

'Christian Worship and Desire'

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Introduction: The Scriptural Basis for Prayer and Worship, as Motivated by Desire

My very grateful thanks, first, for the honour of the invitation to give this annual lecture at Queen's, and especially to David Hewlett for his gracious introduction and to Andrew Hayes and Ajani Parma for taking care of all practical arrangements for me on this visit. I do thank you all.

I have chosen to speak to you tonight on the subject of '(Christian) desire and worship'; but why this topic, why this topic now, and what, fundamentally, do I mean by 'desire' to begin with? My interest, as I shall shortly show, resides first in outlining the particular moral and spiritual difficulties with which our topic ('desire') is larded in our contemporary culture: a culture of advertisement, the worldwide web, social media, the wide-spread availability of soft pornography, and the post-Freudian general presumption of the 'sexualization' of desire. What is perhaps less widely reflected upon is the equal thematic centrality of 'desire' (and cognate terms) as a topic in the biblical witness: its deep entanglement with the core theme of our relation to God in prayer and worship, and its significance for understanding *both* that fundamental longing for God in Godself, and for comprehending the distortions of the desiring faculty in the propulsion towards sin. In short, as I shall chart afresh tonight, 'desire' is a topic that lies crucially at the intersection of sin and salvation; and in order to think about it afresh *against* the blandishments of the hidden (secular) 'persuaders' of our culture, we shall need to probe some forgotten materials out of the tradition and also think afresh, and somewhat challengingly, about

how ministers of the gospel, specifically, have the dangerous but creative task in worship – whether consciously or unconsciously - of educating and directing desire to God.

By ‘desire’ in this lecture, then, I shall mean the conative, motivational, longing core of the self, that is evident in the human from the very moment of birth and up to (and according to some patristic witnesses such as Gregory of Nyssa, *beyond*) the gates of death. Desire in us ‘stretches out in longing’, as Nyssen puts it; and though its closeness, and entanglement with, conscious will and intellect, is obvious (though admittedly somewhat mysterious and hard to explicate), desire as such may be seen as deeper and wider than them in the sense that it is vitally linked to bodily life and predates speech (the newborn comes with the fundamental desire for human intimacy, warmth, nurture, for instance). It is manifested vibrantly too in those who through handicap have no speech; and it can also post-date speech in the dying: the dying person still *longs*, we might say. Desire, then, as Thomas Aquinas put it, is ‘natural’ to us, both in linking and mediating bodily and psychic needs and propulsions, and in connecting us – albeit obscurely - to God, our ultimate source and goal; desire, as both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine taught with complexity and sophistication in the early patristic era, though with different emphases, is also what goes wrong in sin: in terms of Genesis 3, the Fall is not merely an act of disobedience, but perhaps more significantly a corruption, or misdirection, or *misallocation*, of desire (see especially Genesis 3. 6,16).

So desire is a category of core human selfhood, with widespread and ambivalent attachments towards which it is propelled, ranging from the divine and the good and the beautiful, to the corrupt and the harmful and the sinful. It is how those two poles relate that will concern us in what follows.

But first, and by way of brief further introduction, I want to illustrate how deeply this theme informs the conception of worship and praise in the Old Testament (and especially in the

Psalms), and how it also is more fundamental than commonly thought in the teaching of Jesus and of Paul, especially in relation to prayer.

Only consider, then, the core theme of ‘longing’, or ‘desiring’, or ‘thirsting’ for God throughout the psalm corpus: ‘Like as the hart desireth the water brooks, so longeth my soul for thee, O God; my soul thirsts for God, yea for the living God’ (Psalm 42.1-2); ‘Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you; my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever’ (Ps 73. 25-26); or again, ‘How lovely is your dwelling-place, O Lord of Hosts! My soul has a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God’ (Ps 84. 1-2).

These are some of the most memorable turns of psalmic phrase, using a variety of Hebrew words to express longing, ‘thirst’ or desire; but the basic theme of desire for God drips from all the psalms, and would undeniably have been enshrined in Jesus’s evident memorizing of them. And despite Jesus’s own seeming avoidance of ‘eros’ language in favour of ‘agape’ (a matter that was made hugely polemical in Anders Nygren’s famous wartime text, *Agape and Eros*, with ‘eros’ cast as the greedy grasping Platonic [or Pelagian] ‘desire’, over against Jesus’ self-giving, grace-filled ‘agape’), it would be wholly misleading to cast Jesus’s teaching as neglectful of desire in the wider sense we have just outlined. For what is his teaching on the kingdom if not at base the decision and choice always for what *really* matters before God, what is truly *deserving* of desire, if you like, for ‘where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’ (Matt 6.21 and par.) The pearl of great price, the treasure buried in the field, the lost coin or sheep, are not all these parables of the kingdom parables of choices and priorities in desire? Is not, indeed, the Lord’s Prayer itself at base a modulator of desire, which puts God and his kingdom and his Holy Name first in the order of imprecations, and then ranges everything else that is really important and desirable under that? More specifically, the author of Luke’s gospel makes Jesus’s final and most intense desire

in his earthly life that of celebrating his own Passover and last Supper with his disciples: '(lit.) with desire I have desired to eat this Eucharist with you' (Luke 22. 15): 'epithumia epithumesa'. The eucharist then, already becomes, according to Luke, the climax of longing in worship and unity by Christ and with Christ; and thus, implicitly, we might say, it is already the place where desires are tested and sorted in relation to God-in-Christ. Jesus, on the night before he dies, gives us something very specific and practical to do to evince this testing. It should not be as surprising as it might seem, therefore, that in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul brings together, in seemingly random association, all the problems of class and wealth and gender and sexuality (and quarrels and spite about them) at Corinth *precisely in connection* with his teaching on the Lord's supper. 'For I received from the Lord what I also handed onto you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread ...' (vs. 23): the Last Supper narrative is inserted right into the discourse about the Corinthians' multiple squabbles. It is not far-fetched then, I put it to you, to read Paul's instructions on the eucharist (as a site of potential condemnation as well as salvific grace) as precisely a teaching on the *ordering* of desires. By the same token, Paul's great exordium on Christian prayer in Romans 8 tells us the whole creation 'waits with eager longing' (vs. 19, *he apokaradokia*, 'earnest expectation') for the appearance of the children of God. And since we don't rightly know what to 'ask for', says Paul, (i.e., what best to desire in prayer), it is the ecstasy of the Spirit, with 'sighs too deep for words' (note: something deeper than verbal rationality) that must guide us in taking us to the Father through the sufferings and glory of Christ himself. (vs. 26).

The polemical disjunction made so influentially by Nygren between Platonic 'desire' ('eros') and Christian 'love' ('agape'), then, thus begins to look decidedly misleading. The multiple words used for desire or longing in the Scriptures (between 20 and 30 in Hebrew, and several more in Greek, as we've seen) already complicate and blur that disjunction. No wonder,

then, that so many of the early Fathers – amongst them Origen, the Cappadocians, and Augustine, in the early centuries, did not see Platonism’s and neo-Platonism’s teaching on eros as necessarily inimical to Jesus’s teaching on agape, but rather in a mutually fecund critical relationship (as Nyssen put it: eros is ‘love (agape) stretched out in longing’); and – as I have charted recently in the first volume of my systematics, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, this marriage of biblical and Platonic thought, combined with early Christian commentaries on the Song of Songs, was ultimately to raise the notion of divine eros to a metaphysical principle in the work of ps-Dionysius the Areopagite (DN IV) in the late 5th century, with incalculable influence on later Western scholasticism and Eastern Byzantine thought, respectively. On this vision, what desire is is finally in God: that never-ceasing stretching out to scoop us up into it by participation and grace. In short, it is God in Godself who is the true source and goal of all human desires, when suitably purified and re-directed through grace from the effects of sin.

So much by way of initial theorizing of desire, both semantically and biblically, and we shall return to these themes shortly. I have said enough already, I trust, to indicate the centrality for Judaism and Christianity (and indeed also, by parallel formation, for Islam) of the key concepts of longing and desire and to indicate how profoundly they are instilled in acts of prayer and worship. We must now go forward from here contrapuntally, however, into the very different world of the post-modern secular ‘commodifications’ of desire. I seek here not to demonize secular culture as such, as we shall see, but at the very least to indicate how subject we all are, even as believers and practitioners, to the blandishments of that culture.

I *The Commodification of Desire in Contemporary Culture: Sex, Power, Money and Belongings*

Only consider, first, as a slightly eye-opening emblem of the issues I seek to highlight under this rubric, an article in this Saturday’s *Times* colour supplement, which I happened to read

as I was preparing this lecture. Titled 'Sex and Consent in the MeToo Era: What Young Men Really Think', it describes in disturbingly matter-of-fact terms the normalization of pornography (as replacement for sex education) in the lives of young men and women (but especially men), both straight and gay, and the decline of 'courtship' in this latest generation of adolescents in favour of quick web-arranged 'hookups' purely for the hasty satisfaction of the sexual urge. (I cannot help commenting as a feminist that for this we should read, for the hasty satisfaction of the male sexual urge). The author of the *Times* article comments, 'A reliance on dating apps and social media as a way of meeting people means that you often have a fairly good idea of whether you are going to sleep with someone before you've even spoken to them. Which [the interviewee here], Dexter, laments. [As he puts it], "It's strange, because as soon as you've met, it's like 'OK, we've had a drink. Now let's go have sex'. There is no middle ground. I don't think our generation knows how to woo people any more"'. Another interviewee, Monty, describes how he 'enjoyed' a year of such regular promiscuity before sexually burning out, feeling fragmented and unsatisfied. Ultimately he deleted Tinder and his other social media sites from his iPhone, disgusted at the way that pornography and promiscuous sex had caused him to 'objectify' women and distance himself from them (and this, note, without any inputs from Christian critique). Moreover, the MeToo movement is complicating matters in this sexual arena, as the *Times* article goes on to explore – causing the ultimate cultural contradiction between mandated, normalized promiscuity on the one hand and prurient threats of legal punishment, on the other. Notably, mental health quickly suffers all round.

So what is at stake, and why is there no convincing theorizing (certainly not within this *Times* article) about the nature of erotic desire itself, and its ultimate satisfactions? Our secular culture is not devoid of good, desiring instincts, I insist, and this troubled article also dimly articulates such an intuition. But the problem is that there seems to be no moral compass to assess the

choices, except insofar as liberal 'rights' thinking puts a certain break on the rampant masculinist hedonism which is otherwise valorized.

But here the crude sexualisation of desire in popular post-Freudian culture is not the only problem – we need to look more widely. For it is often not acknowledged that sexual desire is aroused and manipulated in a culture which ties many desires into its tether (for eroticism, as we've already noted, is wider and deeper than 'sex', something that Freud understood better than many of his later followers): desire for wealth, power, status, material belongings, and the denial of death are all entangled with those on sex in the weekend newspapers and the glossy magazines – as I can't help noticing as I plough through them with a sort of fascination of my own each Saturday after celebrating the early eucharist at Ely cathedral! – for yes, I too am subject to these blandishments, indeed am fascinated by them, as we all are. As James K. A. Smith illuminates in his 2-volumed recent study of desire and the kingdom, our shopping malls have in a way become the new cathedrals, places where we go to wander in secular analogues to labyrinths, forgetful of time and responsibility, deliberately – albeit somewhat unconsciously – releasing ourselves from ordinary constraint, to buy and spend and own.

Or, when in contrast, rather than going out to shop we surf the web for desirable goods, our credit cards at the ready on the desk, we once more collude with the hidden persuaders who elicit, re-direct, and intensify our desires for a variety of goods. But this is not just a matter of private gratification, as it may seem as we strain over our laptops in the silent watches of the night – for that is at least half the delusion. As William T. Cavanaugh spells out unforgettably in his wonderfully Augustinian little book, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, all our consumer choices have wider political and economic implications. By the supposed 'free' choices we make for our own money (or our indebted lack of it) we buy into societies that either are, or are not, sustaining of freedom and justice in varying degrees. But these days all societies are in one way

or another connected – despite the Brexiteer mentality to self-protect and isolate - making it impossible for us to wash our hands of what is going on on the other side of the world. As Cavanaugh puts it prophetically, ‘I ... present globalization as a way of seeing, an aesthetic, that configures space and human subjects in peculiar ways. Implicit in my argument is the conviction that culture and economics are not autonomous spheres with no mutual effect. Economic relationships do not operate on value-neutral laws, but are rather carriers of specific convictions about the nature of the human person – the person’s origins and destiny. There is an implicit anthropology and implicit theology in every economics’ (Cavanaugh, 59-60, my emphasis). This remark by Cavanaugh about globalization as a ‘way of seeing’ is particularly prescient: for every choice in ‘desire’ is indeed an aesthetic as well as a moral choice. What we choose not to see (as we choose to buy) is what we learn, by repeated habit, not to see: the desirable consumerist object insidiously comes to replace the capacity to see the needy other at the end of the food- and money- chain. The grasping consumerism of so much affluent (or alas, not so affluent) life is thus curiously connected to the distanced objectification of the female body in now-normalized pornography, and to the blindness about ‘racism’ and its effects both at home and in the wider world.

Desire, then, is continually intensified by our consumerist culture; but to what end and to what satisfaction? For when our desires are diffused and un-unified in their direction and intent, we can no longer ‘see’ in the important sense that the early church spoke of in relation to so-called ‘spiritual sensation’ and its requirements: we need to *learn* to ‘see’ Christ and from the perspective of Christ. As Gregory of Nyssa wrote in relation to the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25), the deep irony here is that neither the righteous nor the unrighteous in this story yet recognize that they have, or have not, been serving Christ in the poor and the needy. Even the righteous grope forward, making the right choices but not yet aware that they are

making them. Gregory of Nyssa's (admittedly unsystematic) theory of the development of 'spiritual sensation' thus involved a life-time of the retraining of bodily and psychic desire in order to see Christ consciously in the face of the poor. And this, he taught, is by definition an erotic 'long haul', a spiritual operation in grace and under the power of the Spirit.

And this brings us to our second section. For if the secular manipulations of the commodification of desire according to ends which serve to fragment and divide are so often unconscious even to the faithful in our time, how can our prayer and worship become more consciously vibrant to the undoing of sinful desires and the re-direction of desire to God-in-Christ?

II Charting the 'Ordering' of Desires: The 'Negative Passions' and the Crucible of Prayer

Happily, we are not without classical resources to help us in this task, for the problem of 'sorting' and ordering of desires was a key element of desert spirituality from the time of the beginnings of monastic life in Egypt. And those theologians like Nyssen who watched these developments admiringly from a different, and slightly removed, perspective in Cappadocia and Constantinople, are as important, if not more so, for contemporary Christians who now seek to lead a life of ordered, agapaic-cum-'erotic', desire yet without necessarily eschewing marriage, sex and family. Indeed, Gregory of Nyssa's early text, 'On Virginity' is, as I've argued elsewhere of late (in *The New Asceticism*) remarkable, and indeed unique, for his time in insisting that well-conducted marriage in Christian terms is as good (or nearly as good), as well-conducted celibacy, such as his admired older brother Basil embraced. What these life-styles have in common (over against badly-conducted marriage, and badly-conducted celibacy) is not, according to Gregory, the suppression of desires and passions, but actually their intensification in God. Adjusting Platonic themes from the *Phaedrus* and other texts in late antique philosophy, Gregory can start to sketch here a vision of transformed desire in which bad passions can, over time, and in the power of the Spirit,

be transmuted into good: the dark 'horse' of the *Phaedrus*, with all renewed energy, now pulls the chariot towards the heavenly goal. But the energy is not lost.

But there are no short cuts to this transformation. It was a contemporary of Gregory's in the late 4th century (who may, or may not, have known of him), Evagrius of Pontus, who systematized and theorized the early wisdom of the Egyptian monks in this period most extensively; and in his text 'On Prayer', later enshrined in the Eastern monastic collection, the *Philokalia*, he spelled out the whole panoply of 'dark passions' (or 'thoughts', *logismoi*) that can and will assail the monastic as he/she goes deeper into the depths of the self and 'sees' for the first time the immensity of sin and self-deception that lies there waiting to be transformed in humility and hope. The point is, first, that there is no such transformation without a commitment to a demanding, and necessarily disturbing, adventure in prayer: the devil does not like our progress, warns Evagrius, and will do anything to throw us off course. (Particularly effective here is the stirring up of new levels of lust and acquisitiveness.) But secondly, there is no going on without going down into these depths: this is true 'spiritual prayer', and it's the only way of purification, difficult and dangerous as it is: 'What is it that the demons wish to excite in us? Gluttony, unchastity, avarice, anger, and the rest of the passions, so that the intellect grows coarse and cannot pray as it ought' ('On Prayer', 51). Thirdly, then, it's only by resisting these 'thoughts' and rationalizations that the Spirit can, through this great battle, be let in to do its work of purification and ecstasy into 'pure' or 'spiritual prayer', which also brings calming and soothing to the body (ibid, 63, citing again, unsurprisingly, Romans 8).

As the contemporary spiritual writer Martin Laird, OSA, so brilliantly expounds Evagrius for today (in his *A Sunlit Absence*), it is those 'thoughts' that always catch us; we spend our life on the back foot justifying in endless wordy recitations to ourselves why our negative passions are – in our case - wholly righteous, especially in relation to anger and blame of the 'other'. Progress

is only ever made if we begin in the Spirit to exercise what Evagrius, following here the Stoics (but with a rather different evocation), calls 'apatheia': this is a letting go in prayer into a form of 'dispossession' where the Spirit's ecstasy can take us to a new level of un-self-centredness and stillness. Hence, as Evagrius puts it 'You cannot attain pure prayer while entangled in things and agitated by constant cares. For prayer means the *shedding of thoughts*' (ibid, 71, my emphasis). It is the crucible of prayer, then, and only that crucible, that allows the possibility for the ordering and sorting of desires, both physical and psychic; this is where we begin to see that our sexual desires cannot be disconnected from that tether of all other desires, both sinful and good, and that it is desire for God that finally conjoins them all and draws them into progressive purification.

But this is a wisdom that I find to be largely lost in today's church at large – and I wonder if you do too? The seeds of the wisdom are of course all there in the New Testament (implicitly already in the 'impossible' demands of the Sermon on the Mount to seek 'perfection', and then in Paul's recitation of the features of the competing desires and fruits of the flesh and of the spirit in Galatians 5, which gives us the 'programme' for transformation). But the monastic tradition, once freed from the fear of the imminent return of Christ, and goaded on by the imperial mandate of Christianity and the inevitable laxity in Christian practice that followed, rendered the teaching increasingly systematic and illuminating.

In the West, it was left to later synthesizers of desert wisdom with scholastic Thomism to supply yet more wondrous and demanding - but wholly *realistic* - accounts of the Christian way of desire and worship. Amongst these, the supreme Western cartographer of desire is undeniably the sixteenth century John of the Cross, whose teaching on the 'dark nights' is – alas - still widely taken to be hostile to human affectivity and physicality, and of relevance only to contemplative elites. Nothing could be further from the truth: John himself taught that any Christian who even sets out on a relatively-serious prayer life will quickly hit the so-called 'night of sense', in which

nothing seems to be meaningful anymore in relation to God, because positive prayer ‘affects’ have been withdrawn by God to test and purify our desire. The point, teaches John, is that we are learning how to pray not for our own satisfaction but for God, and as this radical sorting of our desires begins to come into effect we feel all at sea and are sure that nothing is going aright. But this prayer is the crucible, the metabolic locus, of the transformation of all desires. And it is only by passing through this crisis that we begin to see how our physical desires (including our sexual desires) are vitally related, but in a subordinate mode, to our primary relation to God, such that eventually all will be returned to us affectively, rejoicing in union and in the Spirit. As John writes in Bk 1 of the *Dark Night* (4.7), increased sexual attraction (not the opposite) is a potential sign of progress, albeit dangerous, in this transition into the ‘first night’, when prayer *appears* to go dead: ‘Some spiritually acquire a liking for other individuals that often arises from lust rather than from the spirit. This lustful origin will be recognized if, on recalling that affection, there is remorse of conscience, not an increase in the remembrance and love of God. The affection is purely spiritual if the love of God grows when it grows, or if the love of God gives the soul a desire for God – if by growing in one the soul also grows in the other. For this is a trait of God’s spirit: The good increases with the good since there is likeness and conformity between them. ... Hence our Saviour proclaimed in the Gospel, *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit*’ [John 3. 6]’. John of the Cross ends this remarkable passage, thus: ‘When the soul enters the dark night, all these loves are placed in reasonable order. This night strengthens and purifies the love that is of God, and takes away and destroys the other’ ... (4.8).

In short, the late antique monastic Eastern wisdom about desiring ‘thoughts’, and the complex counter-Reformation narratives of desire’s transformations in God, together give us rich resources for ‘sorting’ our desires, and for seeking in grace to march in some coordination in the other direction from much of contemporary secular excitations of desire. Through these

resources we find ourselves placing Jesus's ethical and spiritual demands within a framework of development within which his extraordinary parabolic demands of the kingdom are given new point: it is to a practice, a *habitus*, of desire that we are called, and one with no short cuts, no promises of easy resolution.

But that still leaves us with some questions about how this programme of transformation, with all its ups and downs and reversals in the life of grace, relates more specifically to the worshipping body of the church, and especially to the worship of the Eucharist. If it is 'ourselves, our souls and bodies' which we present at the Eucharist for Christic transformation, how are we to think of this liturgical act as participatory, corporately, in the great purification of desire that prayer itself bespeaks?

Interestingly, this is not a topic that has been to the forefront of Anglican thinking in every generation since the English Reformation; but in the way that it comes now to new significance, we do well to remind ourselves that there was a period within early Anglicanism when this was already a topic of burning interest, not insignificantly in times of political instability and economic uncertainty, as well as renewed fascination with the thought of the Fathers - that is, the very late 16th century and the early 17th. The theme of erotic desire's relation to our right standing before God runs deeply through the Metaphysical poets Herbert, Crashaw, Donne and – later – Milton, as a recent study by Ryan Netzley well illustrates afresh. Only recall, as a supreme example, Herbert's wonderful 'Love, II', which aptly sums up the message I have already tried to convey throughout this lecture, about the unification of desire and its relation to God in prayer and praise:

Immortall, Heat, O let thy greater flame
 Attract the lesser to it; let those fires,
 Which shall consume the world, first make it tame;
 And kindle in our heart such true desires,
 As may consume our lusts, and make thee way.
 Then shall our hearts pant thee; then shall our brain

All her invention on thine Altar lay
 And there in hymnes send back thy fire again.

True desire for Herbert, comments Netzley (45), ‘consumes lust in the same fashion as does Donne’s ‘fiery Zeale Which doth in eating heale’ (from Donne’s ‘I am a little worlde, from *Holy Sonnets* 1). But all these ‘Metaphysicals’, we need to remind ourselves, wrote in the train of Richard Hooker’s remarkable exposition of the participatory meaning of the eucharist in book V of his *Ecclesiastical Laws*, published right at the beginning of the 17th century. As Timothy Squier points out, in a nice little article for *Liturgy*, 2005, the language of participatory intimacy for the Eucharist was already alive and well in Hooker; it is just that we have largely forgotten it. Hooker, in his account of desire-filled sacramental energy, again gives us a vision of intra-divine activity in the eucharist that re-bonds us into the mystical body and gives us all the energy of what we may call proto-erotic permeation: ‘Participation’, he writes’, is that mutual inward hold which Christ hath of us and we of him, in such sort that each posesseth each other by way of special interest, property, and inherent copulation’ (Hooker, 245) . Graham Ward, as Squier also shows, re-activates this Hookerian vision when he insists (in *Cities of the Gods*) that the desire evinced in the eucharist is an expression of divine intimacy unique to itself: within this circle of desire individuals discover a communal unity which is unthinkable outside the special erotic presence of Christ. Likewise, the contemporary French theologian Emmanuel Falque, working out of a very different philosophical tradition (post-Kantian, Husserlian, Heideggerian) can insist in his extraordinary *Wedding Feast of the Lamb* that sexual desire of the jaded, post-modern, ‘lost’ sort – such as evidenced in the *Times* article I earlier cited – can rediscover in the longing of the eucharist a mysterious intimacy with which contemporary sexual desire needs to be reinvested: what is ‘hidden beneath the veil’, in Aquinas’s terms in the eucharist, both mystery and revelation, is

what cynical modern sexuality has lost touch with, says Falque, (163), the inexhaustible offering of love in which human loves too, can find their true meaning.

III *The Minister as Focus of Desire: Dangers and Spiritual Discernment*

But wait a minute, you'll say - and not without reason. Are we not in dangerous and uncharted territory here, where the possible confusion of sexual loves (often subject to self-delusion or abuse) and the expression of Eucharistic love and desire are easily confused? Well said, I say; and that is why this short last section of this lecture comes back to sound notes of caution about the moral and spiritual discernment required in any negotiation of the difficult nexus of human and divine desires that we have been trying to re-negotiate in this talk. Whereas Nyssen, Evagrius, Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross represent neglected arenas for reflection in the topic we have been charted, we do not find in them any extensive reflection on the problems of potential abuse, or the misuse of the ministerial role to further narcissistic or misguided projections. Yet the fact is that – once the nexus of desires I have been charted has been acknowledged in personal prayer – the greater our understanding of how the priest or minister at the altar (or indeed in the pulpit) can be in receipt of the reception of desiring projections from the congregation, which must be approached with extreme care and self-knowledge. As such, this projection is normal and unavoidable: to stand 'in persona Christi' at the Eucharistic altar or to speak His word from the pulpit is, as I have argued at some length elsewhere (in *The New Asceticism*), a responsibility not to be gainsaid. We cannot deflect it by improper self-effacement or embarrassment, any more than we should confuse it with our own personal charm or sexiness. As ministers of the gospel we become Christ's: no longer are we the world's plaything, no longer drawing attention to *ourselves* by cute clothing, self-referring gesture, or – at the other end of the spectrum - falsely self-abasing denial of our priestly role. The fact is

that we find ourselves in this necessarily ‘proto-erotic’ zone, bearing the projections of others whilst at the same time knowing they are not ours: we are merely in the kenotic space where the negotiation of desire is taking place. Sometimes this will be more obvious to us than at other times; but we should always be aware of its huge dangers (here is the incipient possibility of abuse, however subtle, if we inappropriately manipulate this power), as well as of its curious and subtle power-in-the-Spirit, of which we should not intrinsically be afraid. The fact is that the eucharist is, at its most efficacious, precisely the place in worship where Christ himself ‘desires with desire’ (see again Luke 22. 15); and so if anything in the unfolding logic of this paper has legitimacy, it is our consciousness of that logic that at all times should have place in our Eucharistic prayer. We are in *via* to God, and the sorting of desire, so subtle, so profound and so powerful, is the graced process that we should expect and long to meet in our Eucharistic worship, as indeed in all our prayer and praise.

Conclusions: Desire and Its Transformations in Worship

I now come to my conclusions.

What then does all that I have covered in this paper *mean* in practice? Let us recap the main themes I have covered.

I have argued, first, that desire is integral to the life of prayer, because it is basic also to the fundamental condition of frail humanity (body and soul) in relation to God. Desire is also what fundamentally went awry in the Fall, and – through Jesus’s own divine/human choices in Temptation and Passion, and indeed throughout his whole earthly life – was righted once more in his sacrificial death and resurrection. So when we ourselves come into that orbit of Christ’s death and resurrection, and ‘present ourselves, our souls and bodies’ to him in daily prayer, praise and Eucharistic observance, the battle of desires is renewed afresh. And the deeper we go into

the adventure of prayer, worship and sacrament, the more we see that there is no escaping the darkness of our own distorted and misdirected desires, and the more we realise that they have to be brought into the transforming crucible of Christ's own grace and transformation. As the Catholic anthropologist Victor Turner saw long ago, it is in rituals of the profoundest sort that dark human forces are summoned, acknowledged, purified, and then *redirected* in their newly-released energy for the moral goods of the whole community. It is a Christian form of this insight that inheres in Eucharistic worship and devotion.

As for our Christian minister caught too in the creative nexus of her or his own desires, there is both danger and delight, as we also saw: danger, lest s/he falsely identify with the projection of longing that her congregation more or less unconsciously projects towards her; and delight, if by prayerful preparation and kenotic dispossession s/he is able to allow her own bodily deportment and gestures in the rite to signal that s/he herself only acts as she can through the power of the Spirit and 'in persona Christi'. This is neither play-acting nor false identification with Christ: it is a subtle making way to the working of the energies of Christ and his 'mystical body' that are put into practice in each efficacious act of Eucharistic worship.

But whereas, as this lecture has charted, we have inherited much wisdom from the patristic, monastic, early-Anglican and counter-Reformation traditions about the workings of prayer, worship and desire, the matter of our own *bodily* disposition in worship in this regard, whether as lay people or as priests, requires much more thought and insight than it currently garners in our theological colleges and faculties: for we are all unconscious victims, too, of the secular 'commodification' of our desires, and live all too helplessly in that nexus of pressures and demands.

It is for that reason (the unfinished nature of this problem of desire) that I leave you tonight not so much with succinct conclusions but with challenging questions of considerable moment for our Church.

What are the sorts of necessary preparation (bodily, affective and ascetic) for acts of worship that will dispose us priests and our fellow-worshippers, through grace and the power of the Spirit, to the effective transformation of desire-into-God? And how will this generation in the Church re-think this issue creatively afresh, for a culture constantly manipulated by social media, advertisement and pornography? I cannot think of a more pressing spiritual question for the Church today (yes, more pressing than money or buildings or congregational numbers!), and I hope that I have at least given you some seeds for thought about the problem in what I have offered you tonight.

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'Christian Worship and Desire'

Sarah Coakley (University of Cambridge)

The Queen's Foundation Annual Lecture, St Martin's in the Bullring, June 25th, 2018

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This lecture opens up a discussion about how 'desire' operates in the workings of prayer and worship, and how we should think of its enduring significance in the particular context of contemporary church and culture. It begins by 'searching the Scriptures' to elicit the ubiquitous importance of desire for God in the biblical witness (especially in the Psalms), and in the teaching of Jesus and the Pauline letters. It goes on to reflect on the marked contemporary 'sexualization' of desire, and on the more pervasive 'commodification of desire' (for sex, goods, money, success, and fame) in the world of web-based advertisement, social media and visual culture. It then turns to early Christian ascetic and monastic traditions to chart the way in which prayer and worship of a sustained kind educed detailed wisdom about the afflictive dangers of the 'negative passions' (false desires) and the need to re-order and re-orient desire to God through habits of prayer, praise and simple attention to Christ. It ends with a reflection on how the minister/priest participates in, and potentially modulates, the play of desire in the eucharist and other acts of worship, and how this brings both moral danger and spiritual opportunity. It is concluded that theological reflection on the ordering of desires is a spiritual and ascetic task of particular significance for contemporary Christians, and one that should not be dislocated from public worship and prayerful preparation for it.

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Introduction: The Scriptural Basis for Prayer and Worship as Motivated by 'Desire'

I The Commodification of Desire in Contemporary Culture: Sex, Power, Money and Belongings

II Charting the 'Ordering' of Desires: The 'Negative Passions' and the Crucible of Prayer

III The Minister as Focus of Desire: Dangers and Spiritual Discernment

Conclusions: Desire and Its Transformations in Worship

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