

Paying Attention to God: Liturgy in Consumer Culture

RICHARD R. GLOVER

The language of spirituality has become common in the late-modern Western world.¹ As spirituality has developed in reaction to 'formal' and 'institutional' religion, multiple spiritualities have become viable options as 'modes of belief' by which to navigate the world.² Perhaps the most pervasive form of spirituality, among the many on offer, is *consumerism*. Consumerism is *a form of spirituality in which we make meaning, create identities, and participate in communities through acts of consumption*. As a form of spirituality, consumerism has corresponding *liturgical forms* which shape our beliefs, actions, and loves. One of the particular ways in which the liturgical form of consumer spirituality competes with Christian faith is by *appropriating our attention*. At the heart of Christian spirituality is God's call to attend to him as he speaks to us in his Word and in prayer. By appropriating our attention consumer spirituality makes it more difficult for us to attend to God. One of the primary liturgical forms by which consumer spirituality distracts our attention from God in his Word is *advertising*, shaping our beliefs, actions, and loves according to the gospel of identity-forming consumption. By contrast, Christian liturgical traditions represent a spirituality that seeks to shape our beliefs, actions, and loves according to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ by focusing our attention on God in prayer and in hearing his Word. How, then, might the spiritual disciplines of prayer and hearing God's Word as shaped by Christian liturgies be a spiritual alternative to consumerism?

I. SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality can be defined as 'the cluster of attitudes and beliefs with corresponding conduct that is appropriate to a given religion'.³ According to Graham Cole, the appropriate beliefs, attitudes, and conduct of Christian spirituality can be referred to respectively as *orthodoxy*, *orthopraxis*, and *orthokardia*.⁴ These three parts to spirituality, Cole argues, 'are not either/ors but both/ands'.⁵ This understanding of spirituality may also be described as *liturgical*. Liturgies are practices that 'shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world'.⁶ Through the dynamic interplay of beliefs, attitudes, and conduct, liturgies both reflect what is important to us while also shaping what matters to us.⁷ What holds these beliefs, attitudes, and conduct together is a vision of the good life,

¹ For an overview and Christian theological appraisal of this development, see Michael Raiter, 'Stirrings of the Soul: Theological Reflections on Contemporary Spirituality', *The Reformed Theological Review* 60/2 (2001): 54-67.

² On this, see François Gauthier, Linda Woodhead, and Tuomas Martikainen, 'Introduction: Consumerism as the Ethos of Consumer Society', in *Religion in Consumer Society: Brands, Consumers and Markets* (ed. François Gauthier and Tuomas Martikainen; Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Series; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 1-24 esp. pp. 15-19.

³ Graham A. Cole, 'At the Heart of Christian Spirituality', *The Reformed Theological Review* 52/2 (1993): 50.

⁴ Cole, 51-55.

⁵ Cole, 57.

⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (vol. 1; Cultural Liturgies; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

⁷ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 93.

such that through their dynamic interplay this vision will 'grab control of our *kardia*'.⁸ The story that holds together the orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and orthokardia of Christian spirituality is 'the appreciation of Christ',⁹ as expressed in Colossians 3:16: 'Let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among you, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God.'

II. CONSUMER SPIRITUALITY

With these definitional concepts in place, it is possible to see consumerism as a form of spirituality with a corresponding liturgical form. It has been widely noted that modern spiritualities tend to 'play into' an individualist, consumerist mentality.¹⁰ However, it is more accurate to identify consumerism as a deeper spirituality that lies beneath other modern spiritualities. Bruce Rittenhouse has identified this underlying presence of consumerism as its 'religious motivation': consumerism is 'a strategy aimed at answering the existential question of meaning'.¹¹ The question of meaning is answered through the purchase and display of products which exist in a 'semiotic system' that signals something about a person's *identity*.¹² Vincent Miller highlights the fundamental importance of the processes of *abstraction* and *commodification* for consumer spirituality, processes in which objects are abstracted from their context (where they were made, how they were made, who made them) and instead presented as commodities: objects symbolically related to a particular lifestyle.¹³ These processes create a semiotic system in which a *brand*, for example, may 'offer a consistent, coherent identity'.¹⁴ By associating oneself with a brand—"I'm an Apple guy"—one associates with the advertised values of that brand—creativity, professionalism, etc. In this way '[a] brand represents a lifestyle or an attitude that we dream can become our own'.¹⁵ Such brands also offer a way for us to associate ourselves with a particular community.¹⁶ Certain products identify us with 'tribes' and function as 'trophies'.¹⁷ Consumerism, understood this way, may be identified as a 'spiritual disposition' with *shopping* at its heart, shaping the way we see the world in such a way that a product is never just a 'thing' but becomes part of a web of symbolic identity-markers through which we make and remake ourselves with each new purchase.¹⁸

Advertising is key to the creation of this symbolism. It does so by making use of what Miller calls *seduction* and *misdirection*. Advertisements seduce the viewer with an image

⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 93.

⁹ Cole, 61.

¹⁰ See, for example, L. Gregory Jones, 'A Thirst for God or Consumer Spirituality? Cultivating Disciplined Practices of Being Engaged by God', in *Spirituality and Social Embodiment* (ed. L. Gregory Jones and James Buckley; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997).

¹¹ Bruce P. Rittenhouse, *Shopping for Meaningful Lives: The Religious Motive of Consumerism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2013), 173.

¹² Rittenhouse, *Shopping for Meaningful Lives*, 146–7.

¹³ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), 77–84.

¹⁴ Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy* (2nd Ed.; Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2006), 44.

¹⁵ Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 52.

¹⁶ Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 54–55.

¹⁷ Mark Powley, *Consumer Detox: Less Stuff, More Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 33–39.

¹⁸ William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 35.

of the good life, before proceeding to misdirect the desire for that life toward fulfillment in a particular product.¹⁹ Think, for example, of an advertisement for detergent. First, we see a picture of a germ-ridden home and children running amok, a frazzled mother at her wits' end. Then, a brand-name detergent is introduced. Suddenly, the home becomes clean, tidy, full of calm, smiling children, the well-coiffed mother surveying her familial kingdom. The targeted viewer—mothers—are (understandably!) seduced by the image of a well-kept home, and the advertisement misdirects their desire toward the product being offered. This process says nothing whatsoever about the gullibility of the target market (mothers of young children or otherwise). Rather, it illustrates how advertising is able to take advantage of our desires and direct them to a particular act of consumption. Importantly, consumerism in this way redirects *both good and bad desires* toward the goal of consumption. Advertising may well take advantage of the lusts of young men in order to sell deodorant with images of multiple women throwing themselves at whoever douses themselves in a particular scent. But it is *just as adept* at taking the *good* desire of a mother to care for her household by providing order and good health and channeling it into a particular purchase.

James K. A. Smith rightly identifies this symbolic system as a *liturgical*. The practices inherent in consumer culture, and the beliefs and attitudes they both reflect and shape, *actively train us* to be certain kinds of people inhabiting a certain story.²⁰ Advertising teaches us that we don't measure up to the people we see in ads; we fix this by shopping. We shop in communal spaces—shopping centres; but these teach *competition*, not community, as we size one another up according to what we wear and what we own. This competition focuses our sense of responsibility ever more on ourselves, so that '[r]esponsibility now means, first and last, responsibility to oneself'.²¹ Consumer spirituality also evokes a certain eschatology: while marketing 'stories and images point out to us our blotches and blemishes, they are not pessimistic; to the contrary, they hold out a sort of redemption in the goods and services that the market provides'—redemption from day-to-day existence through "retail therapy" and redemption from our failings through the 'seek-and-you-shall-find' experience of shopping.²²

In this symbolic world, advertising functions as *evangelism* for the consumer gospel.²³ This evangelism is both seductive and misdirecting, as we have seen; but it also drags us into a *consumer mindset* by overwhelming our ability to pay attention in any sustained way to anything other than the consumer gospel it presents. Matthew B. Crawford has highlighted how marketers seek 'to boldly dig up and monetize every bit of private head space by appropriating our collective attention'. We experience this as a loss of *silence*, the condition that 'makes it possible to think'.²⁴ Philosopher Thomas Wells has noted that new information technologies have had the effect that 'advertising becomes harder to ignore. [Advertisers] can hunt us more assiduously and individually as we browse the internet, their banner ads and pop-ups following us around no matter where we go'. The result is that we have largely lost the 'right to preserve our own attention and to make

¹⁹ Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 116–126.

²⁰ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 94–103.

²¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 53.

²² Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 99.

²³ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 102–3.

²⁴ Matthew B. Crawford, 'The Cost of Paying Attention', *The New York Times* (March 7, 2015), Cited 31 Aug. 2015, Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/opinion/sunday/the-cost-of-paying-attention.html>.

our own decisions about how we spend it'.²⁵ Americans are exposed to more than nine thousand advertising messages a day—Australians are unlikely to be far behind—to the extent that marketing 'imbues almost everything and is impossible to escape'.²⁶ With our senses so overwhelmed, it is hard to avoid our beliefs, attitudes, and practices being shaped according to consumer spirituality.

III. CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Christian spirituality demands that our attention be directed differently. God demands that our attention be fixed on him as he speaks to us in his Word. In Deuteronomy 6:4–9, Israel are instructed to *hear Yahweh*. From this hearing (orthodoxy) flows a number of actions: love, repeat, talk, bind, write (orthopraxis). The words heard are to be 'in your heart' (orthokardia). The spirituality of Israel as commanded by Yahweh requires *paying attention* to him in his words. Similarly, the Psalmist expresses his spirituality in the practice of meditation on God's word: 'his delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night' (1:2; see also 119:15, 48, 78). The Apostle Paul exhorts Timothy to 'give your attention to public reading' (1 Timothy 4:13). This kind of sustained attending to God in his word is made exceptionally difficult in consumer culture, and without such attention, combating the gospel of consumer spirituality becomes all the more difficult.

The practice of Christian spirituality in the modern world must therefore take paying attention to God in his word with exceptional seriousness. Eugene Peterson sees such paying-attention as a defining mark of Christian spirituality:

*Worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God. Worship is the time and place that we assign for deliberate attentiveness to God—not because he's confined to time and place but because our own self-importance is so insidiously relentless that if we don't deliberately interrupt ourselves regularly, we have no chance of attending to him at all at other times and in other places.*²⁷

Similarly, Smith sees the formal liturgies of Christian spirituality as one part of a wider web of liturgical practices, including private prayer, hospitality, and meeting over the Bible during the week.²⁸ *The formal liturgies of assigned times and places of worship enable us to attend to God at other times and places.* Put differently, the power of liturgy—Christian and secular alike—lies in giving shape, in a particular moment, to the activity of our whole lives. As theological ethicist Oliver O'Donovan notes, liturgy and life are mutually informing. To engage in liturgy is to 'ask how your prayer can make that same reference as your action has to make'; that is, reference to Jesus Christ. To fail to attend to Christ in our speech (orthodoxy) leads to a failure to attend to Christ in our activity (orthopraxis) and in our loves (orthokardia), such that '[y]our prayer will lack the urgency and immediacy of active discipleship, [and] your discipleship will lack the

²⁵ Thomas Wells, 'Is Advertising Morally Justifiable? The Importance of Protecting Our Attention'. *ABC Religion & Ethics*, July 14, 2015. Cited 31 Aug. 2015, Online: <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2015/07/14/4273200.htm>. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza: When Too Much Is Never Enough* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2006), 38–39.

²⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 152–153.

²⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 211–12.

transcendent reference that ought to be given to it by prayer.²⁹ In Smith's language, formal liturgies are 'dense and charged', combatting the liturgies of consumerism both by their depth and, importantly, by the power of God's Spirit working through them.³⁰ Liturgy, shaped by the story of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, have the power to shape our beliefs, actions, and loves across our lives.

The Morning Prayer service of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (BCP) is one among many formal liturgies that Christians have developed throughout the ages.³¹ As is distinctive of Anglican worship, it places a particular emphasis on attending to God in his word, in the context of telling the story of the Christian gospel. The service begins with the proclamation of the gospel, followed by confession and absolution. Having been prepared for meeting the holy God in his word, the congregation then shares in reading Psalm 95: 'To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts'. God's word is heard in the psalms of the day, the Old Testament, and the New Testament, each followed by a response of thanksgiving and praise. Attending to God in his word is itself the preparation for then moving into an extended time of prayer. The purpose of the liturgy is to focus attention on God in his word (orthodoxy) and to respond in prayer (orthopraxis), and so to shape our affections (orthokardia). The daily nature of the service is a way of working this into all of life. As Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, chief architect of the *BCP*, wrote in his sermon *A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading of Scripture*, such attending to God in his word enables 'that thing which, by continual use of reading of holy Scripture and diligent searching of the same, is deeply printed and graven in the heart, at length turneth almost into nature'.³² The formal liturgy of Morning Prayer is designed so that repeated paying attention to God in his word (orthopraxis) and searching of it for right knowledge (orthodoxy) might shape our hearts (orthokardia). The goal is that all three elements of Christian spirituality might work together to form in us an appreciation Christ—in the words of the BCP's General Thanksgiving, forming in us a thankfulness for 'the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ' so that 'our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives'.³³

In our world it is almost impossible to escape the liturgy of consumer spirituality. This liturgy seeks to take hold of us and to capture our hearts by overwhelming our ability to pay attention to any story other than the gospel of meaning-and-identity-through-consumption. In such a world, a return to the traditional formal liturgies of Christian spirituality, such as Morning Prayer, and the development of contemporary liturgies that share a comparable shape and goal, might well be a powerful tool for training us to pay attention to God in the midst of all that competes with the gospel of his Son and an identity firmly founded in Him.

Richard R. Glover (BA, M Political Economy) is a student at Moore Theological College in Sydney. He has interests in reflecting theologically on social, political, economic and cultural issues. He blogs sporadically at www.richardrglover.wordpress.com.

²⁹ Oliver O'Donovan, *Liturgy and Ethics*, Grove Ethical Studies 89 (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1993), 5.

³⁰ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 208.

³¹ *The Book of Common Prayer: 1662 Version* (London: Everyman's Library, 1999), 1–15.

³² Thomas Cranmer, 'A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture', in *The Two Books of Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches* (ed. John Griffiths; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859), 7–15.

³³ *BCP 1662*, 43.

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