

**Would Wesley Have Gone to the Movies?:  
Towards a Dynamic Pneumatology ‘for this Present Age’**

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Abstract

The title is a gimmick, the sub-title is not. I want to know whether (John) Wesley ‘would have gone to the movies’ by investigating what resources there might be in Methodist traditions and practices to help us discern what God has been and is doing by the Spirit in the world beyond the Church. Are we (still) Pietists or Puritans – not historically but theologically – and what does that mean for our capacity to value (or not) culture and the arts? Given the Western (European) context out of which I write – a media-saturated, (popular) culture-dominated, ‘arts-as-the-new-religion’ society – how am I to understand the (Holy) Spirit (of God) of/for today? How am I even to approach the question given the mistakes made in the liberal 1970s, echoed in the evangelical 90s and ‘noughties’, where culture has often been uncritically ‘baptized’ because it is ‘relevant’ or ‘anonymously Christian’? I shall try in this paper to articulate a pneumatology which takes seriously contemporary wrestling with the ways in which human beings can and do reflect the Spirit of God. I shall seek to examine human creativity, and human response to the creativity of others, as a locus of contemporary divine activity in way which valorizes the theological potential of both producers and consumer/recipients of the arts and the media. In turn I shall also draw out the missiological significance of the findings presented.

Contextual Questions

This paper emerges in response to a range of questions relating to ongoing, unfinished work. I have been involved in theological projects related to film over the past ten years,<sup>1</sup> and have more recently been writing a series of articles on theology, the arts and popular culture.<sup>2</sup> Questions which have been driving my enquiries include:

- If ‘the arts’ are (in any sense) the new religion’, then what theological response is appropriate?
- What issues arise in thinking of the arts as the new religion?
- What do we mean by ‘the arts’? Does ‘arts’ mean ‘art, media and popular culture’? (And if so, what does this mean for theology?)

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<sup>1</sup> With Gaye Ortiz ed., *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Blackwell 1997); as sole author, *Cinema and Sentiment* (Paternoster Press 2004), and *Theology Goes to the Movies* (Routledge 2007).

<sup>2</sup> “‘High Theology’/‘Popular Theology’?: The Arts, Popular Culture and the Contemporary Theological Task’ in *Expository Times* 117 (2005-6), pp. 447-51; ‘Theology as “Soundtrack”: Popular Culture and Narratives of the Self’ in *Expository Times* 118 (2006-7), pp. 536-41; ‘Theology and the Practice of Meaning-Making’ in *Expository Times* 119 (2007-8), forthcoming; a fourth article will complete the series.

- Given that people do ‘make meaning’ (including religious meaning) with reference to all sorts of cultural products, what contemporary theological sense is to be made of this?
- What contemporary approach is to be adopted to public, cultural reference to ‘creativity’ or ‘inspiration’ given that in Christian perspective such terms can only be understood theologically?

Much of my practical, systematic theological in recent years has been devoted to Christology<sup>3</sup>, and it has been to Christology that I have usually looked for primary resourcing in relation to any theological question. Christian thought and practice is, after all, Christocentric. The doctrine of the incarnation has itself been used throughout Christian tradition, not least by John of Damascus in the context of the 8<sup>th</sup> century iconoclastic controversies, to defend the (esp. visual) arts. So there is good precedent. And even though Christian (and Jewish) thought readily links ‘spirit’ and ‘creativity’, Christianity always sees the activity of the Spirit as that of the Spirit of Christ. It is not without consequence that the Apostle Paul could tangle up his references to ‘Christ’ and ‘Spirit’ in a way which obstructs any attempt to fashion a systematic theological neatness out of his writings. The Trinitarian ‘grammar’ of Christian thinking, furthermore, will not allow Christian thought and practice lazily to slip into modalism of any kind.

And yet: though I continue to want to identify and speak of ‘Christ in the world’<sup>4</sup> – as a reminder that it is in and through who we know God to be in Christ that we can see where God is and what God is doing in the world – it is the same Trinitarian grammar which will not let us slip into Christomonism either.<sup>5</sup> So here’s my basic question: what is it that we need to say about God as Spirit/the Spirit of God/Holy Spirit in a way which will help us address what is happening in society when people speak of ‘the arts as the new religion’?

## Explorations

The first step is to express surprise: that there isn’t much more to go on from the Bible to help with the linking of the Spirit with the arts. In the Old Testament there are accounts of the tabernacle craftsmen being filled with the Spirit of God to enable them to do their work (Ex. 31.1-11; 35.30-36.1). Other than that, there is nothing much to go on.<sup>6</sup> The New Testament is no better. In explicit terms, then, the Bible leaves us with the sense that God’s Spirit inspires those who fashion religious objects. Any contention that there is any kind of ‘general inspiration’ or that all artistic endeavour is somehow God-breathed regardless of its content is not directly biblical, except in the form of ‘theology by inference’. For such a conclusion to be drawn, the ongoing creative activity of God is considered (inevitably) to be behind all human creativity. It is an understandable step. For God is in all things, and everything that has life owes its very existence to God’s creative Spirit (e.g. Job 33.4, 34.14-15; Ps. 104.29-30).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Christ in Focus* (SCM Press 2005) and *Christ in Practice* (DLT 2006).

<sup>4</sup> And even of ‘the Body of Christ’ beyond the Church (*Christ in Practice*, pp. 129 and 131-2).

<sup>5</sup> On which, see my *Christ in Focus*, pp. 50-2.

<sup>6</sup> J. McIntyre, *The Shape of Pneumatology* (T & T Clark International 1997), pp. 35-6 notes the dispute about whether I Chr. 28.11-19 is helpful.

<sup>7</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (SCM Press 1992), pp. 31-8.

But the specificity of a link between divine creativity and artistic practices, and certainly of any notion of artistic practice outside the realm of religious community, is foreign to the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, we should probably be cautious about making any claims on the basis of the Bible about what happens beyond the community of faith. As Klaiber and Marquardt have noted, for example, it is mistaken to claim that the Bible supports the view that God's acting in the world is so general and anonymous, that any case of peace, freedom justice or love can be ascribed to God's presence though not identified as such. On the contrary, they remark, in biblical perspective God does not want to remain incognito.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it is the same with the arts. Perhaps the sole task of the Church is simply to articulate (and thus explain) where any human creativity comes from.

In short, the Bible does not appear to provide immediately useful material for our current context. There is not much about the arts as such. Where there is, we are dealing with an explicitly religious context. And in dealing with the relative absence of what we need, we are simply reminded of how distant the world of the Bible is from our own setting.<sup>10</sup>

What then, second, of 'the Christian tradition' since the Bible? I have done a trawl (admittedly far from comprehensive) through some standard text-books and come up with surprisingly little material of use here too. 'Gifts of the Spirit' may be understood either in a narrow sense (e.g. in biblically-controlled treatments of the Pauline and Petrine lists; Rom. 12.6-8, I Cor. 12.4-11, I Peter 4.10-11) or more broadly as relating to a wide range of 'charismatic powers' or influences upon communal life.<sup>11</sup> But the arts are missing. In Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's lucid and helpful *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Baker 2002), containing a welcome, eirenic discussion of liberal attempts to challenge a radical discontinuity between divine and human spirit, there is still no place for artistic endeavour. What, then, have we been interpreting all these years? Have our pneumatologies really been so ecclesiocentric?<sup>12</sup> Have we failed to see God at work in the world in the arts (and/or failed to name, pneumatologically, where God has been working) because we have been preoccupied with religious art or the art of religion? Has this only come to light because of the decline in the cultural influence of churches in the West? Let's face it, much of Western art has been Church-related or Church-sponsored anyway for two millennia. Changes only really began to occur in the eighteenth-century.<sup>13</sup>

Time spent with Gesa Thiessen's excellent Reader in theological aesthetics reveals that the history of Christian thought is not quite so bleak.<sup>14</sup> Ambrose comes off well, though even here we remain in the realm of image (the Spirit as ointment, fire and light) rather than strict application or the world of concrete conclusions. Other helpers

<sup>8</sup> Bearing in mind that even this conceptual framework (of any 'sacred'/'secular' divide) is a modern and post-modern phenomenon.

<sup>9</sup> W. Klaiber and M. Marquardt, *Gelebte Gnade* (Christliches Verlagshaus 1993), p. 186.

<sup>10</sup> Accepting that 'our own' for me personally is pluralist, Western consumer culture.

<sup>11</sup> As, e.g., in Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, chs. IX and XI.

<sup>12</sup> In Orthodox perspective, of course, 'we' in the West may be considered to have had inadequate pneumatologies anyway (the reason why we have needed Pentecostal revivals throughout Western Christian history). But that discussion must be for another time.

<sup>13</sup> See Howes, *The Art of the Sacred*, commenting on Weber, pp. 148-9.

<sup>14</sup> Gesa E. Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (SCM Press 2004).

from the tradition include the Byzantine mystic Symeon and, in (cautious, not unqualified) support of the use of the imagination, Jonathan Edwards. Luther saw the Spirit at work in music as well as words (especially when words and music *together* communicated the Word), though was not at all sure that non-religious music could uplift. The Thiessen Reader also reminds us, however, that concern at the uses to which artistic skills are put goes back a long way. Justin Martyr was quite clear that pagans used their artistic skills to create idols. It is, it seems, just a short step from a stark distinction between that which is ‘church’ and that which is ‘not church’ (and especially that which is of ‘other’ or ‘no’ religion) to very limited and limiting doctrines of creation, Christ, and spirit, not to mention redemption, anthropology or sacraments.<sup>15</sup> As we shall need to investigate, pneumatology is one key area of theology in and through which it is possible to respect and develop an understanding of an active God who work consistently and continually within and beyond identifiable believing communities. There will undoubtedly be challenges for what it means to be ‘church’ as a result. But that is part of the necessity and excitement of contemporary theological endeavour.

If a quick trawl through the ‘doctrine/dogmatics’ end of Christian tradition is less productive than might be hoped, what about works on theology and the arts or the theology of art? Again, I have only sampled in preparing this paper and would need to revisit some of the modern classics in this sub-field of theology (e.g. Tillich, Dillenberger, Burch Brown<sup>16</sup>). I suspect, though, that all too little is made of the doctrine of the spirit in such explorations. In two recent texts, Graham Howes’ *The Art of the Sacred: An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Art and Belief* (I.B. Tauris 2007), despite its final chapter (‘Theology and the Visual Arts’) theology barely gets a look-in, let alone any of systematic theology’s sub-themes. Nor is the question of an artist’s ‘inspiration’ explored (not even in a chapter on ‘Artists as Believers’).

William Dyrness’ *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (CUP 2004) is admittedly a more historical work, and there are stimulating insights here about Calvin’s pneumatology. The Holy Spirit works, for Calvin, within the believer to ‘reveal the reality of Christ to the mind’ in the context of the interpretation of scripture.<sup>17</sup> And if any positive view is to be held of any of the senses (as opposed to the inner testimony of the Spirit) then it is to the ear, through which the Word can be heard. The eye is to be treated more suspiciously. But even so, this evidence only serves to confirm the impression that a doctrine of the Spirit is *not* being (and or at least has not been) linked with artistic endeavour in many positive ways within Christian tradition. It perhaps suggests too that Roman Catholics and Protestants might *both* find it hard to do, given their respective theological histories. Howes and Dyrness both note the impact of Protestantism’s wordiness on its relative reluctance to value visual art – a fairly commonplace observation. But Western theology as a whole is notoriously weak on its pneumatology. And Justin Martyr and the present Pope are no Protestants.

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<sup>15</sup> In his papal address of 21.3.07, the present Pope reminded his hearers that ‘Justin...especially in his first Apology, mercilessly criticized the pagan religion and its myths, which he considered to be diabolically misleading on the path to truth’. Truth is held to be opposed to ‘the myth of custom’ or to ‘consuetudo’ (Tertullian’s term), which ‘can be translated into modern languages with the expressions: “cultural fashion”, “current fads”.’

<sup>16</sup> And I should, perhaps, have read more Von Balthasar, but life is short.

<sup>17</sup> Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, p. 69.

Orthodoxy may have a stronger pneumatological tradition to work with. But whether there, too, it is linked to artistic practice is a moot point. I would doubt it.<sup>18</sup>

So where does this leave us?: at a relatively straightforward if not very optimistic point. Where the Spirit is spoken about, we may still be speaking of a very clearly Church-related Spirit. Or where the Spirit is spoken about beyond the Church, it may be in connection with creation (in some general sense) and with human movements in history and politics, perhaps. But there does not appear to be quite as much as one might expect exploring the Spirit and/of the arts. Meanwhile, the arts become the new religion.

### More Questions

So what is to be done? At this point I invite us to ask our own specific tradition where we have come from. Has Methodism anything specific to say? How do we find out? I begin anecdotally. Some years ago (in the late 1990s) I lead worship at a Methodist Church in South Yorkshire (in the North of England). After the service a woman in her 70s came to me to thank me profusely for being so positive about some aspect or other of the arts or popular culture in my sermon. ‘You see’, she said, ‘I’ve always liked dancing. It’s just that I’ve never been able to own up to it in the church.’ The truth is she probably could have done. But she was, in practice, shackled by a sense borne of Christian experience from the early decades of her life (the 1940s and 1950s in British Methodist culture) of it not being acceptable to like dancing.

Meanwhile, with the rise of youth culture in the 1960s and 1970s, and the promotion of many ‘arts events’ within church youth work, it might later have looked as though a much more positive approach to the arts was being adopted. In one sense it was. Greater adventure – especially in worship – was attempted. Young people were encouraged much more to express themselves and develop and use artistic skills in the life of the church. Before the onset of the ‘spirituality rather than religion’ era at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, creativity was being fostered. Occurring simultaneously with the rise of the ‘Charismatic Movement’, it looked as though Methodism, with its strong youth culture, was at the forefront of a dynamic, progressive Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

But was it? History suggests not, the multiple reasons for which cannot be gone into here. Two points germane to the concerns of this paper do, though, need highlighting. First, the creativity being fostered, the artistic skills being promoted, the Spirit emphasis espoused and the ‘youth development’ cultivated all occurred especially in relation to worship. There was, in other words, not much of a foundation for what

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<sup>18</sup> I would accept that attention to iconography might challenge this. But does an Orthodox theology actually provide a pneumatology capable of handling art beyond the Church?

<sup>19</sup> The Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church in Britain was asked by its 1973 Conference to produce a report on the Charismatic Movement ‘in the light of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit’, which it did so for the Conference of 1974 (just four pages in length!). It is a sober, balanced, unsurprising document. It contains, though, the intriguing and helpful statement: ‘Perhaps most striking of all is the repeated emphasis upon the Movement as essentially a “Jesus” movement. Although there is stress upon the work of the Spirit in both the individual and the group, His supreme role is seen as “glorifying Jesus”’ (*Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, Volume One, 1933-1983*, 2nd edn. Peterborough: MPH 2000, p. 203). In other words, the Spirit’s role as witness to Christ is paramount. But the distinctive work of the Spirit is left underexplored, even in the Charismatic Movement.

may be termed – for want of better expressions – a ‘worldly spirituality’ or, theologically speaking, a ‘worldly pneumatology’ to emerge. This would in large part have been because, second, despite the so-called ‘radical 60s’, as Dominic Sandbrook has been showing quite convincingly, British culture in the 1960s and even into the 1970s remained very conservative.<sup>20</sup> This remained true, I suggest, of much British church culture too. *Honest to God* had quite an impact, and beyond the Church of England. But contrary to lazy accounts of the two decades which followed, according to which John A.T. Robinson and his kind are held to be single-handedly responsible for ‘the Death of Christian Britain’, the changes in British Christianity throughout the 1960s and 1970s were brought about by much more complex causes. It can, I think, be argued that whatever happened at the wacky end of Christian thought and practice (where faith gave way to who knows what – and who defines ‘wacky’ anyway?), Christian culture and theology did not become liberal *enough* to be able to deal with the social changes that were occurring (‘liberal’ in the sense of open to consider fresh options, within a generously orthodox and critical framework). Theologically, this meant that whatever creative options for theology might have been mooted (a broader, more encompassing, arts-related pneumatology, for example), they were not taking root in church culture. So popular culture and the arts beyond the Church became much more interesting and relevant. And, lo and behold, the churches lost many of their young (and not so young) members. British Methodism has had to try and move forward in the midst of all this.

But has any of this anything to do with Wesley? I think it has. Part of the critical interaction with John Wesley has to include the asking of awkward questions about the traditions he himself inhabited (and sought to foster in his followers), as well as wrestling with theological emphases which are part of his legacy. We need to accept, for example, that there is not much fun in Wesley. No time was to be wasted, and therefore there is not much room for leisure or frivolity.

Put Wesley’s pneumatology alongside this, and there is not much room either for an arts-related exploration of the work of God’s Spirit. The Holy Spirit could be seen as ‘God’s gracious empowering Presence restored through Christ’ (Maddox). But despite consistent attention to the communal aspects of Christian faith and practice, and to the way that Christian faith affected the whole of life, Methodist traditions have in practice not proved very successful in taking that understanding of the Spirit very far away from the inner, individual life in relation to the identifiable believing community. Clearly there are resources available to do more with Wesley. ‘Prevenient grace’ is something of a Methodist mantra, but it is no less important or useful for that. Runyon (and many others) have noted the concept’s relevance with respect to inter-faith dialogue.<sup>21</sup> Its usefulness extends further still. Just how active *is* God already in music, TV, theatre, film? Wesley and his followers have left the question largely unaddressed.

In preparing this paper I looked back at the last time the Oxford Institute addressed the topic of ‘The Holy Spirit’ (the same year, incidentally, as the British Methodist Conference requested its report on the Charismatic Movement).<sup>22</sup> There were papers

<sup>20</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had it So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (Little, Brown 2005; pbk edn. 2006).

<sup>21</sup> T. Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Abingdon Press 1998), p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Dow Kirkpatrick ed. *The Holy Spirit* (Tidings 1974)

on the natural world, other faiths and cultures, and liberation movements, but nothing on the arts. Even in the chapter on ‘The Spirit of God and the human spirit’, the arts put in no appearance. In the meantime, in the same year the published Oxford papers appeared, Dylan was releasing one of his (still sung) standard anthems (a blessing, in fact), ‘Forever Young’. Two years later Stevie Wonder would release *Songs in the Key of Life*. The song writers had, in other words, long since begun to write the liturgical texts within which most of those who a few decades before would have been churchgoers now lived. Was God with them in their singing? Certainly. Was the theology of this worked out sufficiently? Certainly not. Were lazy conclusions sometimes drawn by Christians (on grounds of relevance) about where God was and what God was doing? For sure. Do we still need to do some creative theological work about all of this? Most definitely. We need a theology (including a pneumatology) for what is actually already happening (and has been for some time) in the realms of the consumption of the arts and popular culture across Western society. We need a theology which does not simply baptize what we happen to like, or which appears to chime in with what may be ‘roughly’ Christian. Discernment is needed: critical discernment. But how that critical discernment is exercised is itself part of the pneumatology needed. Otherwise the pneumatology itself dissolves into ecclesiology, and prevenient grace becomes prevenient church.

## Reflections

So where to next? I begin this section in a perhaps unusual place for a paper which purports to be about theology. John Carey’s *What Good are the Arts?* (Faber and Faber 2005) is written by a self-confessed secular atheist. In it he presents a beautifully argued, entertainingly-written, somewhat knockabout case for the arts’ importance in society, ending up with a firm apologia for literature as the supreme art form. ‘Literature does not make you a better person, though it may help you criticize what you are. But it enlarges your mind, and it gives you thoughts, words and rhythms that will last you for life.’ These are his closing words.<sup>23</sup> Prior to reaching this conclusion, he has been upfront about his disagreement with those who claim that there are absolute values in art. And with gentle and pungent swipes at misplaced élitism he has still managed to find a place for ‘canons’ (‘if you stick to the canon you are less likely to waste your time’).<sup>24</sup> He even devotes a whole chapter to ‘Can art be a religion?’, at the end of which, intriguingly, he reaches a similar point to where I have come myself after 15 years wrestling with theology and film debates.<sup>25</sup> He remarks: ‘Another thing we should do... is to switch the aim of research in the arts to finding out not what critics think about this or that artwork – which is necessarily only of limited and personal interest – but how art has affected and changed other people’s lives... critics... have very seldom recorded how people feel about art, what they like, whether it has altered the way they think and behave. The history of audiences and readerships is largely blank.’

This is changing (with reader response and audience response work being undertaken in literary and film studies, for example). And there are, of course, inevitable suspicions that for ‘serious’ research to move into such territory is to signal its death-knell. Scholarship has succumbed to consumerism. But I disagree. Carey is right. If he

<sup>23</sup> Carey, *What Good are the Arts?*, p.260.

<sup>24</sup> Carey, *What Good are the Arts?*, p.252.

<sup>25</sup> Carey, *What Good are the Arts?*, pp. 135-68, here esp. p.167.

is weak on film, debatable with about his preference for literature, and challengeable at a great many other points, he is right here, and in many other respects too. His book should be recommended reading for every student of theology and religious studies as part of exploration into 'where Western culture is' (the context for theology) and what theology is for (what is theology doing which is similar to and different from the arts?).

But, still, what has all this got to do with a contemporary pneumatology? Simply this: that if we are to 'start where Western culture is at' then any attempt to develop a theme of systematic theology in and for 'this present age' has got to pay close attention to what the arts and popular culture are already doing to and for people. To take *theologically seriously* what is happening will then resist fostering a 'repristinating theology' and challenge ever-lurking ecclesiocentrism. It will also resist the lazy baptism of the 'Christian-like' (all those Christ images in films, for example: they're everywhere!) and engage in some serious audience research. It will work with the tradition as received. But it will know that what is received may be profoundly challenged (in method, form and content) by what is actually happening (why are people not in churches? because they're boring; why are they boring? because we are used to high quality entertainment; is entertainment escape? yes, but so is church – escape need not be a bad thing; does entertainment do more than entertain? very often, it's just that people sometimes don't like to own up to how they are being educated or 'personally developed'; do churches entertain? yes, and have been doing so for centuries, but haven't owned up to the fact enough).

In such a context a christological argument for the arts, and a contemporary Christology in and through the arts could be developed. I am simply trying to have a go at a pneumatological 'take' and can here but sketch the barest outline, knowing that, to be consistent in any basic sense with Christian tradition as received, a pneumatology will need to be redemptive, corporate, christological and eschatological. My contention is that listening to the arts and popular culture and their contemporary reception will prove very fruitful for theological enquiry. So let's look at each of those headings briefly.

Spirit and redemption belong together. It is the Spirit who brings people to level of self-knowledge, and of the knowledge of what it means to be 'saved' from whatever prevents their living a full human life. In Christian tradition, such redemption is seen to be 'in Christ'. But such a conviction may well be a late recognition than a starting point. The 'witness of the Spirit' in a human life may begin to take shape in a person's consciousness in a range of different places: at a point of self-questioning, when deciding about the values by which one lives (and why), or when beginning to participate in the Spirit's fruits (love, joy, hope, peace) in the context of family life and friendships. 'Western culture' is easily to be criticized on a great many fronts. But it also carries with it a 'redemptive tradition' still profoundly embedded within it.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> As recognized, for example, by David Kelsey, *Imagining Redemption* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2005), pp. 5-6: '...as an assiduous reader of reviews of fiction, plays and movies, I have been impressed by the frequency with which reviewers comment on the presence or absence of a 'redemptive' note or theme in the work under review or debate whether there might be such a note. Sometimes the presence of a redemptive note seems to count in favor of the work and its absence to count against it. Although I am often unable to tell just what the reviewer means by 'redemption' or 'redemptive,' it is clear that the words are used in the context of certain practices that help make up Western cultural life.'

As the arts ‘carry’ that tradition and work with it constantly, it is scarcely surprising that one should expect a contemporary Christian pneumatology to be engaged in critical interaction with that persistent redemptive motif. Here, in conversation with the arts and popular culture, is where the presence and work of God the Spirit is to be identified and articulated.

Spirit and community belong together. Despite all that is present in Jewish and Christian tradition alike about inspired individuals (kings, prophets, priests), the emphasis upon communal participation in and identification of the Spirit is crucial. ‘Community’ is, of course, a slippery term. It is a positive word about which we are to feel warm. And too easily we can hear ‘community’ simply to mean ‘church’ (even ‘church as we know it’). But the arts may be prompting us to look at things differently. If Carey is right about the lack of absolutes in art (and he is no sloppy, indifferent, postmodernist when he makes this claim), then we all need – churches included – to look at the social contexts and institutions in and through which we debate what matters. Ecclesiastical complacency rears its head all too easily here (‘We already *know* what matters. Why won’t people listen to us?’ The very tone indicates why they don’t.). The challenging pluralist context in which theology is done, though, reminds us that we have to articulate a case worth hearing. And if it is not a case of ‘arguing against’ all of the time (though sometimes it will be), then it becomes a facet of pneumatology to recognise that the Spirit of God is at work in the communities of artistic debate. How *theology* is to be at the table of conversation, when there are secularists of a kind which would want wholly exclude us, merely accentuates how difficult the task might be.<sup>27</sup> How, for example, do you speak trinitarianly in a public setting without saying ‘Trinity’?

Spirit and Christ belong together. We don’t know who Christ is unless the Spirit enables us to see. We cannot articulate a Christian understanding of Spirit except with reference to Jesus the Christ. But even the Church does not fully know who Christ is. We know enough. But ‘Christ will come again’. So the cultural carrying and re-working of images of Jesus the Christ (in and beyond churches) is a key way in which the link between Spirit and Christ occurs.<sup>28</sup> ‘Jesus traditions’ are decisive, even determinative, for who and what churches are and do. But they are not the possession of churches. The ‘communities of discussion’ (religious, artistic or otherwise) who debate what Jesus the Christ means for today become themselves context in which the Spirit of God is at work.

The Spirit of God is eschatological. Whatever sense is to be made of Holy Spirit, we are talking about the presence of God as from an imagined future. The reign of God is here, but not yet here. The Spirit of God is glimpsed in the same way that the reign of God is glimpsed, and enjoyed, celebrated, participated in already, in anticipation of what God has promised. The experience can be real. But there is also a visionary element, for we do not experience in full. Here, though, is where the arts and popular culture really have taken on religion and found it wanting. It is here where one expects to be ‘taken out of oneself’, beyond this world (drink and drugs are not needed for the ecstatic experiences which musical concerts can evoke).<sup>29</sup> It is here

<sup>27</sup> Carey, it should be said, is not such a secularist. He just thinks we’re wrong.

<sup>28</sup> I have explored this more fully in *Christ in Focus*.

<sup>29</sup> This is the ‘strangeness of the Spirit’ described in relation to Old Testament evidence by Eduard Schweizer, *The Holy Spirit* (Fortress Press 1980/SCM Press 1981), pp. 10-14

where imagination is cultivated about what might be possible in this world (whether or not God is deemed to be able to help). A Christian pneumatology would not, however, be credible (in the sense of seriously believable by those not in the Church) if it failed to interact to some degree with what is imagined for the future. And if the future imagined is bleak, of course, then Christian theology's task is to suggest how it is credible to be hopeful.

These four brief sketches are but an outline. If pressed I would want to suggest that they all boil down to aspects of theology's role in the task of 'person-forming'. God as Spirit is at work in the formation of human persons. So any theology built up from this sketch would be undertaken with this aim in mind, chastened by the challenge of addressing the task without reducing pneumatology to anthropology. That is the common (at times) legitimate charge levelled against some forms of Christian liberalism. The liberalism espoused here, though, is presented in its chastened form. Theology has to be liberal enough to do more with what is 'not church' whilst also recognising the riches of the resources that theology, in its relation to the Church, actually has available, both for the Church's and society's benefit.

### Working Conclusions

So would Wesley have gone to the movies? Almost certainly not. It would have wasted his time. Cultured he may have been, though he seemed to want to play it down (vileness was much more preferable, and thank God for that). Perhaps there is more of Justin Martyr in Methodism than we are willing to admit as a result. This has to change, for God's and theology's sake. There remains the challenge of reassuring churches that by being more open to what is not church is not about furtively smuggling pagans into pews (there are in any case pagans and atheists pews struggling to find out what it is we believe and do, and I admire them for being there). It is about respecting what is 'other', and what, as 'other' is sometimes different and sometimes the same. But in the interaction, what is created is (and always has to be) something relatively new.

And what does this mean for church and mission? Here are some straightforward conclusions.

- ◆ We have to teach a better pneumatology, one which is prepared to identify from the Church, for Christians (in their active discipleship), and for society (for its sheer information), where we believe God to be at work in the world.
- ◆ Churches' against with the arts has to be more honest than it often is. There are far too many books (on film, for example) which simply plunder films for illustrations of what is already known. This will not do. It is bad use of art and poor theology.
- ◆ If churches want to be involved in all of this in a creative, mission-oriented way, then perhaps we don't label it as mission. That's not being deceptive. It is accepting that we have to move in our understanding of what 'mission' is. If God's Spirit really is at work in the world, then of God it is God's mission which we choose to join in with. But then 'mission' language is only helpful for Christians. So why not simply get stuck into the arts and see what happens? This

has practical consequences. It means churches won't put on film events leading to highly directive/directed discussion groups (in the church hall) over coffee. Theological exploration will have to come about in amore messy, enmeshed (incarnational?) way in the context of the reception and critical discussion of the arts. It is a public theology, yes. But it is one which the churches do not control. Now there's a challenge.