

14th July 2024

Attraction

“Invisible forces of spirit and attraction.”

James Gleick, *Isaac Newton* (2003)

Roger Edbert was an American journalist, essayist, screenwriter, film-historian and author. Film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times* from 1967 till his death in 2013, he was the first film critic to win the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. In *Life itself: A Memoir*, published in 2011, he wrote this as he reflected on “How I believe in God”:

I have no patience for churches that evangelise aggressively. I have no interest in being instructed in what I must do to be saved. I prefer vertical prayer, directed upward to heaven, rather than horizontal prayer, directed sideways toward me. I believe a worthy church must grow through attraction, not promotion. I am wary of zealotry; even as a child I was suspicious of those who, as I often heard, were “more Catholic than the Pope.” If we are to love our neighbours as ourselves, we must regard their beliefs with the same respect as our own deserve.

I’ll reflect on “vertical” and “horizontal” prayer over the next couple of days. But for now, I’m interested in the phrase “through attraction, not promotion”. A recent survey informed us that, for all the publicity churches are involved with – posters, social media, mailshots, leaflets, sponsorship, and the like – only 6% of new people come to church because of promotion. But 67% of those who choose to come, are there because of a relationship with someone who already attends. That might be a family member, a neighbour, a work colleague or a friend. But it’s clear that people will choose to attend worship if they find something attractive and welcoming in the people who’re already involved.

In 1704, when discussing the forces of magnetism – attraction in particular – Sir Isaac Newton wrote this in his work entitled *Opticks*:

How these Attractions may be perform'd, I do not here consider. What I call Attraction may be perform'd by impulse, or by some other means unknown to me. I use that Word here to signify only in general any Force by which Bodies tend towards one another, whatsoever be the Cause.

Like Newton, I won’t consider here how “these Attractions” in Church life “may be perform’d”. But you and I know they matter. “Whatsoever be the Cause”? Something to work on, perhaps ...

A prayer for today

Lord, let the “invisible forces of spirit and attraction” be visible when they matter. Amen

An original reflection © Tom Gordon

Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>