The Fernley Hartley Lecture 2010 Adventures in Affective Space: The Reconstruction of Piety in an Age of Entertainment

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My purpose is quite simple. I want to undertake a rehabilitation of a positive sense of the term 'piety'. By piety I mean the cultivation of a rich inner life, on the basis of which the practice of goodness and the search for wisdom is undertaken. I know, though, that the task of rehabilitation will be difficult. Ten years ago, commenting on John Cusack's performance in the film version of Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity*, *The Observer* film critic Philip French wrote: 'Cusack has the rare ability to play characters who have a complex inner life and to suggest a sense of decency that rejects piety . . .'.[2] The implication was that you can't have an interesting and complex inner life if there is piety involved. 'Piety' inevitably means sanctimoniousness, it seems.

More recently, there is a sign that things might be more hopeful. Again from *The Observer*, in a review of a recent book about religion's future in Europe, Kenan Malik writes:

> In our post-ideological age, secularists find it more difficult to 'compete with the rich emotions evoked by religion'. The recent 'return of religion' has been less about a rise in piety than a desire for identity and belonging, purpose and collective direction, yearnings that secular politics finds tricky to satisfy.[3]

At least piety is not negative here, even if it is claimed that it is not featuring much as part of religious resurgence.

My opening claim, though, is that it is necessary to dig deeper into what is going on here. Emotions and their use are very much in the public eye, as are – perennially – the way in which people form groups, discover or fashion identity, and find or make meaning. Whether or not 'piety' is a helpful term to use in approaching all of this, it is vital that we explore what is *actually happening* at the point of intersection between entertainment and ethics. By that I mean that there is considerable evidence that when people have fun, they also know that they may not *just* be having

fun, because more is happening to them. And people even choose to do things which class as entertainment and enjoyment in order for – what we might now call – the 'added value' of those other things that happen.

That 'added value' may, of course, have nothing to do with religion, or spirituality or discipleship or piety. (And from here on I shall avoid the word 'spirituality' because of its vagueness, even though it is often used positively over against the term 'religion'.) But the kind of things that we end up having to talk about – the value and belief-systems that people have, the way they vote, the lifestyle choices they make, whether they support war or not, the things they buy, how they develop their sexual ethics and practices – these overlap with the concerns in which religious systems and practices have long been involved. So in examining what is going on at the interface between entertainment and ethics we cannot but study something of religion too.

I am, then, suggesting that we *need* to address the issue of piety so that we have a better understanding both of contemporary religion *and* of the complex way in which people are now addressing issues of identity, belonging, purpose and so on. To consider *piety as a practice* rather than use the term as a negative value-judgement is to probe a very necessary area of contemporary western life by examining – with respect to popular culture and the arts – an aspect of how meaning-making is being done in contemporary western societies.

Part one: what's happening?

I begin with six points about what is actually happening when arts, culture, and popular culture are consumed.[4] We must first be reminded that people primarily consume popular culture and the arts for enjoyment, and for pleasure.

First: *Participation in popular culture and the arts is deeply enjoyable.* Of course, we do not have to say that participation is always enjoyable. There are bad films, bad plays, bad musicals, poor songs. But it is not always easy to predict which ones those will be. Nevertheless people participate in the arts and culture in search of enjoyment. From the perspective of participation in a faith community, admittedly, it can often seem that the arts and pop culture are *more* enjoyable than religion. In the case of Christianity, whilst the Church has for centuries been a promoter of the arts, it has not been terribly good on the promotion of enjoyment. And how do you assess levels of enjoyment anyway? If, though, it is thought that we can make any easy distinction between popular culture being for entertainment and the arts being for edification, then let me nip that one in the

bud immediately. I was at a rather high-powered academic event recently at which a composer of operas was speaking. In the context of debates about how theologically significant the arts are for theology, whatever the background and intentions of writers, composers, artists and poets themselves, the composer reminded the group that even if he is often trying to do interesting, creative, stretching, intellectually and emotionally satisfying things, he is also writing to earn a living, and to entertain. Interestingly, the theologians did not pick up those points.

Second: *consumers of art and culture display habits of participation*. You see this in film-watchers' habits of regular (e.g. weekly) cinema-going, music fans' habits of CD-purchasing, music-downloading or concert-going. You see it in the daily habits of MP3 use. There are also habits of TV-watching (e.g. favourite programmes) and, increasingly, of disciplined watching of DVD box-sets. Some music and TV fans have daily patterns of fan-site consultation. There are also pilgrimage practices such as attendance at music festivals or culture tours. It is this range of habits that can lead to talk of such practices as being 'religion-like'. They are repetitive, and also life-shaping.

Third: *'Entertainment' does more to and for people that they often recognize*. The 2004 film-reception research I was involved in showed that whilst the dominant declared reason for cinema-attendance is for 'entertainment' or 'escape' (be that from work, or from the humdrum nature of life), when you actually ask people what they gain from cinema-going, then more comes to light. I do not wish to overplay this and say that it *usually* happens or that all forms of entertainment and the arts are equally valuable. I simply want us to note that there is a discrepancy between what people declare their intent of consumption to be, and what happens through the way they process their experiences, when given the opportunity to do so.

Fourth: *The most satisfying encounters with/use of the arts and popular culture are emotionally engaging.* Music which we latch on to moves us emotionally. There is a considerable amount of study of why that is. Sometimes it is because of association, with memory or place, or particular people. Sometimes it is because of the physical experiences we have whilst listening. Often, when we relate to a favourite composer, musician, artist or performer, it is recognized that we have already formed what scholars call an 'affective alliance' with the performer, so that we are expecting certain kinds of emotional response.

Music is not the only example we could use here, of course. Films work on the emotions first before going on to do whatever else they may do to

and for us in our heads. The reason we go to romantic comedies, whilst being entertained, is to cry. The reason we go to horror films is to be scared in a safe environment because we want to know what the range of human emotions is and how we might deal with them. But the basic point remains: emotional engagement with the culture consumed is hugely significant.

Fifth: *'Cognitive processing' adds even more to the experience.* We do not only 'feel' things, however. We have our experience enhanced by reflecting on our emotionally-engaging experiences (wherever and however they happen). Whether or not we do this formally – and the likelihood is that much more happens informally – we do undertake what can be called 'cognitive work' around our consumption of the arts and popular culture. There are big debates about the morality and value of video-games at present. Steven Johnson, in his book *Everything Bad is Good for You*, has offered a powerful argument in favour of the value of the cognitive work that videogames and high quality TV makes us do in response to them.[5] We can become, he suggests, more skilled and thoughtful as a result of the reflective thinking that such pastimes require of us.

I am not saying that an experience of arts or popular culture is not valuable or valid *until* cognitive work is done – and the cognitive is always already in some sense wrapped up in the emotional response you have or the skills you develop. But that 'cognitive work' is useful to do is beyond doubt. To think about what we feel is a healthy thing to do. To think in order to avoid feeling – to prevent identification and acknowledgement of the feelings one has – is not healthy. But to reflect on what moves us is a good and refreshing aspect of human development. It adds to our patterns of consumptions of popular culture and the arts.

Sixth: *There is resistance to owning up to thinking about entertainment*. By this I mean that the first point – arts and popular culture are about enjoyment – is so strong that our first response is often to say, 'Look, I'm escaping, OK, and nothing else is happening.' We have to be in an appropriate frame of mind even to begin to see that in the midst of our enjoyment, much more is sometimes going on besides. Academics are, of course, notorious anyway for taking the fun out of things. So put religion and the academy together and it will be assumed that all forms of pleasure are likely to be crushed. Where religions are concerned, then, for those who do not have experience of religion, or do not have positive experiences to draw on, negative assumptions about social control appear quite clearly.

However, when you undertake research and have time to explain what you are doing, some of the more knee-jerk, default reactions to which we

have become all-too accustomed in secular western society, are modified. Hence, in the case of the 2004 film-research to which I have referred, when the researcher explained that people were free to say exactly what they wanted to say and that there were no prescribed views being offered to people for them to assent to, or reject, then even though the research was church-funded, people were OK about it. But the sense of wanting to have freedom to believe or think whatever an individual wants, is very strong.

We might say that this is exactly as it should be in a liberal, secular, democratic society. But it is also true that in the midst of that sense of individual freedom we may be prone to overlook the social contexts in which we make our choices *and* the need for us to make alliances with worldviews and value-systems which enable us to make the meanings that we have to make in order to be human.

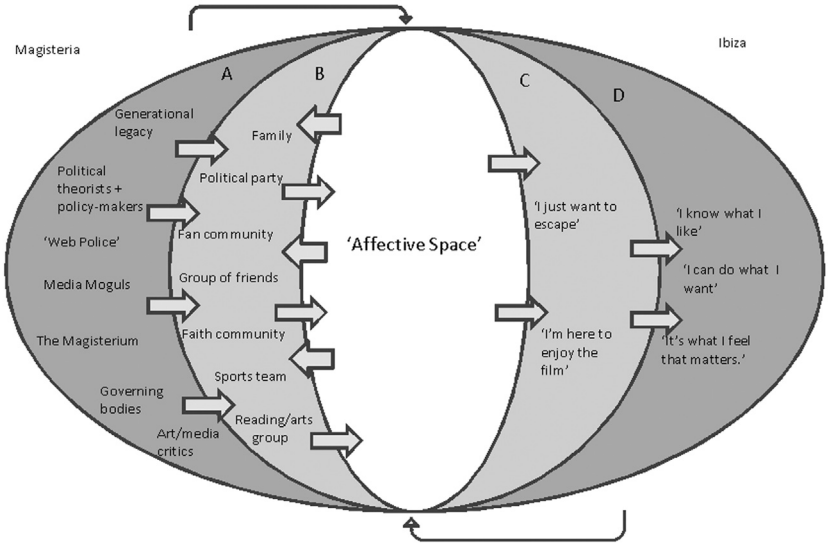
Part two: analyzing the developments

We must now analyze what is going on here, using those points I have just raised as starting-points, but adding some others as we go. Here I introduce what I call 'The Magisteria to Ibiza Spectrum'. It is a playful diagram, and for those who have done any formal sociology, it will appear quite basic. But it is important for understanding where and how religions and faith – and thus, piety – fit into the picture I am seeking to describe. Magisterium is the term used, of course, for a teaching authority, especially of the Roman Catholic Church. Here I am using the term in a more general (and original classical/Latin) sense to mean 'a group of authoritative official leaders'. Ibiza I use with apologies to what I understand is a very pleasant Spanish island, and thus also to the Spanish Tourist Office, for I am using 'Ibiza' as a symbol for a rather extreme form of individual freedom.

I must introduce first the concept of 'affective space'. By this term I mean any practice or activity which entails significant emotional engagement. This could therefore be listening to a piece of music, going to a concert, watching a film, attending a major sporting event, watching a TV programme, attending a religious act of worship. None of these may require additional 'cognitive work' to be done in the manner suggested in Part One, though it may in practice be undertaken formally or informally. But such events and activity prove meaningful through the emotional commitment devoted to them, or required by participation in them.

To put them more broadly in context, and to begin to understand how such a range of disparate practices may conceivably contribute to what I am calling 'piety', entails exploring what goes on *in and around* the experience of listening, watching and so on. The exploration thus becomes

Fig.1 'The Magisteria to Ibiza Spectrum'



an exercise in learning what film, media, cultural, sociological and music studies contribute to our collective understanding of how arts and culture work. We need to remember that though we use the word 'space', it is an over-used word with which we must take care. This 'space' is far from empty. Speaking of a 'space' is a way of talking about a site, a location, where things happen. So we are exploring locations within public life where significant *affective* events happen, in and through which much more happens than may be acknowledged at the time.

I must stress again that I am not necessarily speaking of proven, lasting, 'classic' forms of art. What goes on in such affective space may include how the fine arts, classical music, opera are currently being accessed and used. But it is vital to acknowledge that people's participation in affective spaces is not confined to interaction with what is defined as high culture. It is vital not to make prior, or even later, judgements about any popular culture or art's intrinsic worth or purpose. *We are dealing here with what people do with products of art and culture, whether high or low.*

Having identified what is being referred to in the 'affective space', we now need to build up the diagram further. Participation in culture is never just an individual matter. Why do we end up participating in some events

rather than others? Why are we interested in particular music or art or films? And then, when we have seen or listened to the films or music, with whom do we think through our experiences? At this point the many groups listed in section B in Fig. 1 come into play. These are obvious types of groups which are important, though as a representative list it is not meant to be complete. The influences are two-way. We are directly affected by the groups we are part of in the 'affective spaces' we inhabit (e.g. in the choices of what to listen to or watch). But we also make choices about which groups to turn to, to process our experiences. By doing so, we even grant them authority.

So, for example, as a music fan, I may choose to belong to a fan community (perhaps an online community). Yet I am also likely to belong to informal groups of friends, whose opinions and judgements I respect, with whom I also reflect on my music-listening experiences. But these friends may not be fans of a musician or band that I like. So I am making different kinds of authoritative alliances all the time.

But that is only one context within which to understand what goes on in the affective spaces that we inhabit. There is a broader framework still, which pushes, respectively, in individual and social directions. Move further in the Ibiza direction, and we push further a sense that it is important to stress individual choice and individual freedom (section C in Fig. 1). The sense of not being bound by any human structure and there being nothing objective to which we can appeal *could*, in theory, be extended so far that only what an individual feels really matters (section D). And indeed, it often appears as if we have moved so far in the direction that what we feel, and what we feel individually, is so crucial, that everything that happens on the left side of the direction, or any appeal to rationality, is not worth much.

The fact that I call the central shape 'affective space' shows that I want to take the emotions very seriously indeed. I am not wanting to argue for a dry rationality to somehow correct the waywardness of the attention we might want to pay to feelings, though I do want to explore how we can be not just either reason-based or feelings-based as we process our life-experience in healthy ways.

But now let us turn to the far left of the 'Magisteria to Ibiza Spectrum' to see where authority structures really take effect. For beyond the social contexts in, and in relation to which, we enjoy our participations in affective space, there are also social structures which affect, even control, what happens in the affective space we inhabit when we listen to music, watch TV, go to films, participate in faith communities, or whatever (section A).

Sometimes we are happy to know and accept this. At other times we might be rather resistant.

Let me come back to my music-listening example. Not only might I be a member of an online fan community, and participate in discussions about my favourite music, I might also eavesdrop on the words of established music critics. I might accept that they really know their stuff, and are really influential, even whilst I might not like what they say. But the fact that I have paid attention at all is significant.

We can, of course, apply this insight to all the groups we might be able to identify in our own personal versions of section B. Behind and around the groups in which we actually participate as we consume the arts and culture, we are, all the time, also being influenced by, and sometimes actively choosing to respect the authority of, those who affect the groups of which we are a part. In the case of faith communities, the doctrine which is carried in practice in section B comes in some way from (and is continually monitored by) a 'magisterium' in section A.

Now to see it as a spectrum like this implies, of course, that the two extremes have little to do with each other. There are the authority structures in section A, and then there is the totally free individual in section D. But we all know that it is more complicated than that. If I am listening to music in Ibiza, having the time of my life, expressing my individual freedom, I am also subject to the choices and fashions in music which have created the world that I want to inhabit (section A). And I may even be there as part of a group of friends (section B). So we need to acknowledge that 'the affective space' in which all of us consume arts and culture brings all this together in one confusing, sometimes overwhelming, heap.

To sum up Part Two:

- Every form of participation in the 'affective space' occurs in multiple social contexts
- Some of the social contexts we choose, some we do not
- We can never be quite as individual as we think we can
- Authority structures (often as hidden factors) are always at work
- We actively make some choice about who we want to exert authority over us/whose authority we respect
- All of this goes on even whilst we might well be having a good time!

And then finally, to add a point which links back to my desire to define and explore piety, and thus to the concerns of my final section:

> Religious motifs, symbols, ideas and beliefs are wrapped up in culture high and low, even in supposedly non-religious forms of culture.

They are there explicitly where the practices of faith communities contribute directly to what goes on in affective spaces. They are also there indirectly (e.g. in *Doctor Who* and in other TV dramas, in novels, in films) wherever explorations of forgiveness, redemption, meaning, self-understanding, identity, and so on, occur.

Part three: considering some consequences

But what has all this got to do with piety? If I am right in thinking that it is worth pressing the definition of piety as a practice, and if it can be accepted that people – at least sometimes – do more with what they enjoy in their consumption of the arts and culture than just enjoy it, then we must collectively explore what impact this activity is having in society. When organized religion is weak – and Christianity at least has been in severe numerical decline in the West for some time – and when religions are not at the forefront of creating contexts in which exploration of meaning and morality occurs, then we have to ask, 'Well, where *does* this exploration happen?' Here – at the point of intersection between entertainment and ethics – is one place where people are working out their value-systems, and what to think and believe.

It is much too simple to conclude simply that the arts and popular culture have *replaced* religion (without remainder), or that they have *distracted* people from religion. The latter could be true, and is worth examining. But the evidence of the actual reception and use of popular culture and the arts should catch western societies up short in so far as exploration of the human practice of meaning-making is concerned: whether to be labelled as, or correlated with, religion or not, such exploration happens because it is a facet of what it means to be human. Meaning-making occurs as a dimension of what people do when they are engaged in things that they do regularly and enjoy doing.

This situation is as problematic for religious groups, however, as it is confusing for those who are enjoying themselves in the affective spaces created by entertainment. If people are sometimes unwilling to admit that they are doing anything more than 'escaping' or being entertained by popular culture and the arts, then religious groups are frequently reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which their practices, and their members, are caught up in the 'media world'. Here, however, are important words from Stewart M. Hoover: 'The realms of "religion" and "media" can no longer easily be separated . . . They occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity.'[6] Whether or not you agree with Hoover's statement, his conclusion can be

broadened to incorporate all media-related activities, including consumption of the arts and popular culture, and it coheres with what I am saying here. Those who argue for a *religious* piety must therefore accept that their beliefs are tangled up in ways they may not wish with a whole range of cultural texts and practices. And those who wish there were *no* religions will have to accept that what people are doing with their consumptions of arts and culture may be closer to religious piety than they may wish to admit. Certainly when consumption and use of the arts and popular culture function as practices through which people actively undertake meaning-making, then 'piety' is back in view.

But what is piety, then? Piety, as I suggested at the outset, is the cultivation of a rich inner life, on the basis of which the practice of goodness and the search for wisdom is undertaken. In other words, without having a specific content initially (e.g. 'Christian piety' or 'Jewish piety'), it nevertheless recognizes that it is good thing to have a set of activities of practices to which one is committed, and which one may even enjoy (!), through which one is working out the principles according to which one is to live.

Piety thus understood is therefore an individual practice with socio-political consequences. It is important to recognize that one is not acting in isolation but has also always to consider the well-being of others. So if you are trying to be or do good, then it is not something that can only have consequences for yourself. Piety has ended up with such negative overtones largely because it has been too readily related only to the agent, the speaker, the do-er of the supposedly pious actions.

It is vital, though, that more notice is taken of what is already actually happening in the affective space at the point of intersection between entertainment and ethics. Furthermore, when governments, educational institutions and faith communities accentuate the fact that the practice of goodness or the active search for wisdom might be a good thing, this need not be understood as coercion or social control. It can equally be about happiness, well-being and concern for people.

Such ethically interested activity is not confined to what happens when people process their 'affective space' experiences. Consider these concepts and phrases: 'mindfulness', 'self-care', 'self-compassion', 'self-awareness', 'compassion for others', 'reflective practice', 'meditation', 'practising forgiveness', 'experiences of transcendence', 'emotional literacy', 'the spirituality of work'. These are all terms that have been quite familiar in the worlds of psychology, counselling, management studies, human resources, professional studies and education in recent years. They overlap with what has been going on in theology in pastoral studies and practical theology.

None of them inevitably requires any kind of religious or theological content. Yet in practice all of them connect with what those who have a religious belief and practice are keen to promote.

So if we look at what is happening at the intersection between entertainment and ethics, and at what goes on in the affective space to which I have referred, then we are compelled to consider the practice of goodness and the search for wisdom, and at what both those who are religious and those who are not religious are contributing to it, whether or not we call the resulting practices we are observing 'piety'. Of course, not all that occurs in 'affective space' is done with goodness and wisdom in mind. But then not all that goes under the name of religion has such noble intent. However, religions do not have a monopoly on goodness and wisdom (as the Bible itself reminds us frequently). The promotion of goodness and wisdom is always a collaborative task, and is always to be undertaken in self-critical perspective, whatever the social settings and traditions one works within.

The reflections conducted here carry practical consequences. First, I note some consequences *for academy and society*:

1. *To have a 'piety' is to be human.* It is not an unusual or abnormal thing to desire to practise goodness, and to seek wisdom. On the contrary, it enhances human living. To be committed to activities which can be said to constitute such piety, however they be constructed, is thus worth pursuing. Even if they are not specifically religious practices, contemporary religions cannot but be interested in which particular practices may in fact be supporting 'piety' thus defined.

2. *In exploring how piety works, we neglect religions (in all their diversity and complexity) at our peril.* Religions shape people. They structure people's lives. They help people discover or make meaning. Some (or all!) may be mistaken. But even whilst we shall need to go on debating the truth-claims which they contain, what they are doing is providing interpretative frameworks for people. It is thus a fundamental error when the function that religions have is neglected by those who claim to be studying society in all its various forms. And yet it is nothing short of astonishing to find in cultural, media, film, educational studies and sociology – outside of the specialisms such as the sociology of religion – how easily religion can be overlooked. Whatever their failings, religions will help us clarify good and bad pieties, good and bad forms of structuring life in the service of goodness.

3. *The cultivation of piety (and of healthy religions) is a collective, public responsibility.* Religions are much too important to be left to the religions themselves to develop. We need to have mutual critique across religions, and accept that there will be those who choose to stand outside. Yet if the cultivation of what I am calling piety is essential for being human, then it is in all our interests to develop it in a healthy way.

4. *Education has a crucial role to play in the cultivation of healthy religious/spiritual belief and practice.* If religions contribute to the identification and exploration of forms of piety appropriate for the present, then the contexts in which religions are examined critically in our education system is naturally important. I mean this from schools through to higher education. In the case of the latter, I am aware of real concerns at present at the weakness of many subjects in Humanities and the Arts in our universities.

5. *The study and promotion of piety must be inter- and multi-disciplinary.* The Magisteria to Ibiza Spectrum shows clearly how important it is for many intellectual disciplines to be involved across Arts, Humanities and the Social Sciences. Cultural, media, art, music, religious, political studies, sociology, psychology must all be involved in the task of understanding how we make meaning today.

Finally, I note some consequences *for faith communities (especially churches),* and these are presented as imperatives:

1. *Explore the similarities and differences between worship and entertainment.* In an age of entertainment, our task is not simply to copy what happens in the wider world of popular culture and the arts (though we may learn much from them). But we do have to acknowledge the similar things that often go on – in worship, for example. This is why acts of worship can be included within the 'affective space' I have identified. We must not overlook this and turn worship into something so wholly different from every other human activity that it has no links. There *are* differences. But because God is active in the world as a whole, we should not be surprised to find similarities between worship and concerts, and musical events, and art exhibitions.

2. *Rethink what it means to 'teach the faith'.* 'Teaching the faith' means being familiar with a set of resources and what the resources say. But it

is quite wrong to think that a faith community simply hands over a set of beliefs to be learned, or even a set of scriptures to be known in detail, in isolation from practices of use, or the contexts in which they are read. Faith exploration is, in other words, in practice experienced in the inter-play between participation in 'affective space' and active involvement in section B of Fig. 1. Notions of 'teaching the faith' frequently begin too simply in section A, as if a faith community's task is to transmit a set of texts or meaning through section B *to* a person. The substance of this paper has been to show how inappropriate such an understanding of communication is for the contemporary world. The cultivation of Christian piety, then, means knowing how to live, using the resources which Christianity has carried with it through time, and on the basis of ideas and beliefs about God which are tried and tested by life, and are constantly checked out in the company of others. Churches are more like support groups for living, operating in the inter-play of many other groups (in section B), than conservation areas for an endangered species.

3. *Respect the educational role for faith communities* (and make alliances with educational institutions where possible). Faith communities have to recognize their public responsibility not just to raise people in the faith, but to enable their people, and those who express interest in their community, to understand how to live in the society of which they are a part. It is such a simple point, but unless those of us in faith communities see it as a faith responsibility *also to be educated and to educate about the world in which faith is held,* then we shall be able to do none of what I have tried to do in this paper. We shall be unable to commend our own faith as a form of piety worth holding. But faith communities do not need to do this alone. On the contrary, we would do better to be actively engaged with educational institutions of all kinds, and encourage our members to participate in them, as a means of understanding the world in which faith is held, and thus in which piety is practised.

4. *Continue to address 'the God question' in a lively way.* It may seem a surprise that I have barely mentioned God so far. This is because I have been speaking about religion in general, and piety more specifically, as practices within which reference to God can be assumed. Of course, most faith-communities carry with them a tradition of understanding of the reality in whom/which all human beings are deemed to live, move and have their being. In Christian understanding, you cannot be Chris-

tian without having some notion of God. As a theologian, a Christian, and one who also believes that there is content to the statement 'I believe in God' beyond what goes on in my own brain, I am naturally extremely concerned about the content of any claims about God. Exploration of that question has to be for another time. This paper has used a functional understanding of religion or piety. To express matters sharply, what I have argued for does not depend on a specific understanding of God, or even on the being a God independent of the human mind at all. But even from this very limited exercise, I would still want to argue that the content of what is claimed for and about God is crucial. Where people do *not* believe in God then it is clear that they should be encouraged to clarify what they *do* believe in and why, and what narratives and communities they are controlled by and choose to commit themselves to, over and above any commitment to scientific rationality. Otherwise – to use G.K. Chesterton's pithy, often-quoted and very accurate quip – when people stop believing in God the danger is that they do not believe in nothing, but start believing in anything. For let us be clear: when what goes on in the affective space is explored, narratives and worldviews, thoughts and beliefs, ethical convictions and philosophical assumptions all come into play, even if not labelled as such.

Conclusion

To work at a piety ultimately means having a disciplined approach to practice and thinking about which traditions of thought and belief you plug into in order to do your sense-making. This is not lazy traditionalism, or an argument for pseudo-religion, but good sense in a world of media-saturation which threatens always to overwhelm us. Whether we should call what I am seeking to identify 'piety' is, of course, debatable. But I suggest simply that what I am drawing to our attention here – about what is *actually going on* in western societies – is a serious matter, even when it occurs in the middle of people's having fun. As churches we need to take note. Perhaps, then, our task as Christians is to consider 'how to foster piety without being pious', recognizing that we have many resources and a rich experience to offer, but remembering that we are not the only ones in the meaning-making business.

Notes

1 Clive Marsh is Director Learning and Teaching at the Institute of Lifelong Learning, University of Leicester, UK.

2 *The Observer*, 23.7.2000.
3 *The Observer*, 2.5.2010, The New Review section, p. 42.
4 The points I am making here are based on direct research, conducted collaboratively with Charlotte Haines Lyon (on film-reception) and with Vaughan S. Roberts (on the use of popular music), on extensive reading beyond my own comfort zone in the world of theology and religious studies (in media, film and music studies, and in the sociology of religion), and on decades' worth of reading newspapers, watching TV, listening to music, talking to contemporaries (Christian and not) about all of this. See further C. Haines Lyon and C. Marsh, 'Film's Role in Contemporary Meaning-Making: A Theological Challenge to Cultural Studies' in S. Knauss and A. Ornella (eds.), *Reconfigurations: Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives on Religion in a Post-Secular Culture* (Vienna and Berlin: LIT Verlag 2007), pp. 113–25, and C. Marsh 'On dealing with what films actually do to people: the practice and theory of film-watching in theology/film discussion' in R.K. Johnston (ed.), *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2007), pp. 145–61.
5 S. Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Popular Culture is Making Us Smarter* (London: Penguin 2006).
6 Stewart Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (New York and London: Routledge 2006), pp. 1 and 9.