

THE DANGERS OF A SUPERMARKET APPROACH TO RELIGION

Analyse how the owners of the supermarket think about you when you go into their supermarket. They view you as a person who makes choices. They hope that their advertising has attracted you. They have designed their advertising and attractive packaging on the shelves to make you feel dissatisfied with some goods you have been using, and make you feel that you would like better goods and other things you have not been using. They do not care if you can never be satisfied, as long as you return to them to keep choosing. Although you have limited resources, they hope that their price-structures will induce you to buy. They think of you as a person who has needs that have not been met, but who can be appeased, partly, by goods and experiences. They think of you as an individual. Your family, your friends, and your commitments do not count. All that matters is that you buy their goods. The checkout girl's "How are you?" is insincere recognition of your real needs. When they look at the calendar they do not think of holy days. The days before Christmas and Easter are opportunities to coax you to buy more. They do not want public holidays, when their stores close.

How do you think of yourself in a supermarket? You are aware of the power that you wield. If you and all other shoppers went elsewhere, the store would have to close. You shop as a person driven by self-interest. You come as one who chooses. You are part of the general assumption that the store is there to satisfy your needs and desires.

Unfortunately there is a parallel approach to reality and truth in many schools and universities. It is assumed that truth is merely an aspect of different ways in which societies view things. Truth is tribal. There are no external or objective realities. Every claim to truth is dissolved in uncertainty. All claims are pulled apart. Every statement has many interpretations. The lecturers are not there to provide you with truth. They define their purposes as teaching people to think critically, broadening their intellectual horizons, and making them more aware of themselves. If there is truth, they leave it to you to figure it out. There is also little attempt to provide moral guidance.

The higher-critical approach to the Scriptures, which is driven by humanism, has fostered the notion in theological circles that the Scriptures cannot be trusted as a sure guide to what human beings really need, or to who God is and what He has done for human beings. It ends with the cynical view that there is nothing left.

The impersonal and dehumanising assumptions of consumerism are having a devastating effect on ways in which Christian people regard their husbands and wives, their children, their friends, and their commitments. These kinds of thinking in our culture have devastating results when they apply to people's religious faith. Many people are casual about their church membership and confession. The idea that people choose what seems right and attractive to them is on the same plane as the self-chosen idolatrous worship of pagan societies. The idea that a Christian is a person who wants self-interested exchange with God is dangerous. It forgets that God is the Giver. It forgets that His most precious gift is His presence and that eternal life is His gift. Human beings have no capacity to buy from Him. God is not a means to some end that people choose as good for themselves. That He is the God of His people and that they are His people are their own ends and rewards.

In this post-modern context, Christians ought to stick out like bandaged thumbs. God does not think of human beings as people who flatter Him by exercising their power of choice. He does not pander to us as people driven by self-interest. Christians are not people who choose, for God knows what they really need. They are people who resist attempts to draw them elsewhere. They are not people who "shop around." God's sacrificial love to them in Christ has made them committed people, committed to Him, to their husbands and wives, to their children, to their friends, and to their neighbours. They are committed above all to God's Word in the Scriptures, and take their confessions seriously. The Christian creeds are universal, and the confessions of the church are treasured because they expound the Christ whom the prophets foretold and to whom the apostles bore witness. The confessions are treasured because they have clearly rejected the antitheses of the times when they were written, and because those rejections continue to be valid. God's Word requires continuing antitheses to the false assumptions of this post-modern age. This commitment to God is apparent in them in their homes, in the workplace, and on the playing field. It makes Christians stand out from their society, which is governed by uncertainty, the conviction about the right to choose, and the cynical view that all is driven by self-interest. Christians live their lives as in the presence of God, but with Christ, under the cross. Their Christian lives continue through Baptism, which joined them to Christ, and as they are nourished by His life-giving body and blood.

Christians know that God wants them to realise that they must be dissatisfied about what they are and have done. Nothing in this world can satisfy their real need but the Son of God, who became incarnate, and has done

what they could not do, fulfilling God's Law, and taking their guilt and punishment on Himself. Real satisfaction rests on God's gift, and His eternal life is final and ultimate satisfaction. He loves them as individuals without insincerity. Jesus Christ understands their sufferings because He also was tempted and suffered like them.

The church on its part must also not be driven by the assumption that all human beings, especially the unchurched, are strings of separate, but valid consumer-desires. That allows people who know least about the faith the right to determine most about how the faith should be nourished and expressed. As church members, we reject the enthusiasm of individual, private, choice-driven religiosity. We reject emotional appeals to self and to felt needs, which lead to endless and ephemeral re-conversions.

The Word of God challenges post-modernism in very radical ways. The language and ideas of God's Word are related to this real world. God's Word fosters the conviction that human beings are objects of God's special creation and care. It deals with the essential human problems of their solidarity in sin and death, and addresses their bondage to Satan, which came when Adam exercised his right to choose, and chose the fruit of the tree of death. It makes exclusive claims about what is true and false. It offers human beings redemption that is whole and undivided, in body, mind, soul, and spirit. Its truth is anchored in the Son of God, who became man at a particular time and place in this real world. His revelation of the Father, His incarnation and His surrender of Himself for the sake of others are the proofs that God indeed loves and is compassionate. Christians know that the holy and blessed Trinity has caused the beginning of this present world and has defined its end. Christians are secure the knowledge that the crucified Messiah has given, not sold, out of self-interest, life that is whole and real for ever.