

Beyond Virtual Experience: Sustaining Liberationist Commitment in a Brave New World

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The Problem with Reality

Jon Sobrino identified three prerequisites of a genuine spirituality which might maintain and foster the vitality of faith: '(1) honesty about the real, (2) fidelity to the real, and (3) a certain "correspondence" by which we permit ourselves to be carried along by the "more" of the real.'¹ In the practice of liberation these presuppositions are clarified and understood. Sobrino goes on to articulate their meaning theologically, asserting that 'honesty with and fidelity to reality is more than a prerequisite for spiritual experience of God. It is its very material as well. Apart from, and independent of, this honesty and fidelity we neither grasp revelation nor respond to it.'² Embedded in a context of committed liberation practice amongst impoverished or disenfranchised people, the meaning of Sobrino's prerequisites may indeed be clear, almost self-evident. In a *media-saturated* context, however, we have a problem with talk about 'reality', even a problem with reality itself, where so much of our experience is simulated. This fact impinges on theological discourse about 'context' or 'experience', on the meaning and processes of conversion and of discipleship in our globalized localities.

The three-dimensional virtual world *Second Life* (www.secondlife.com/), which opened in 2003, has, at the time of writing, attracted an official population of more than eight and a half million residents. The way in which *Second Life* meshes with 'first' lives becomes increasingly sophisticated (in form rather than content) as computers evolve and participants collaborate. One social commentator predicts that if, in virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, 'potential sources of growth, leisure, education and commerce take off together, then the distinction between virtual and real worlds will become hazy to the point of disappearance.'³

The experience of 'virtualization' is not restricted to those who elect to participate in virtual online worlds or similar pursuits. Those of us who live in a media-saturated world have, claims Thomas de Zengotita, 'been consigned to a new plane of being engendered by mediating representations of fabulous quality and inescapable ubiquity, a place where everything is addressed to us, everything is for us, and nothing is beyond us anymore.'⁴ Whether or not intentionally spending time in 'virtual' worlds, many people have experienced a relatively rapid virtualization of everyday life which continually modifies (and arguably confuses) our sense of the world and of life itself.

Although the experience of virtualization or media saturation is far from universal, the implications extend beyond the immediate worlds of those directly impacted. De Zengotita acknowledges the limitations of his own thesis, whilst highlighting its implications:

... millions of human beings are trapped in realities so restrictive, so desperate, that the possibility of applying to them what I have to say in this book does not arise at all. But the issue of the trend remains, for it is global. And *so does the issue of mediated reality in relation to the immiseration of those millions, not as it is lived, but as it is experienced by the rest of us*, by privileged citizens of the overdeveloped world who can choose to deal with it. Or not.⁵

This paper addresses aspects of the global trend of media-saturation and virtualization in relation to participation in God's redemptive mission in the present age. Virtualization is bound up with technological evolution and particularly characteristic of a media-saturated culture.

What's happening to us in a Media Age?

Stewart Hoover deduces that 'media and religion have come together in fundamental ways. They occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity. Today, it is probably better to think of them as related than to think of them as separate'.⁶ There are many for whom this would clearly not be true. De Zengotita acknowledges this point which is not made explicit in Hoover's recent study. Hoover also tends to identify 'religion' with protestant Christianity in the USA. Nevertheless, his work does illustrate the complexity of thinking about religion in a media-saturated context, and describes a new paradigm - in both media scholarship and religious scholarship - which generally shows that religion 'remains "vital," at the same time that its form, location, and practices of meaning-making no longer occupy the traditional spaces'.⁷ Analyzing the convergence of religion and (mostly electronic) media in the personal and social practice of interviewees, Hoover notes significant trends:

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

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

the “fluidity” is in the *process*, whereby it is possible to always be on the lookout for new insights and resources. At the same time, “grounding” is important, and the resources of tradition, history, doctrine, “shared memory” and “imagined community,” as well as resources from unconventional places and of unconventional types, such as those available in and through media, are important touchpoints to this “grounding”.⁸

Evidently, people interpret life and ‘make meaning’ with reference to a variety of cultural resources including, for Christian people, specifically Christian resources and practices. In overdeveloped cultures and contexts, people simply do not (cannot?) imagine living without electronic media, experiencing life through media images and impressions in a way not readily distinguished from immediate experience. At the same time, a range of everyday virtualizations shape our sense of the world, a process accelerated in recent decades by the rapid evolution of television culture, followed by a more rapid evolution of the internet. This point is not specifically about virtualization, but is inextricably related. Neil Postman, following in the tradition of Marshall McLuhan, stated in his seminal work of more than twenty years ago (that is, before the advent of domestic internet and widespread use of mobile technology) that we have reached ‘a critical mass in that electronic media have decisively and irreversibly changed the character of our symbolic environment’.⁹ Even newspapers and magazines – which, particularly through advertising, present idealized, artificial worlds which may increase general dissatisfaction and distraction – are designed to look like television screens. Postman’s emphasis is epistemological; he laments the decline of print into a ‘residual epistemology’ (which may have been expressed differently with the new use of text through internet and mobile technology) and argues that ‘a television-based epistemology pollutes public communication and its surrounding landscape, not that it pollutes everything’.¹⁰ He goes on to describe the reception of ever more information which *has no impact on our living* and rarely provides insights which impinge directly on our lives. This phenomenon seems to be most significant in what we are calling the ‘virtualization’ process. On the one hand, a sense of being overwhelmed by impressions and (visual) information may result; on the other, ‘news’ becomes indistinct from entertainment. Postman decries the trivialization of public information which he does not say is all achieved *on* television, but rather that television has become the *paradigm* for the conception of public information. In short, a television-based epistemology can undermine our sense of the world as a serious or as a hospitable place, whilst the medium itself can create a sense of displacement. ‘The damage is especially massive to youthful viewers who depend so much on television for their clues as to how to respond to the world’.¹¹ Referring to Daniel Boorstin’s description of the “pseudo-event”,¹² Postman suggests that:

a more significant legacy of the telegraph and the photograph may be pseudo-*context*. A pseudo-context is a structure invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use. But the

use the pseudo-context provides is not action, or problem-solving, or change. It is the only use left for information with no genuine connection to our lives. And that, of course, is to amuse. The pseudo-context is the last refuge, so to say, of a culture overwhelmed by irrelevance, incoherence, and impotence.¹³

We might note in passing that another use created for fragmented and irrelevant information is to win money on (interactive) television quiz shows such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, a global flagship of late capitalist mediated culture. More seriously, Postman's notion of the pseudo-context may provide a counterpoint for reflecting on ecclesiology in a virtualizing culture: Are there elements in his description of a pseudo-context which could describe some of our ecclesial communities, particularly as perceived 'from the outside'? Postman pessimistically concluded that the world into which we (the media-engrossed world in the mid-1980s) emerged was not so much like George Orwell's tyrannical vision of Big Brother (which ironically became the name of another interactive virtual flagship of late capitalist hyper-reflexive culture), but more like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in which people grew to *enjoy* their oppression:

All that has happened is that the public has adjusted to incoherence and been amused into indifference. Which is why Aldous Huxley would not in the least be surprised by the story. Indeed, he prophesied its coming. He believed that it is far more likely that the Western democracies will dance and dream themselves into oblivion than march into it, single file and manacled.¹⁴

If these are indeed aspects of our context, our cultural landscape, then what are the implications for nurturing and promoting the kind of genuine Christian spirituality described by Sobrino in relation to 'the real'? What are the implications in relation to the suffering and disenfranchisement of desperate and ensnared people, 'not as it is lived, but *as it is experienced by the rest of us*, by privileged citizens of the overdeveloped world who can choose to deal with it'? How indeed do those of us with choices about commitment action, lifestyle and so on process our experience or make decisions about life in the world? How do we recognize and act on a 'call to discipleship'?

What we experience as reality

In a world having become accustomed to the disappointments as well as pleasures and opportunities of virtual reality, it may be no surprise that people seek 'something more real' than what is experienced as the thin, fake, unsubstantial nature of much of our existence and the commodities which accessorize it. In practice, the situation is often more complex and nuanced than this quest implies, and we then might want to ask whether the 'more real' life people seek has anything to do with the 'more of the real' that Sobrino describes.

Slavoj Žižek's essay¹⁵ written in the aftermath of the events of September 11th, 2001 attempts to analyze the public reception of those events and the public discourse in which terms such as 'war on terror', 'human rights' and so on only served to obscure public perception rather than enabling people to think it creatively. He considers what it means that the traumatic attacks were dreamed in endless disaster movies before the event, and how the media-disseminated options for response disregarded and worked against more nuanced alternatives. Žižek's essay is an extended meditation on 'what Alain Badiou has identified as the key feature of the twentieth century: the 'passion for the Real',¹⁶ which paradoxically 'culminates in its apparent opposite, in a *theatrical spectacle*.¹⁷ Analyzing the complex effects of the growing 'virtualization' of our lives in an over-developed, electronically-mediated culture, Žižek points out the inadequacy of the simple conclusion that 'the experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to an irresistible urge to "return to the Real", to regain firm ground in some "real reality"'.¹⁸ In the aftermath of September 11th, 2001 a more complex effect became the shared experience of many:

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

In other words, the traumatic WTC explosions were not, as often implied, the intrusion of 'the Real' into our illusory world, but were for most people a 'fantasmatic screen apparition' which 'entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic co-ordinates which determine what we experience as reality)'.¹⁹ As implied in De Zengotita's preface, our reality - the world in which many of us lived, moved and had our being - included the perception of human tragedy, war, disaster and 'Third World horrors' *as distant, not actually part of our social reality*, but 'something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen'. Our reality included *images* of other realities, enough to inoculate us against what would be the overwhelming emotional impact of those realities face-to-face. Yet they come at us as ever-more 'realistic' as technology evolves, whilst being received in an epistemological framework conditioned by what Postman called the 'now... this' culture. At '9/11' – uniquely effective as it was witnessed 'live' (as we say) – most people affected by the WTC attack experienced another semblance, so traumatic and excessive as to defy integration into the reality with which we were familiar. This was more than inoculation or 'infotainment', but was experienced as a kind of nightmare which rendered the public vulnerable to reactionary interpretations of one kind or another. 'The "terrorists" themselves,' concludes Žižek, 'did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it.*'²⁰

Turning on its head the literary critic Roland Barthes' 1960s use of the term '*l'effet du réel*', Zizek concludes that, rather than being cautious about mistaking fiction for reality, '*we should not mistake reality for fiction* – we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it.' If this is the case, and if theology is in this sense a 'fictionalizing' of experience (and a 'fictionalizing' which sustains the hard kernel of the real), then how might theology now function as a vocabulary for interpreting the world and for integrating experience of the world into meaningful presence and action? The alternative may be the creation of a theological and ecclesial 'virtual reality' which functions instead only as a shield to protect threatened privilege or emotional vulnerability.

What do we want?

So Zizek challenges the notion that people seek 'something more real' than their everyday reality, even if that reality is experienced as thin or 'virtualized' – and especially if they are haunted by anxiety as a result of trauma. Many inhabitants of the overdeveloped world experience extreme human suffering as something distant, rarely impinging directly – and would presumably choose to keep it that way. Whilst perhaps seeking out stimulating, adrenalin-pumping, exotic, even risky experiences which vivify but in no way threaten the co-ordinates within which life is experienced, people who seek a 'more real' experience of hunger, pain, poverty or severe restriction would generally be considered eccentric, possibly psychotic. But isn't this the meaning of Sobrino's 'more real', spoken out of a Latin American pastoral perspective? Honesty about and fidelity to the real conditions, struggles and longings of disenfranchised people *might* coincide with a yearning for a more authentic and full-bodied life - but does not necessarily.

As Sobrino describes a Christian spirituality which sustains a liberationist faith commitment, his language of 'the real' and 'the more of the real' is experienced differently within the virtual bubble of a media-saturated culture than in a context where harsher realities are less avoidable. Zizek's discussion of the 'twentieth-century passion for the Real' goes some way to describing the problem and the way in which relatively secure populations generally experience other people's harsh realities as distant apparitions, and the 'more reality' we want is generally pleasurable rather than disruptive.

Zizek's essay takes its title from an ironic line in the 1999 blockbuster film, *The Matrix*.²¹ The film (which became a trilogy of films) is set in the aftermath of a global war which people no longer remember, as they are living wholly in a virtual reality generated by the victorious machines, to which they are all in reality attached and drained as sources of energy for the machines' own

continuation. A small resistance group has broken away from this grand illusion, and battles against the domination of the machine. One theme therefore deals with the risks inherent in developing technologies without constraint; but the core thread is about perception, illusion, reality and the extent to which 'experience' can be trusted. When the film's hero, Neo, a skilled hacker, has his suspicions confirmed that life is founded on illusion, he receives the news with palpable relief. We might usefully pause at this moment: Though the implications of the confirmation to Neo are enormous and harsh, he is nevertheless relieved and grateful. The information *makes sense* to him, whereas another person might wish their eyes had never been opened in this way. Is not this the threshold of a typical conversion experience? Considering for a moment audience reception of this film rather than the narrative itself, popular response suggests a resonance amongst some of the audience. The film narrative chimes emotionally and intuitively with a feeling that there *is* something more substantial, more reality, hidden from our eyes – a reality which appeals even though potentially harsh and inhospitable. The fictionalizing of this intuition brings relief, even release, as its articulation within the film did for Neo.²² *The Matrix* fictionalizes an instinctive suspicion of the potential of sophisticated electronic media to manipulate a person's experience of the world. What might we as Christians make of this response? How does it illuminate our liturgy and our language of 'experience' in general, and of 'religious experience' in particular?

Returning briefly to *The Matrix* narrative, another archetype takes us back to the question of why anyone might *choose* 'more reality'. The character Cypher, knowing full well that he lives within a computer-generated illusion, chooses to betray his comrades because *he prefers the sensations* of the illusory world to the harsh barrenness of the 'actual' landscape. Digging into a juicy steak whilst ruminating that his experience of the steak is only simulation, he confesses to the agent of the machine that after years of resistance he has discovered that 'ignorance is bliss.' Meanwhile the few, the elect, the remnant press on in their war for liberation which means, in essence, not being manipulated and controlled, not being enslaved to the machine. It is too easy to equate this character with those who literally lose (and re-create) themselves through an internet-based *Second Life*: Here is a character who knowingly inhabits and helps sustain a fabricated existence which masks less hospitable realities – at the expense of others, and of the very fabric of existence. Cypher is not mentioned in Zizek's essay, though the sub-plot brings another perspective to the question of how a person responds when the symbolic co-ordinates of one's regular reality are disrupted: The option is simply to collude with what causes least distress or disruption, to choose the self-consistent illusion which, though known to be a simulated experience, is nevertheless more pleasurable than the alternative 'real reality'.

The Pursuit of Happiness or Reality?

Why would a person in these fictional circumstances *not* choose to collude with the illusion and its simulated happy state? Why would we not choose the virtual world of *The Matrix* over the harsh Desert of the Real? Cypher may be plugged in, but it doesn't hurt and 'ignorance is bliss'. The trouble is that Cypher is not ignorant; he knows about the 'real' desert. And *knowing* changes things. The fictional Cypher manages to suspend his knowing because, for him, his impulse for pleasure is stronger than the insistence of actual (as opposed to virtual) reality. This, I suggest is one of the fundamental tensions within which we work out our spirituality and mission in the twenty-first century overdeveloped world. When the stronger impulse is 'to be carried along by the "more" of the real', then in a Christian framework we experience a call to conversion, to growth in discipleship. The theological and liturgical task is to articulate this in fidelity to the real as we know it – the reality of the world and of God.

For a self-aware subject who senses that 'something is wrong' with the impression of the world portrayed through dominant media, for example, how possible is it to be content with a 'pleasurable' existence which seems to be 'unreal' *in as much as* it requires the suppression of a deeper impulse which calls for some resolution? 'In psychoanalysis, the betrayal of desire has a precise name: happiness', writes Žižek. He goes on to describe such happiness as 'a *pagan* concept: for pagans, the goal of life is to be happy (the idea of living 'happily ever after' is a Christianized version of paganism)'. He concludes that happiness 'belongs to the pleasure principle, and what undermines it is the insistence of a Beyond of the pleasure principle':

In a strict Lacanian sense of the term, we should thus posit that 'happiness' relies on the subject's inability or unreadiness fully to confront the consequences of its desire: the price of happiness is that the subject remains stuck in the inconsistency of its desire. In our daily lives, we (pretend to) desire things which we do not really desire, so that, ultimately, the worst thing that can happen is for us to get what we 'officially' desire. Happiness is thus inherently hypocritical: it is the happiness of dreaming about things we do not really want.²³

On this basis, Žižek notes, conservatives are 'justified in legitimizing their opposition to radical knowledge in terms of happiness: knowledge ultimately makes us unhappy'. The Philosopher of Ecclesiastes would agree. In practice, the question for Christians in particular is whether we (even implicitly) discourage the pursuit of full-bodied knowledge in favour of the pursuit of happiness. That which Žižek describes in Lacanian terms as 'desire' might be interpreted in a Christian framework as 'calling' or as the impulse to conversion. Indeed, 'fuller life' and a more lasting joy and adequate hope are, we will argue, the fruits of a religious life vulnerable to particular

disruptions and accepting of inevitable tension, friction and continuous reorientation. Does our ecclesial life articulate and nurture this attitude and expectation?

An adequate theological vocabulary can deal with what Žižek calls the necessary 'fictionalizing' of experience such that even difficult experience is remembered enough either to be subsequently laid aside without its continuing to 'insist', or fictionalized in such a way that the 'hard kernel of the real' can be sustained in mind and body rather than held at bay. In practice, if neither of these ends is achieved, then the outcome might be the kind of reactionary posturing or violent nihilism evident in the events of 11th September 2001 and its aftermath or, on the other hand, the lingering depression and apathy described almost thirty years ago by Johann Baptist Metz:

Everyone can see the signs of this looming social apocalypse: the atomic threat, the arms race madness, the destruction of the environment, terrorism, the global struggle of exploitation, or North-South conflict with its attendant danger of a worldwide social war. And yet the catastrophe remains mostly an awareness 'in the mind', not in the heart. It generates depression but not grief, apathy but not resistance. People seem to be becoming more and more the voyeurs of their own downfall.²⁴

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

Disrupting the 'merely-believed-in' faith

Despite the radically changed social, political, technological, globalized context, it would be interesting to test out a suspicion that the current stream of literature on Emerging Church has by and large ignored the *cri de coeur* addressed by Metz back in 1979 to the West German church, asking whether Christianity in West Germany was ultimately *only* a bourgeois religion – a religion (he acknowledges) which may have great value for society, but which is essentially devoid of any messianic future. By which he meant that, when the church talks about the reign of God and of God's future, 'it is speaking primarily in this case to people *who already possess a future*. They bring their own future, as it were, into the church with them – the powerful and unshakably optimistic to have it religiously endorsed and uplifted, the fearful to have it protected and confirmed by religion'.²⁵ Metz describes an ecclesial world which, in resisting any disruption of its 'symbolic co-ordinates', manages also to resist 'the messianic future proper to Christian faith' which 'does not just confirm and reinforce our preconceived bourgeois future' but necessarily '*disrupts* it':

The meaning of love cuts across the meaning of having. "Those who possess their life will lose it, and those who despise it will win it." This form of disruption, which breaks in from above to shatter the self-complacency of our present time, has a more familiar biblical name: "conversion," change of heart, *metanoia*. The direction of this turning, the path it takes, is also marked out in advance for Christians. Its name is *discipleship*.²⁶

The kind of disruption described by Metz is quite unlike the traumatic disruption which was our distant experience of the WTC attack - though both could have the effect of shattering complacency. The latter shattered the symbolic co-ordinates of an ordinary mediated life in a way which, for many, could not be integrated into an interpretation of the world but continues to linger as a phantasm which renders the once-familiar world a more frightening and unstable reality. One reasonable response to such an experience might be to seek out a 'virtual world' which can be more closely controlled, and where threats cause no real harm.

On the other hand, the disruption of divine love, the 'resurrection experience', the 'call to conversion' experienced as grace reconfigures the coordinates by which all of life is interpreted – not in a threatening way (though there may be some trepidation) but in an integrating and enervating way. The experience may not be one of naïve 'happiness' (as John Wesley discovered) but may involve profound *relief*, for example. Does the Church run the risk of not welcoming such *liberating* 'disruption' because we do not adequately describe or enact *this* experience of God, but rather take a cue from the prevailing notions of mediated culture whose portrayal of undisrupted happiness may be altogether different? Metz describes one way in which an impotent Christianity works against the flourishing of vital, liberationist faith:

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

A 'bourgeois theology' serves to assist this concealment, perhaps in much the same way that all-pervasive media industries help to conceal harsh realities which might ordinarily make profound (and disruptive) emotional demands on us as they call us into 'the more of "the real"'. Metz notes how in a bourgeois theological discussion of the last things, for example, 'the messianic future has

long since been relieved of all apocalyptic tensions: no dangers, no contradictions, and no downfalls remain'. Notwithstanding the concern that apocalyptic theology has on occasion been evoked to compensate for the fact that we cannot be certain of the long-term outcomes of our actions, nor of the victory of goodness, Metz's point holds and bears directly on the question of 'happiness' considered above:

.... hope within bourgeois religion repeatedly conceals from itself its own messianic weakness, the fact, namely, that it is still awaiting something.... Hope becomes a power without expectation, and hope without expectation is, in its essence, hope without joy. This, I think, is the root of the joylessness of so much of what passes for joy in bourgeois Christianity.²⁷

Metz follows Kierkegaard's critique of civic Christianity as having become indistinct from 'the "natural" existence of the bourgeois' by colluding with the powerful classes in society. 'Yet at what price? No less a price, so claims Kierkegaard, than the abolition of Christianity itself, the Christianity of discipleship, as he never ceases to insist'. Metz asserts that the church is more appealing when it challenges people with demands which are clearly presented as priorities of the gospel, 'radical' rather than 'rigorous' in the legal sense. 'Rigorism springs more from fear, radicalism from freedom, the freedom of Christ's call.' A nominally Christian theology or spirituality built – intentionally or otherwise – as protection against anxiety or disruption may in practice replace a more Biblical (messianic) Christianity, and the potential for 'fuller life' is surrendered in favour of 'the pursuit of happiness'.

Spirituality involves being reconciled enough with tension and frustration

In *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, Rowan Williams concludes that 'one of the most powerful enemies of the self will always be anything that encourages us to imagine an environment without friction'.²⁸ In accord with Zizek's reflections on happiness as suppression of desire, Williams concludes that an essential aspect of human development is 'the subject aware of its lack of power in making the world intelligible', Hegel's 'unhappy consciousness':

I desire peace, I desire to be at home with myself; but the edge and the energy of the desire, the *movement* involved, comes from the already experienced knowledge that I am 'irretrievably dispersed in a multiplicity of unstable feelings and changing relationships'.... The self I know is the self that is not at one with itself but is moving and changing; the self is always 'in question', under criticism, a matter of thought.... my desire to be (at one with, at peace with) myself is exactly what is frustrated by the very act of thinking truthfully about myself (as an historical and mutable reality); but, on the other hand, the only way in which it is possible for me to be (at one with) myself is to be reconciled to the reality of change and so of frustration.²⁹

Williams goes on to state that 'Inwardness develops not by escaping or resolving but by deepening *the conflicts that define it*'.³⁰ What do we make of such testimony? For some, the response to this statement might be similar to that of Neo in *The Matrix* when his suspicions about the world are affirmed as true: relief, liberation, and some trepidation. We may naturally avoid conflict; but if some experience of (inner) conflict is of the essence of our very becoming, then we might proceed with paralyzing fears held in check. Indeed, all the more so if our (ecclesial) community has an adequate lived and spoken vocabulary for articulating and nurturing such a reality – rather than a naïve and misleading notion of spiritual happiness. Williams' meditations are complex, but their truth does not necessarily assume highly articulate Church, for 'The understanding or thinking of frustrated desire is not primarily a conceptual exercise; it is what goes on (in the child, in the 'handicapped' or senile) whenever reactive emotion gives place to other responses.'³¹

In an overly-mediated context, do we together nurture a liturgical and theological life which might sustain a spirituality faithful to the reality of tension and friction as essential to the growth of the soul, and open to divine disruption rather than building against anxiety, or prioritizing a headlong pursuit of happiness?

¹ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Towards Political Holiness* Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989, p. 14

² Sobrino, p.21

³ Victor Keegan, 'Virtual Worlds and Second Lives', *Prospect Magazine* Issue 133 (April 2007), p. 53

⁴ Thomas De Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shape Your World* London: Bloomsbury, 2005, p.11

⁵ De Zengotita, p. xi. *My emphasis*.

⁶ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2006, p.9

⁷ Hoover, p. 71

⁸ Hoover, p. 281

⁹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* London: Heinemann, 1986, p. 28

¹⁰ Postman, p. 29

¹¹ Postman, p. 107

¹² Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961)

¹³ Postman, p. 77

¹⁴ Postman, p. 113

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* London and New York: Verso, 2002. Žižek is Senior researcher at the Institute for Social Studies, Ljubljana.

¹⁶ Žižek, p.5

¹⁷ Žižek, p.9f : 'If, then, the passion for the Real ends up [10] in the pure semblance of the spectacular *effect of the Real*, then, in an exact inversion, the 'postmodern' passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real.'

¹⁸ Žižek, p. 19

¹⁹ Žižek, p. 16

²⁰ Žižek, p. 22. Though not the first time that destructive power had been exercised for its spectacular, provocative effect, this was a turning point because globally viewed. But why this event rather than, say, Beslan?

²¹ Writers and Directors: Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski. Release Date: 11 June 1999 (UK). See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/>. There are blatant religious allusions throughout the film.

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

²³ Zizek, pp. 59-60

²⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a PostBourgeois World* London: SCM, 1981, p.9. Metz, after being prevented from being appointed to the Chair of Fundamental Theology in the University of Munich by the Catholic authorities, became Professor of Fundamental Theology at the University of Munster.

²⁵ Metz, p. 1

²⁶ Metz, p.3 (and the following quote)

²⁷ Metz, p.4 (this and the previous quote)

²⁸ Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000, p.147

²⁹ Williams, pp. 145f

³⁰ Williams, p. 146

³¹ Williams, p. 147