telling stories and parables. Indeed according to the testimony of the gospels, he was frequently misunderstood, even by those closest to him. And yet, despite this disadvantage, such an oblique approach is necessary in trying to communicate spiritual values.

One of the most striking features of pop music today is the attempt by certain artists to bring sex and religion together. They realize that these two forces have been radically separated. Interestingly, the most vociferous advocates are generally those who have been given a disembodied or repressive faith as children. To redress the imbalance, they try too zealously to bridge the chasm between flesh and spirit. Although their way of seeking a reconciliation between spirituality and sexuality is often unhelpful, they are prophetic in alerting us to the need for such a reconciliation.

Madonna and 'The Artist formerly known as Prince' are two well-known examples. Both have been phenomenally successful. Madonna grew up in an Italian-Catholic family in Michigan and was educated by nuns. Her song 'Like a prayer' portrays orgasm as religious ecstasy. The video of the song culminates in a shot of Madonna making love to a moving statue of a saint in a church filled with burning crosses. The Artist formerly known as Prince has sold over one hundred million records to date. He was raised in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Many of his songs are heavily erotic and view sex as salvific. The father of this trend in pop music was Marvin Gaye, son of a Pentecostal preacher, who tried to overcome the sexual repression of his childhood by fusing the Playboy culture with the culture of preachers in songs such as 'Let's get it on' (1973) and 'Sexual healing' (1982). Marvin Gaye was shot dead by his father in 1984.

Although New Age music appeals more to adults, pop music with explicit spiritual overtones has made surprising inroads with young audiences. The best example is the Romanian composer Michael Cretu whose 'Enigma' album of 1991, *MCMXAa.D.*, sold over twelve million copies. It mixed Gregorian chant, world music and dance rhythms and its success was undoubtedly helped by a distinctively sexy sound. Another phenomenal success was an old recording of Gregorian chant by the Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos, released in 1993. Gregorian chant exerts a fascination upon the contemporary ear. It is connected with the images we have of monks as inhabiting a more perfect world, close to the earth and to the heavens. It is the promise of a holiness which may invade us by listening to their pure tones. It is the poverty of a music without harmony, instruments or percussion which starkly contrasts with our commercially driven songs. It is the peaceful sound which guarantees to transport us to a realm where time is no longer pressure but relaxation. Listening to chants promises transfiguration but only delivers it in an ephemeral and partial way. Its limit is that it draws us into a virtual liturgy. We enjoy it but it makes no

moral demands upon our life or character. The new album of Oasis, *Be here now*, released in the UK on 21 August, sold just under a million copies within its first week on sale. This group, often compared to the fab four of the Beatles, dominate the music scene along with the 'feisty five', the sexy and sassy Spice Girls whose vampy hit 'Wannabe' heralded their brazen conquest of the pop music world and whose every appearance, like that of Liam and Noel Gallagher, continues to grab tabloid headlines.

The appeal of Oasis is due to the great song-writing talent of Noel Gallagher and the arrogant relish with which his brother Liam powers the songs along. The lyrics are made up of cheeky, catchy phrases. The music itself is unashamedly confident and aggressively sentimental. It has a vast emotional sound that grows on you and stays inside long after you have listened to it. In the long run its unchanging familiarity may turn people off, but for the moment Oasis can do no wrong.

The music and attitude of Oasis encourage a pride in who you are and a trust in what you can achieve. The message is not that you need to become someone else in order to achieve something but that there are wonderful possibilities in who and where you are already. The title of their new album hints at this: 'Be here now' is the brilliant answer John Lennon once gave when asked whether pop music had any special message to convey. As the music of Oasis enters inside you with all its winning youth and energy, being where you are now suddenly seems more replete with potential, and a better future no longer seems out of reach.

Our hopes are big. Words cannot express them. Music is deeper and richer. It puts you directly in touch with something language cannot define. It invites you into the mystery of who you are, a mystery which lies deeper than saying that you are English or male or 23 or that you like sports. Music also takes you beyond the individuality of 'I' to the commonality of 'we' and the elusive spirit which binds us together and yet adds up to much more than the sum total of who we are.

Few Christians have crossed the threshold of hope. They are too enslaved by fears of themselves, of others and what they might think, of social norms. The music of Oasis gives hope to a lot of young people. It reaches down deep. Not to the still point where Jesus is fully Lord, but to somewhere in its orbit. It would be marvellous if the Church could explore that mysterious world of depth along with young people. Both parties could benefit enormously.

If you are surfing the internet you can download tips and hints from the various Spice Girls. Emma (Baby Spice) will tell you: 'Love

yourself the way you are, don't change for anybody . . . just be who you wannabe!' Geri (Ginger Spice) suggests: 'Follow your instinct it's never wrong'. Mel C. (Sporty Spice) speaks in a similar vein: 'Do exactly what you wanna do and don't let anyone tell you otherwise'.

Now that traditional sources of moral guidelines have been discredited, youth are inclined to look elsewhere. For young people whose family roots are weak, the power of the Spice Girls' rhetoric must be strong. For those blessed with happier family circumstances, this advice from the new pop icons has less effect. But whatever its concrete influence on young people, this new moral discourse is proposing a new way of regarding good and evil. It is not a matter of reversing traditional values. Neither is it a question of certain fine adjustments. It amounts to a claim to redefine the ways in which we talk about good and evil. For certain church people, the famous slogan of the Spice Girls, 'Girl power', may amount to treading a blurred line between feminism and porn. A recent hit by Meredith Brooks may illustrate what is really at issue. Her single 'Bitch' was played all over the airwaves during the summer. Explaining why she chose a song with this title, Meredith said, 'I wanted to reclaim that word, make it powerful again. I've been called a bitch loads of times before in my life, so I think it's pretty good to be able to use the word in a positive sense.'

Female singers want to redefine their image beyond the constrictive stereotypes. The Spice Girls are shrewd enough not to discard sexiness and femininity. It would not be a wise marketing move. People like to cling to a certain amount of illusion. But side by side with the raunchiness is the desire to be strong women. Again there is a message here for Christians who have lived too easily with the reduction of women to a second-class role and to Catholics who have yet to discover the 'Girl Power' of Mary's famous Magnificat: 'God has thrown down the rulers from their thrones and raised up the lowly' (Lk 1:52).

Pop-culture church

Were a church to try to appeal to young people immersed in pop culture, what would it look like? This is a difficult question to answer. I will offer a few pointers, not a comprehensive blueprint. In doing so, I do not want to suggest that a church should *only* try to attract young people. While experimenting with a plurality of approaches, it obviously needs to cherish the cumulative wisdom of tradition.

Having made these pre-emptive remarks, let me offer some reflections on a type of church that might speak to pop culture. First of all, on

the level of architecture, there would need to be significant changes. We might do well to get rid of external features such as crosses and spires and internal elements like the hard pews and old-fashioned seating arrangements. In fact, it might be better if the church did not look like one at all and if its logo were as discreet and low-key as the symbol of the fish used by early Christians. It might be best of all if a church resembled a shopping centre or mall with various sections that could be used for different purposes – worship, workshops and relaxation. Psychological barriers can be reduced through an architecture that is not laden with burdening overtones. Such visual restructuring could help churches to inhabit the realm of the secular with more success than old-fashioned churches do.

Cosmetic changes are insufficient. More important is the capacity to create new community structures which are civic as well as religious. This could be approached by offering a whole menu for different palates and tastes. By doing so, the church becomes a place where people feel at home and find friends, and so it transcends the demarcation lines between the sacred and secular. It can be integrated into the fabric of people's daily lives. It would not only be a matter of the church offering different kinds of liturgies: traditional, contemporary, meditative, charismatic. More than that, what is needed is a whole range of facilities based in and around the church as building and as community. For instance, a café for socializing, a rehearsal space where people could train for plays or mime or dancing, a giant television screen where soccer fans could watch their favourite teams together at the end of church services. A whole series of small groups with common interests could be set up: beyond obvious activities like bible reading, they could also watch their favourite soaps or films together and discuss them afterwards.

There is a danger that churches oriented towards pop culture could lose their distinctiveness and identity. But if they have clarity about their purpose and vision, they will strive to give people not only what they want but also what they did not know they were seeking. In a way such churches of popular culture can be more radical than traditional churches. The latter are tempted to live out of age-old traditions whose very familiarity and repetitiveness can insulate them against the danger of which these traditions are the memory. People today want the danger and risk which is indispensable in Christian life, that of taking responsibility for their own spiritual lives. Habit and custom are not enough to sustain faith in our time.

Conclusion

I have looked at ten places in which pop culture is life-giving and intersects with Christian spirituality: the joy of *Friends*, the openness to the supernatural in *The X-Files*, the desire to be yourself in *Trainspotting*, the creativity and unpredictability of *Pulp fiction*, the interest in justice-related issues on MTV, the effort in U2 to point people towards the good, the desire to reconcile sexuality and spirituality, the spiritual space chant music offers, the gift of hope in Oasis and the redefinition of women in the Spice Girls. Finally I looked at how the churches might speak to pop culture more effectively.

There are shortcomings in pop culture. I have chosen not to dwell on them. Instead I have tried to see that even the limits of pop culture are possibilities that can bring young people along the road to depth. Rather than fighting the images and values pop culture presents, we might do better to enlarge and deepen them as Paul did at the Areopagus: 'As I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, "To an unknown God". What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you' (Acts 17:23).

NOTES

¹ A collection of articles in Gary Davy (ed), *Readings in popular culture: trivial pursuits* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), included everything from 'page 3' girls to organized crime.

² *Friends* came first by a long way. Jennifer Aniston, the mega-babe of the series, made it to the cover of *Sky Magazine's* August edition and inside there was an episode-by-episode guide to the third series of the sitcom.

³ See David Herman, 'The culture of narcissism' on the glut of self-help books, confessional talk shows and rising tide of interest in individual heroes, with a corresponding turn away from social and political issues in *New Statesman* (May 1997), special edition, pp 124–128. *Time* magazine (9 June 1997) also notes in relation to US youth: 'Voter participation is dropping in all age groups but in none so steeply as among 18-to-24-year-olds, less than a third of whom voted in last year's presidential election. A generation ago, in 1972, 42% of this group went to the polls. But those were the days when young people still believed they could change the world' (p 62).

⁴ Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the distraction factory: music, television and popular culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p 150.

⁵ 'As Levi's European marketing director put it, "MTV Europe represents a youth lifestyle and Levi-Strauss produces the clothing for that lifestyle".' Simon Frith, 'Youth/Music/Television' (p 75) in Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Sound and vision: the music video reader* (London and New York, 1993), pp 67–83.

. . . God as like a pizza

ISOMETIMES THINK OF GOD as like a pizza. You can always choose how you want a pizza – pan or thin-crispy with different toppings. You can have as much as you want and still feel free to come back later. Pizzas are always readily available, i.e., once eaten you can come back for more. They come in packages, opened when ready. Often they come indirectly – you have to rely on a delivery boy. Most important: they draw people together. I always associate pizzas with parties and people being happy and having fun.

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