"*Befriending Our Desires* is a thoroughly learned and readable book that offers a dynamic vision of Christian spirituality. Philip Sheldrake retrieves 'desire' as a key dimension of a fully embodied, vulnerable, and authentic spirituality. Always informed by Sheldrake's deep knowledge of the Christian tradition, the book presents carefully nuanced readings of Scriptures, mystics, poets, theologians, and theorists while remaining in touch with ordinary human struggles toward growth. Delighted to see this third edition in print!"

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"An extraordinarily beautiful and honest account of the role of desire in the spiritual life. Not a sanitized version, but a fully embodied, deeply human depiction of longing that is bound up with our humanity but also mysteriously reaches out and into something not entirely nameable or knowable—as our longings so often do."

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"The ache of the heart is the lure of God. Few writers explicate so clearly that intricate, yet intimate, interconnection. Philip Sheldrake does. He is truly a doctor of the soul, and this book is proof. Highly recommended for anyone who is searching for a more coherent grasp of their spiritual life."

—Ronald Rolheiser, OMI

Befriending Our Desires

Third Edition

Philip Sheldrake

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For Susie

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Preface to the Third Edition

I am very pleased that Liturgical Press is publishing this revised third edition of *Befriending Our Desires*. In particular, I am grateful to Hans Christoffersen for suggesting the project and for his helpful advice about new material.

The original book appeared in 1994 and the second edition in 2001. Apart from a range of editorial changes and stylistic improvements throughout the book, the third edition has a completely new, substantially longer, introduction. This includes helpful material on the teachings of the Buddha as well as references to the theme of desire in the striking poetry of George Herbert, the seventeenth-century English poet and priest. In chapter 5, "Desire and Choosing," I have also added some new material on the Christian tradition of discernment and of choosing well.

My intention continues to be to offer helpful insights that place "desire" at the very heart of our spiritual journey. As I suggested in my preface to the second edition, for many people the word "desire" is essentially associated with sexuality. It is certainly true that sexuality and spirituality are intimately connected, despite negative attitudes to sexual questions by religious people in the past as well as the contemporary commercialisation of "sex." However, as the book tries to underline, a spirituality of desire is much broader than sexuality. Only by attending thoughtfully to our many wants, longings, and passions can we gradually discern our truest desires. In doing so, we encounter the depths of our

existence and are able to engage with the God who dwells within us and whose own longing enlivens our own.

The original book owed a great deal to various courses I taught at the Summer Institute of the University of Notre Dame as well as to classes with Anglican ordinands at Westcott House, Cambridge. Since then the book has provoked conversations and exchanges with a range of people. It also led to invitations to speak and to conduct workshops in the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States, and Norway (sometimes with my partner Susie) in the areas of spirituality and sexuality or of discernment and choice. These experiences have helped me to develop my thinking further and therefore to improve the book.

The Scripture quotations I cite are taken from the New Jerusalem Bible and a list of other works quoted in the book appears at the end.

I wish to thank Westcott House in the Cambridge Theological Federation, where I am a senior research fellow, and Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas, where I am director of the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Spirituality. Both places offer congenial contexts in which to think and write.

Finally, I am very grateful to my partner Susie for her imaginative cover design and I dedicate this book to her with much love.

Philip Sheldrake
Westcott House, Cambridge
Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas
2016

Introduction

The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.

—Blaise Pascal

Desire lies at the heart of what it is to be human. There is an energy within all of us that haunts us and can either lead us to set out on a quest for something more or can frustrate us by making us nostalgic for what we do not have. This is true of all of us. But we all know of some people who plunge into the events of life and into relationships with unusual passion. Their energy can be attractive, and yet at the same time, it is unnerving. There is a feeling of restlessness about such people. They seem to suffer from an insatiable desire for more of life—a hunger and thirst that is never satisfied. Such strong desires can get dangerously out of control. The American novelist Anne Lamott, in her bestseller *Traveling Mercies*, movingly and powerfully describes her own struggles with such passionate desire. For years her deep sense of dissatisfaction with herself and with life and a persistent restlessness drove her into a succession of relationships and to the abuse of alcohol and drugs. Somewhere deep down, however, a journey of faith was also in progress. In the end, in an unsentimental and reluctant way, Anne came not only to believe in God but also to discover in her faith a means of focussing her passionate desire into a committed love for the processes and people of everyday life.

Desire haunts us. In its deepest sense, it is a God-given dimension of human identity. As such, desire is what powers all human spirituality. Yet at the same time, spirituality in Christianity and in other faiths is concerned with how we focus our desire. At the heart of Christian spirituality is the sense that humanity is both cursed and blessed with restlessness and longing that can only ultimately be satisfied in God. It is as though our desire is infinite in extent and that it cannot settle for anything less. It pushes us through the limitations of the present moment and of our present places towards a future that is beyond our ability to conceive. This is why the greatest teachers of Christian spirituality were so concerned with this God-filled desire and with how we understand it and channel it.

In more general terms, desire is not something in our minds. Its power is sensuous and embodied. Many people, including Christians, have often found it difficult to think of desire as a key to spirituality. Part of the suspicion of desire undoubtedly has to do precisely with the fact that it threatens a rational, controlled, and protected understanding of a mature human being. Desire is not only closely associated with embodiment but also with being open to the world beyond our private selves and therefore with vulnerability, encounters with "the other," and the challenge to change. From the moment we are born, we continue to be shaped by our involvement in networks of relationships. As we grow older and progressively come to understand about how and what we choose, our own identity continues to grow from our conscious commitments to other people. To be a person means "being-in-relationship."

Sadly, however, "desire" sometimes has a dark side where it becomes focussed in destructive ways. That which is God-given, beautiful, and creative and intended to embody the depths of love may end up expressing the exact opposite. For example, the media often presents stories of perverted sexual

desire in the abuse of children and vulnerable adults and in other forms of sexual exploitation by those with power of various kinds, including people with social status or religious authority. That said, our contemporary world also offers evidence that there can scarcely be a more evil desire than one that promotes violence and the destruction of other human beings in the name of God. I refer to religious people of various kinds who appear to suggest that God has ordered the destruction by human agents of religious "outsiders" or of people judged (by their fellow humans) to be irredeemable sinners.

Yet, in terms of both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, to share in God's own desire for humanity demands that we actively welcome the stranger, the "other," even the despised outsider. In Genesis, chapter 18, the narrative of Abraham suggests that his hospitality to three strangers is, unknown to him, actually hospitality to God. In the gospels, Jesus is regularly portrayed as pushing his early disciples towards people who were outsiders and were positively disturbing. For example, in the Gospel of Mark (chap. 6), he forces his reluctant disciples to cross to the non-Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee. Later (chap. 8), he feeds a multitude in non-Jewish territory. And in the Gospel of Matthew (chap. 15), he heals the daughter of a Canaanite (pagan) woman and commends her faith.

In a fully Christian spiritual sense, "desire" also challengingly embraces compassion and our reconciliation with what is strange, other, and even disturbingly alien. Not only is there a reconciliation between God and humanity through Jesus' death on the cross (for example, Rom 5) but also the love of God poured out upon us as a result of divine-human reconciliation creates a new humanity in which the walls of division between people are broken down. For those "clothed with Christ," there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28-29). Does

this only apply to the baptised "insider"? The short answer is "no," if we balance this with other texts. In 2 Corinthians (chap. 5), the universal vocation of the Christian community is clearly laid out. The community does not exist for its own sake—its God-given desire and love must be for all. Christians are to proclaim the message of reconciliation, that God is reconciling the world to God's own self. Clearly, a critical aspect of proclaiming the message of God's healing love to the world is for Christians to be living examples of God's all-embracing love and bearers in their own lives of what it means to be a new humanity (for example, Eph 2:11-22).

In the Gospel of Luke (10:25-37), the obligation in Jewish law (repeated by Jesus) both to love God and to love our neighbour "as ourselves" is presented in a deeply challenging way in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Here it is the Samaritan, member of a despised and outcast religious group, who alone shows loving compassion. Finally, in the Gospel of Matthew, embracing the stranger has a bearing on our eternal destiny in the portrayal of the final judgment. In giving hospitality to the stranger, we embrace God, and in refusing the stranger, we refuse God (25:31-46). If we truly desire God, we must also desire the "divine image"—our fellow human beings without exception. In the very direct words of William Blake, the eighteenth-century English poet, painter, and religious visionary, in the final verse of his poem "The Divine Image":

> And all must love the human form,
> In heathen, Turk or Jew;
> Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
> There God is dwelling too.

Returning briefly to the dark side of desire, the need to be able to distinguish between life-giving desires and destructive desires (however superficially pleasurable) is the heart of Ignatius Loyola's teaching about discernment in his *Spiritual Exercises.* This will be explored more fully in chapter 5,

"Desire and Choosing." At this point, however, it is worth engaging briefly with Buddhism, another spiritual tradition with helpful things to say about desire and particularly the struggle with unhealthy desire.

Precisely because human desire is the fundamental motivation of all human action, Buddhism gives a great deal of attention to the difference between unhealthy craving and healthy desire. The Buddha taught that life is full of suffering and fundamental dissatisfaction. This is caused by what might be called "ignorant desire" rather than desire in general. By this he means attachments, cravings, envy, hatred, and anger. The path to being freed from suffering is to overcome this false or ignorant desire which imprisons us. Overall, the Buddha's teachings are intended to be a recipe for all "sentient beings" to become free from suffering, thus to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth and ultimately to achieve liberation and enlightenment (*nirvana*). To be liberated, we need to grasp the true nature of existence. "Impermanence" underlines that everything is contingent, and it is therefore unhelpful to become "attached." Life-as-suffering is underpinned by dissatisfaction precisely because our attachments and cravings do not give us anything ultimately satisfying. In Christian terms, this comes close to Ignatius Loyola's notion in his *Spiritual Exercises* of "disordered attachments" from which we need to be freed. We also need to embrace the notion of "no self"—that nothing and no one, including me, has an independent, freestanding "self." In other words, "I" am not the centre of existence. Interestingly, the great early Christian theologian Augustine, in his commentary on Genesis, suggested that the original human sin, portrayed by the figure of Adam, was to please oneself and to live for oneself alone. Hence, a healthy human life should be based on "the love that promotes the common good for the sake of the heavenly society."

The Buddha offered an Eight-Fold Path as the basis for the spiritual journey in the direction of seeking an end to

suffering and of reaching enlightenment. This Path is reflected in three groups of "higher trainings." First there is Wisdom, where we learn renunciation and move towards "right understanding" and "right intention." Second, there is Ethical Conduct, where we cultivate "right speech" (avoiding lying, gossip or slander), "right action" (not acting in a damaging way, including killing), and "right living" where we do not use harmful means to achieve things. Finally, there is Concentration, where we cultivate "right effort" to purify ourselves from destructive thoughts, "right mindfulness" to become truly aware of reality, and "right concentration" through disciplined spiritual practices such as meditation.

Behind this Buddhist spiritual Path is an equivalent of the inner struggle towards spiritual freedom that is expressed in various ways in Christian spiritual traditions. A notable example is the spirituality of the sixteenth-century wisdom figure Ignatius Loyola, which will be mentioned at various points throughout this book. For the present moment, however, the themes of desire and of inner struggle, and the connections between them, are beautifully portrayed in the powerful and complex words and imagery of the outstanding seventeenth-century poet and Anglican priest George Herbert.

In Herbert's main poetic collection, *The Temple*, he emphasises that humans are creatures of desire who (as Herbert himself appears to do in his poetry) struggle to reach out to God in response to God's own dynamic of love and desire. In the notable prose work on the life and work of a priest, *The Country Parson*, Herbert speaks of God as the one "who giveth me my desires and performances." And in the poem "Discipline" (verse 2) he affirms:

> For my heart's desire
> Unto Thine is bent:
> I aspire
> To a full consent.

In terms of God, God's freedom and activity are most powerfully expressed by Herbert not in terms of judgment but rather as love. In the poem "Love (1)" God is described as "Immortal Love" and in another poem "Love (2)" God's love is imaged as "Immortal Heat" whose "flame" arouses true desires in us. Herbert's poem "Evensong" (the equivalent of Vespers in the Church of England Prayer Book) opens with the praise, "Blest be the God of love." And verse 4 concludes:

> My God, thou art all love.
> Not one poor minute scapes thy breast
> But brings a favour from above;
> And in this love, more than in bed, I rest.

God woos us sensitively. Herbert's fundamental assurance is always God's love—not God's anger. Indeed, God's loving desire is more powerful than judgmental anger could ever be:

> Then let wrath remove;
> Love will do the deed:
> For with love
> Stony hearts will bleed.
> ("Discipline," v. 5)

The most striking of Herbert's poems in relation to our intimacy with God is called "Clasping of Hands." In it, our deep human desire is for a union between ourselves and God that somehow transcends "Thine" and "Mine."

> O be mine still! Still make me Thine!
> Or rather make no Thine and Mine!

It appears that Herbert's desire for God, as is typical with all human beings, was not straightforward. According to words apparently quoted from Herbert's letter to his friend Nicholas Ferrar accompanying his poetry prior to publication,

the poems are "a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master: in whose service I have now found perfect freedom." Indeed, a notable thread running through the poems is a relationship with God characterised by an intense inner spiritual struggle on the part of the human heart. The human heart is a place of conflicting desire:

> A wonder tortur'd in the space
> Betwixt this world and that of grace.
> ("Affliction (4)")

There are various dimensions to Herbert's spiritual struggle. In the classical Protestant sense of sinfulness and unworthiness, there is an inability to cope with the single-pointedness of God's unconditional desire and love. To my mind, however, the struggle is more complicated. While Herbert's inner struggle is evident throughout the poetic collection, arguably the most powerful and beautiful expression is the final poem of the central section of *The Temple*, "Love (3)." Here, God (Love) welcomes the human character at the heart of the poem (no doubt Herbert himself) and invites him to join the feast. This is clearly a reference to the eschatological banquet, but it also has strong eucharistic echoes. Herbert comes across as wanting to be worthy to be there at the feast. His desire is to merit God's love. In this final poem, what is lacking at God's feast is "A guest . . . . worthy to be here." Indeed, a basic question throughout the poetic collection is how Herbert is to let go spiritually, to surrender himself and allow God to love him and to serve him freely. Basically this desire to be worthy is a subtle form of pride. On the one hand, it seems entirely appropriate to desire to be worthy. That, however, is to place our own capacities at the centre of things rather than God's own freely expressed desire. In this powerful poem, God is shown to be the one who respects human beings—nothing is forced or imposed on us, but God

desires to grant us everything. In the end, Herbert surrenders his own desires, accepts God's desire for him to enter and to sit down and eat. In that realisation and surrender, Herbert finds spiritual freedom.

Just before the Second World War, Simone Weil, the French Jewish philosopher and political activist with an inclination towards Christianity and mysticism, read Herbert's poem while staying at the Abbey of Solesmes over Easter. She subsequently used it regularly for meditation, and it apparently led her to a powerful mystical experience of the loving presence of Jesus Christ.

> Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back
> Guilty of dust and sin.
> But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
> From my first entrance in,
> Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
> If I lack'd anything.
>
> A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
> Love said, you shall be he.
> I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
> I cannot look on thee.
> Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
> Who made the eyes but I?
>
> Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
> Go where it doth deserve.
> And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
> My dear, then I will serve.
> You must sit down says Love, and taste my meat:
> So I did sit and eat.
> ("Love (3)")

Our desire is a rich, intense, and challenging force in our lives. While the word, from a contemporary human perspective, is closely associated with human sexuality its power and potential is much wider and deeper. Many of the greatest

Christian spiritual teachers and mystics such as Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Ignatius Loyola, or some of the seventeenth-century Anglican spiritual writers focus on the language of "desire," longing, yearning, as the fundamental key to our spiritual growth. All of these teachers, however, also note that while desire is a God-given energy that drives us onwards on the spiritual journey, our deepest desire needs to be carefully distinguished from our immediate wants or attractions. From this perception grew the Christian tradition of discernment as the basis for choosing well. All great spiritual traditions seek to identify an object of desire worthy of our human potential and that draws us beyond the superficial or the self-absorbed. The object of our deepest desire, however, which we name as God or the Absolute, is necessarily beyond what can be definitively described, possessed, or controlled. In that sense, the word "desire" expresses a movement ever onward towards an indefinable future.

In this book I seek to explore the role of desire in our quest for God, in prayer, in relation to our sexuality, as we make choices and are challenged to respond to change. In my case, I both am and am not the same person who wrote the original version of this book over twenty years ago and then first revised it more than ten years ago. My personal journey of desire since the original book has involved considerable, even painful changes as I first moved out of a religious community into family life, then changed my work patterns and lived in new places. This further modest revision is a reflection of my continuing journey.

When all is said and done, each of us is a work in progress and will continue to be so for as long as we live. And the key to it all is our desire, how we respond to it and seek to shape it.

Chapter One

A Spirituality of Desire?

Abruptly, Florence asked, "Is there nothing that you long for, quite passionately? *Want?*"
"Oh, all human beings have aspirations!"
"Aspirations! I was not talking of anything so elevated. *Wants* . . . Desires."
Florence looked round the garden wildly. It was cold and almost dark and the rain had begun again. In the buildings behind them, she felt the presence of studious, purposeful, dedicated young women.
"This . . ." she gestured. "I could never aspire to this."
Nor ever want it, she realised. For the air would surely suffocate her.

—Susan Hill, *Air and Angels*

Although those of us who have lived in Cambridge know otherwise, the rarefied atmosphere of the University colleges and their aspirations, so deftly captured in Susan Hill's novel *Air and Angels*, appears to be the complete opposite of the passion and restlessness of desire. Ancient universities seem more at home with ideals and elevated emotions. But one of the novel's characters, Florence, has more down to earth feelings that appear to be beyond the grasp of her friend Thea, a university teacher, as they share afternoon tea. For, although she cannot afford to admit it too explicitly, Florence desires Thomas Cavendish, the irreproachable

clergyman, and is seeking some way, from whatever source, to achieve her end.

A similar contrast between, on the one hand, the earthiness and concrete quality of desires, wants, longings, or passions and, on the other, more elevated ideals and emotions, has also been common in Christian thinking. In popular presentations of Christian history, it is the elevated, apparently more "spiritual" values, rather than the earthy, that have come to be associated with the dedication, purpose, and virtue of serious believers or aspiring saints. Conventional images of holiness do not encourage us to befriend our desires. Indeed, they usually suggest that saints, if they ever showed signs of having personal desires at all, soon lose them in some overwhelming conversion experience. In Hill's novel, it is true that Florence's desire is not a very healthy one but has the quality of obsession and possessiveness. Not all desire is, however, of this kind. The problem is that unless we feel free to own our desires in the first place, we will never learn how to recognise those that are more fruitful and healthy, let alone how to live out of the deepest desires of all.

Desire is intimately associated with our capacity to love truly—ourselves, other people, God, or the Absolute, and even abstract things such as ideals or causes. Love, we need to remember, is not simply a matter of immediate feelings. There are times, even in the most intense love commitments, when tangible feelings are absent. But love ultimately proves itself in its focused attention and its quality of dedication that is richer and deeper than mere duty or will power. It is perhaps what St. Augustine means by "intention" and the author of English medieval mystical text, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, by "naked intent."

Desires or Ideals?

Unfortunately, where human love has been allowed any role in traditional Christian spirituality, it had to be the spiri-

tual, disinterested, universal love of *agape* rather than the engaged, passionate, particular love of *eros*. These have so often been treated as two distinct kinds of love. Indeed, they have been viewed in hierarchical terms as a higher love and a lower love. Only *agape* was commonly associated with God and therefore godliness even though, as we shall see, *eros* played an important role in the thinking of some significant writers such as Meister Eckhart.

I recall a letter to a church newspaper years ago concerning the writer's difficulties with the more homely and personal style of worship that had been introduced into his local parish. "After all, Jesus asked us to *love* our neighbours not to *like* them!" Some of us will recall the old-fashioned phrase, "As cold as charity." I heard a more contemporary update from an American friend who described a superficial type of generosity in terms of, "As wide as the Rio Grande and just as shallow." It is all too easy for a so-called universal, disinterested *agape* love to be simply *un*interested and well protected. A gift of everything but myself. Donation without commitment. An article in a well-respected British religious weekly noted that too many clergy appear able to relate to their parishioners only in this disengaged way. The writer rather sharply affirmed that she had no wish to be the object of someone's universal love! As I hope will become clear throughout this book, I firmly believe that the radical separation of *agape* love from *eros* love is a very unhelpful way of seeing things.

For present purposes, however, human desires have a particular association with *eros*-love, or "erotic power," and are feelings of attraction towards or aversion from objects, people, and ideas. Any desire is essentially personal, that is to say associated with the kind of people we are. It can, however, be directed towards non-personal things such as material possessions or abstract qualities such as success, justice, and perfection. The point is that desire is not some kind of impersonal power "out there" that controls us whether we like

it or not. Desires are best understood as our most honest experiences of ourselves, in all our complexity and depth, as we relate to people and things around us. Desires are not the same as instincts—either human ones or those of other animals. Although desires have sometimes had a bad press, being more or less reduced to the instinctual, they in fact involve a reflective element. They are therefore, as far as we know, uniquely human qualities. In particular, we need to rescue "desire" from attempts to reduce its meaning to sexual libido and its increasingly murky associations with sexual abuse or sexual power games.

On the other hand, desires undoubtedly overlap with our needs and neediness, although it is still possible to distinguish between them. Both needs and desires can be conscious or unconscious. In fact, it is not unusual to experience a conflict between the conscious and unconscious levels of ourselves. As we reflect back on our lives we can come to understand more clearly how unconscious needs had the capacity to drive us to behave in ways that we actually disliked or which failed to express our truest self. For example, we may be driven by a deeply buried need to succeed, and to be seen to succeed, while on a conscious level we say to ourselves and to others how much we *desire* to operate differently! When we choose to talk of befriending desires rather than simply responding to needs, we are implying that desires involve a positive and active reaching out to something or someone. Such a movement goes beyond our temporary reactions to immediate circumstances and actually touches on deeper questions of our identity and our ideals.

Thus, to return to my comments on Susan Hill's novel, if we distinguish desires from aspirations, it is not because desires have nothing to do with *ideals*, for they frequently do. It is simply that desires have a more grounded quality than what we generally understand by "aspirations." Desires are more intrinsic to the reality of each person. True and

realistic ideals have this same intrinsic quality. Aspirations, on the other hand, often speak rather more of *idealisation*, of something outside myself, indeed detached from my own experience and capacities, but against which I feel I should measure my life. If so, we can think of desire as openness to the fullness of *what is* rather than to *what ought to be*. Desires, then, contrast with a world of duties or of unrealistic dreams. Any ideal that attempts to overcome desire and replace it with cool reason is both inhuman and unattainable.

Whether most of us are aware of it or not, the early centuries of Christianity set the tone for so much that came afterwards and still influences us. Not least was the powerful effect of various ascetical trends inherited from pre-Christian Greek and Roman philosophy. These ascetical traditions presented the ideal human being as free from needs and desires—especially our apparently inescapable dependencies on food and sex. Because desire has a grounded quality, it is inevitably linked to our physical senses that in turn connect us to the world of time and space. In a way, all desire is sensual, that is, associated with our senses. It is interesting that we instinctively make this connection when we talk of "being sensible" about taking wise actions or making wise choices. We also speak of arriving at a more healthy way of seeing and doing as "coming to our senses."

The Power of Desire

In general, our desire is a powerful matter. Individual desires, like all feelings, vary in intensity. They can range from faint wishes to powerful passions that really drive us in particular directions and govern our thoughts and actions. Some are fleeting while others last longer and reappear repeatedly. But the main point is that there is nothing passive or limp about desire, for it gives energy and direction to our psyche.

The fourteenth-century Italian mystic Catherine of Siena recognised this positive and extraordinary power of our

desires when she wrote that it makes them one of the few ways of touching God because "you have nothing infinite except your soul's love and desire" (*Dialogue*, p. 270). The German Dominican mystic of the same period, Meister Eckhart, suggested that the reason why we are not able to see God is the faintness of our desire. In the graceful language of desire that permeates Archbishop Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*, one of the foundation documents of the English Reformation, there is a difference between following "too much the devices and desires of our own hearts" and the "holy desires," "good counsels," and "just works" that proceed only from God's inspiration. Yet, even "holy desires"—the desires that ultimately find their rest and quietness only in God—tap into energies that are partially physical.

The sensual, indeed sexual quality (understood properly) of even holy desires, is witnessed to by the language of many of the great Christian mystics. This is something to which I shall return later. The problem is that if we are regularly taught to understand the spiritual life as mainly, if not exclusively, about *giving up* things, we will never hear the call to engage with life or particular issues in a passionate way. Attention to desire, on the other hand, is about cultivating in ourselves that capacity for passionate concern. Because desire is such a strong thing, there is always a hint of risk. Without doubt, some desires enslave us and others dissipate our energies. But desire can also generate power and physical energy and therefore also galvanise our spirituality. The fact that we frequently avoid such risks and therefore often lack a lively spirituality is closely connected with the frequent absence of a healthy and deep theology of God's Spirit in Western Christianity.

This problem goes far beyond the presence or absence of a few dramatic manifestations of "charismatic" gifts. The Spirit blowing where it wills is the risky, wild, and profligate side of God inviting us to a similar risky freedom and a willingness to pour ourselves out into situations, commitments and re-

lationships. The Spirit is vulnerable as well as powerful. To allow ourselves actively to desire is also to be vulnerable. The Spirit of God given to us leads us not only into all truth but also into the vulnerability of Jesus' way. But to take such risks is at the same time to know ourselves to be held securely and to be safe at some deep and essential level beyond our own powers to control. The Spirit is also the indwelling power of God in the heart of each of us, sustaining us.

Should I Have Desires?

On several occasions I have been struck by two common reactions to the idea of a spirituality of desire. These sum up the human and spiritual dilemma. The first reaction is, "I have so many desires that I don't know what to do with them." Such a feeling is partly related to our fears and sense that we lack control over our inner life. But the variety of desires is also confusing. This makes our experience of desire appear ambiguous, with no reliable means of distinguishing between the superficial and the deep, the healthy and the unhealthy ones. There are certainly many conflicts that we shall have to face if we decide to take our desires seriously. Perhaps we are tempted to feel that it would be safer to treat them all with equal suspicion and to try to live (at least in our better moments) in reference to more objective values.

The second reaction goes something along these lines. "I was taught not to have desires. Or rather, I was given the message from childhood onwards that it was important to fulfil the desires of certain other important people in my life." So, even more powerful than the *oughts* and *shoulds* of objective values were the people in reference to whose desire or will we were taught to live. These might be parents, teachers, our spouse, the Church and, most powerfully of all, God. The teaching of the Christian Church has tended to place a very strong emphasis on external sources of authority in contrast to

our personal desires. Desire was felt to suggest private judgment and the uncontrollable. To follow desires seemed like a failure in obedience to Church norms in favour of self-will. Duty, faithfulness to the expectations of others, or self-denial in an almost literal sense of denying one's personality and tastes all too easily became the criteria for spiritual progress. In the long term, this was often to the detriment of physical and psychological health. Desire also suggests passion, yet "a person of good judgment" was often thought to be cool and objective. As a result, it seemed that it is not so much desire that should guide our choices but a cultivated detachment from any strong (and implicitly, unreliable) feelings.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, the sixteenth-century founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola, invites any person who makes a retreat to "ask God our Lord for what I want and desire" at the beginning of every period of prayer. So many people find that their unconscious response is to exclaim, "What *I* desire? I have no desires!" Or, we say to God, rather prematurely, "I want what *you* want!" We find ourselves stuck—instinctively mouthing the "appropriate" feeling or the truly spiritual aspiration! While it is true that nowadays the language of codependency and addiction is sometimes used too glibly in spirituality circles, there is some truth in admitting a condition of spiritual addiction which leads us to fulfil the desires of others (even a God created in the image of human authority figures) in a compulsive way with a consequent erosion of our own identity.

Desire and God

As a consequence, many of us have found it hard to think of desire as a key to the spiritual journey. On the contrary, it is experienced as a problem or at least as something difficult to integrate with our understanding and practice of faith. This is partly because we have inherited an image of a very

disengaged God. Consequently, we do not instinctively relate to the more biblical notion of a God who is passionately engaged with the whole of creation, whose life is a continuous movement out of self, who is God precisely as the one who out of love sends the Son into our world not to condemn it but to redeem it. As Jon Sobrino and other Latin American liberation theologians have reminded us, the cross of Christ is not just an event or an act but, in a radical way, points to the nature of God's being.

> On the cross of Jesus God himself is crucified. The Father suffers the death of the Son and takes upon himself all the pain and suffering of history. In this ultimate solidarity with humanity he reveals himself as the God of love, who opens up a hope and a future through the most negative side of history. Thus, Christian existence is nothing else but a process of participating in this same process whereby God loves the world, and hence in the very life of God. (Sobrino 1978, p. 224)

Unfortunately, a more familiar influence in the consciousness of many Christians is the image of a passionless, detached God whose perfection is to be self-contained, still, and at rest. According to this image, God's will is eternal, predetermined and extrinsic to our own hopes and feelings. If we believe ourselves to be created in the image of that kind of God, we can all too easily associate desire and passion with lack of balance, with confusion, loss of control, and dangerous subjectivity. Desire is also closely linked to sexuality, which seems to have little to do with common (arguably, traditional male) perceptions of the spiritual. Desire, then, is too often viewed with suspicion as something disturbing or misleading, even if pleasurable, rather than something to be embraced as a positive and dynamic force. As a consequence, human love for God has been treated for centuries as entirely unique and wholly disconnected from all other forms of human loving.

Despite the power of all this psychological and spiritual inheritance, I want to suggest that spirituality is in fact intimately associated with desire—our own and God's. Human longing for fulfilment in God does not need to be based on our denial of other forms of love that connect us with created reality. On the contrary, all of them are interconnected. For this reason, we can validly talk of "erotic" elements in our love of God. This does not necessarily involve us in using explicitly *sexual* imagery, although the evidence from many of the classic Christian mystics is that it often does so. But we understand the word "erotic" more broadly as that passionate, specific, and partly physical energy that lies behind other human loves and deep commitments. In that case, desire is inevitably bound up with our relationship with God. The highest form of love, drawing us into a more perfect relationship with God, includes rather than excludes the best in all our human experiences of love.

Teachers of Desire

Many of the great spiritual teachers used desire or its equivalents as the central metaphor for the human search for God or for God's search for humanity. Other writers witness to the fact that our desires are vital to spiritual growth and discernment. This book is full of such writers as Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, medieval monks with a liking for the Song of Songs, Beguines such as Hadewijch, Bonaventure, Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the great Carmelites Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Ignatius Loyola, the Anglicans George Herbert and Thomas Traherne, the Jewish writer Etty Hillesum, and the Buddha. All of them, in their very different ways, taught that spirituality centres on desire.

At this point, I would highlight two figures as paradigms of a journey of desire. Those are the contrasting figures of Ignatius

Loyola and Etty Hillesum. Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) was a sixteenth-century Basque noble destined for a military and courtly career whose life unexpectedly changed in a most radical way. He will appear regularly throughout the book precisely because many people see his teachings as a paradigm of a spirituality of desire. Both his life and his teachings touch on many of our themes, particularly desire in relation to prayer, choice, and change. From the moment that a severe wound at the battle of Pamplona in 1521 ended his military career, Ignatius began a journey of desire. During his painful convalescence at the castle of Loyola, he first had to struggle to discover what his heart's desire really was. The remainder of his life, a period as a hermit at Manresa, university studies, the creation of the famous *Spiritual Exercises*, and his founding of the Jesuits, was a gradual process of learning how to focus his desire in the most powerful way. He was also concerned with how to pass on to other people the wisdom he had gained in his own life and from accompanying others on their spiritual quest. Running through Ignatius's spirituality of desire is the search for spiritual freedom, freedom from the misplaced or superficial desires that imprison us (what he called "disordered attachments"), and an ever greater ability to centre human desire on God.

Etty Hillesum is a more unconventional figure. Hers is a story of deep mystical pilgrimage in the midst of violence, war, anti-Semitism, and tragedy. Etty was born in 1914 into a scholarly, highly talented, and secular Dutch Jewish family and died in 1943 at age 29 in Auschwitz. Her story is available primarily through her diaries for the years 1941–1942 and her 1942–1943 letters from the Nazi transit camp at Westerbork. She was hardly known outside the Netherlands until recent years and, compared to Ignatius, is a spiritual maverick.

> Our desire must be like a slow and stately ship, sailing across endless oceans, never in search of safe anchorage. (Hillesum 1985, p. 92)

"Never in search of safe anchorage." That admirably sums up the fearless and passionate commitment of Etty's never-ending search for an inner truth (her "destiny" as she called it), for intellectual honesty, and for moral beauty. She sought to be faithful to her belief in humanity and love in the face of appalling Nazi brutality. Eventually, her restless desire led her to develop an intense religious sensibility that gives her diaries a profound and even mystical tone. Etty's spirituality was detached from institutional religion but embraced her own Jewish tradition, elements of Christianity, other philosophies, insights from psychology as well as her own idiosyncratic understanding of "the God within." Two things are particularly striking. First, Etty's passionate approach to life was thoroughly embodied in her sexuality. Second, however, she gradually discovered, beyond her tendency to become emotionally involved with men in an impulsive way, how to channel her desire into a deeper and more tranquil blend of tender commitment and personal freedom. The intensity of Etty's growing mystical awareness did not lead in the direction of detached solitude but back into active engagement with the real world, expressed finally by her volunteering to work for her fellow Jews imprisoned at Westerbork and thus inevitably to share their terrible fate.

Scripture and Desire

The basic foundation of a Christian approach to desire is, of course, the Scriptures. Both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are full of the themes of desire, yearning, and longing. The writers of the psalms were never afraid to express deep and powerful emotions of this kind in relation to God:

> As a deer yearns
> for running streams,
> so I yearn
> for you, my God.

> I thirst for God,
> the living God;
> when shall I go to see
> the face of God?
> (Ps 42:1-2)

God, too, is a God who desires us and yearns for us:

> Yahweh is tenderness and pity, slow to anger and rich in faithful love. . . .
> As tenderly as a father treats his children, so Yahweh treats those who fear him. (Ps 103:8, 13)

The consoling prophecy of Second Isaiah to the defeated and exiled people of Israel portrays God's desire as so great that the people's image or name is carved into the palm of God's hand:

> Zion was saying, "Yahweh has abandoned me, the Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her baby at the breast, feel no pity for the child she has borne? Even if these forget, I shall not forget you. Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. (Isa 49:14-16)

But desire and longing are not only for God. The Gospel of Matthew links desire to the writer's great theme of justice in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness [or justice]: they shall have their fill." The Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, has sometimes been described as a passage that highlights in different ways the qualities and intensities of human desires. The rich man certainly desires to be good and to love God (10:17-22) but he also wants material security and familiar surroundings. The Scriptures here do not present a crude contrast between love of God and love of other things and people. Rather the point is that the man's deepest desire for God, and all that this implied, was still not free to find full expression. Even among the disciples, the so-called sons of Zebedee (10:35-40) not only desire to

be with Jesus but also seek the status and power that they believe the kingdom of God will bring to them. To desire fully to "be with" Jesus is to allow oneself to risk sharing in who Jesus really is and thus in a process of stripping away more superficial desires. The blind beggar Bartimaeus (10:46-52) contrasts strongly with the spiritual blindness of both the rich man and the disciples. His deep, intensely focused, and active desire is not merely to be healed but, as with the previous cases, to follow Jesus. In this case, his singleness of desire brings both healing and the invitation to follow Jesus.

Authentic Desires

It is, therefore, important to realise that while all desires are real experiences, not all are equally valid expressions of our authentic selves. Certain desires spring from a more profound level within us than others. Depth of desire is not necessarily the same as intensity of feeling. For example, violence or abuse of various kinds can result in a strong and immediate desire for revenge. This is perfectly natural and understandable. Yet Christians would say that, ultimately, we need to move beyond that level of desire to a deeper, more authentic level where the power of forgiveness and reconciliation can be found. Authentic desires come from our essential selves rather than from the surface of our personalities or from our immediate reactions to situations and experiences. Such authentic desires tend to reach into the very heart of our identities. At this level, the questions "Who am I?" and "What do I want?" intimately touch each other. To return to the teachings of Ignatius Loyola, "To ask God our Lord for what I want and desire" as we focus our prayer, is an invitation to us to acknowledge our immediate sense of need. But this is only a starting point for the gradual unfolding of what it is we are most passionately and deeply engaged with. Our "Great Desire," to paraphrase Ignatius, is sometimes well hidden be-

neath a confusing mass of often more insistent wants, needs, and longings. To move through the various levels of desire clearly demands discernment. This is such a critical subject that I will dedicate a chapter to it later.

What all this means is that the more honestly we try to identify our authentic desires, the more we can identify who we truly are. We can think of our authentic desires as vocational in orientation. They are guides to what we are called to become, to live, and to do. If we want to begin to know who someone else is beyond the externals of their immediate life story, we need to understand their desires, which find expression in both words and actions. Of course, we all tend to show off more immediately the desires that express the more superficial aspects of ourselves. But ultimately, a pattern of what we want in and from life emerges and thus provides one of the best clues to the true self. If our desires reveal who we are, then one value of attending to them is that it helps us gradually to recognise our true self behind the masks we wear. At the same time, it helps us to become what God desires us to be as expressed in the process of our very creation. This was the level of experience that was probed in the three stories of the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10. And that is, it seems to me, one of the points of Jesus' question to the disciples of John the Baptist in the opening chapter of John's gospel: "What do you want?" (1:38). Rather, it is a question of "What do you want your life to be? Who do you really think you are?" The disciples' response is to ask Jesus "Where do you live?" On the face of it, that may seem a rather odd response. "Place," however, is not merely geographical but is also a question of a person's place in the world and in the scheme of things. The response, too, seems to be a desire to come to know their "place" and where and how they should live in relation to Jesus' "place."

The more authentic our desires, the more they touch upon our identities and also upon the reality of God at the heart of

ourselves. Our most authentic desires spring ultimately from the deep wells of our being where the longing for God runs freely. This is so even if the desires are not always expressed in explicitly religious terms. As a result, our deepest desires to some degree move us beyond self-centredness to self-giving. To put it another way, these desires are not narrowly concerned with ourselves but with the growth of the kingdom of God. They reflect God's own desires, God's longing, for the world as well as for each of us in particular. In this sense, authentic desires have a social or collective dimension.

There is obviously something of a paradox here. I have said that deep desires reflect what is uniquely personal. Yet at the same time, the more deeply we go into ourselves, the more surely these desires are seen to transcend any temptation to individualism. At the level of deep desires, any distinction between what I desire and the desires God gifts me with actually begins to blur. The more profoundly we reach into ourselves, the more we experience desires that are *both* uniquely our own and also uniquely God-given. It is important to affirm at this point that these remarks are true of healthy sexual desire as well. The quality of our sexual desire is a kind of paradigm of the kind of people we are and cannot, therefore, be distinguished from other kinds of desire.

Towards a Spirituality of Desire

Given what I have said so far, my hope in the remainder of this book is to explore in a broad and accessible way a spirituality of desire in order to show that it is only by attending to desires that we may encounter our deepest self, the image of God within. It is probably already clear that I believe that the degree to which we value or devalue human desire as the key to our inner growth, as well as growth in relation to other people or the world around us, depends very much on our images of God. It is to this issue that I propose to turn my

attention first. There are two key questions. First, is God a God of desire? The seventeenth-century Anglican priest and mystic Thomas Traherne had no doubts that God is a God of desire. Traherne is one of the most striking and beautiful spiritual writers on the subject of desire—ours and God's—and has become better known in recent years. "His wants put a lustre upon his enjoyments and make them infinite" (*Centuries of Meditation*, 1.44). Second, if we say that the goal of all human desire is God, does this mean that all other human desires are a distraction or, rather, that God is to be found at the heart of all true desire? I want to suggest that a thoroughly Christian answer is the second.

Following closely on the heels of a consideration of healthy or distorted images of God is the question of our explicit relationship with God, or what we call prayer. In the Christian tradition, it is not only Ignatius Loyola who considered that our desire should become focused in prayer and indeed become an important aspect of growth in prayer. Desire, or its equivalents, plays a major role in the approach to prayer taught by many spiritually enlightened people from the early Egyptian Desert Fathers and Mothers to a number of the great Western mystics. People often think of desert monasticism in terms of unattractive asceticism. While it is true that there were dubious exaggerations, a healthy asceticism was, however, actually an effective discipline to focus desire more sharply. As Abba Joseph said to Abba Lot, "You cannot be a monk unless you become like a consuming fire." And on another occasion he said to Lot, with his fingers "like ten lamps of fire," "If you will, you can become all flame" (Ward 1975, p. 103).

Some spiritual writers mention a deepening of desire in association with the gradual loss of images of God. The inability to pin God down to this or that image drives us ultimately into a kind of "darkness" or unknowing in which desire alone becomes the force that drives us onwards. It is sometimes important to remind ourselves that dryness in prayer is not

the same as absence of desire—in fact the contrary is true. For Julian of Norwich, "longing" or "yearning" are key experiences not only in our forgiveness by God and conversion from sin but also in our developing relationship to God. And for the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, "Now you have to stand in desire all your life long" (Chapter 2). In other words, we need to stand openhanded and openhearted, not assuming that we know best or, indeed, that we know anything very much. We need also to learn how to wait and, like Mary in the story of the annunciation in the Gospel of Luke, ask continually, "How can this be?" Waiting is one of the hardest lessons for the serious seeker after God. By standing in desire we need to be ready to struggle and to allow our perspectives to change so that we are ever more open to God's action in us.

Delight, play, and pleasure are not concepts that many of us instinctively associate with holiness, the search for God, or spirituality. We may admit that the word *desire* has some kind of spiritual dimension, but its passionate sexual connotations seem to lack the sober quality needed among sound and serious seekers. Is it not the case that from Buddhist ascetics to Christian contemplatives, a culture of celibacy has predominated? This culture affects the self-understanding of even some religious people who have not opted for celibate lifestyles. So, the question of the relationship between desire, intimacy, and sexuality needs to be addressed. It is not merely a question of asking how we can be spiritual with all the distractions of family and wage earning. An even sharper question is: how can sexuality *be* spiritual experience as opposed to something that, at the very least, is spiritually confusing or, at worst, some kind of loss of innocence and of our essential energies?

Our desires imply a condition of incompleteness because they speak to us of what we are not or do not have. Desire is also, therefore, a condition of openness to possibility and to

the future. Desires ground us in the present moment, but, at the same time, they point to the fact that this moment does not contain all the answers. Clearly, such ideas have a great deal to do with our experience of choice and change. Being people of desire implies a process of continually choosing. Here, once again, desire comes into its own as the condition for discerning what our choices are and then choosing from within the self rather than according to extrinsic demands. Discernment can be thought of as a journey through desires—a process whereby we move from a multitude of desires, or from surface desires, to our deepest desire, which contains all that is true and vital about ourselves.

This is a process of inclusion rather than exclusion. The movement inward is where the essential self, or "image of God" within, may be encountered. Yet this journey also involves engaging with the ambiguities of desire. Initially we are aware of many, sometimes contradictory desires. How are we to recognise the level of deepest desire that truly sums up who we *are*? For mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Julian of Norwich whatever is evil or destructive or sinful is in the end nothing, "no-thing." All that is good and has meaning is part of what we mean by deepest desire because it is part of ourselves and part of God. At the heart of all of us is a centre that is a meeting point where our deepest desires and God's desiring in us connect and are then found to coincide.

Being people of desire also means that we live consistently within a condition of constant change rather than experience occasional changes from one static situation to another. Our spiritual journeys are essentially stories of continual transition. In this way, desire becomes a metaphor for transformation.

If desire is our openness to possibility and a metaphor for change, and if we say that to be human is to desire, how do we relate these things to traditional Christian images of perfection, the vision of God, and eternal life? Surely these have a very static quality because they imply completion and our

final possession of all that matters? The afterlife as a condition of "eternal rest" has been assumed to involve freedom from desire firstly because there is no need for "more" and secondly because the sexual connotations of desire are assumed to be overtaken by our union with God. In this context, Jesus' comment to the Sadducees that "at the resurrection men and women do not marry; no, they are like the angels in heaven" (Matt 22:30) has been asked to carry more meaning than it can validly bear. Of course, none of us can possibly know what "eternal life" ultimately means. But against the traditional static view I suggest that it may, like the God we encounter, have an eternally dynamic quality in which we shall remain beings of desire.

> For giving me desire,
> An eager thirst, a burning ardent fire,
> A virgin infant flame,
> A love with which into the world I came,
> An inward hidden heavenly love,
> Which in my soul did work and move,
> And ever ever me inflame,
> With restless longing heavenly avarice,
> That never could be satisfied,
> That did incessantly a Paradise
> Unknown suggest, and something undescried
> Discern, and bear me to it; be
> Thy name for ever prais'd by me.
> (Thomas Traherne 1991, "Desire")