

Commentary

The New Paganism: The Religious Role of the Media

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In his article "Catholic Faith, Modern Doubt and Media Hype" (ARSR 1:3) Scott Cowdell examined "the awkward position" of the media in relation to matters of religion. It's a point that needs special focus, for the "awkward position" we are discerning in media attitude is due, not to a basic misapprehension of religious issues but a basic incompatibility of issues. More and more, the media, especially television, are taking over the ground traditionally held by the churches.

In 1977, Malcolm Muggeridge hypothesized that were Christ alive today, he would have been tested by four, not three temptations in the wilderness. The fourth, Muggeridge believed, would be an offer to Christ of his own TV show. Muggeridge's fictional TV mogul pictures it this way:

For the set they'd have fountains playing, a lush atmosphere, with organ music, a good chorus line, if possible from Delphi, and some big names from the games — gladiators in full rig, also, if possible, priests and priestesses from the Aphrodite Temple, and maybe from some of the Eastern cults becoming so popular with the young. Jesus himself would need something special in the way of a robe, and a hair-do and beard trim. He'd be the central figure, naturally, but for safety's sake his words would have to be put on autocue . . . there would be no intrusion of unsuitable commercials; just a very reputable sponsor — say, the highly-respected public relations consultancy, Lucifer Inc . . . "it'll put him on the map, launch him off on a tremendous career as a world-wide evangelist, spread his

teaching through the civilised world, and beyond. He'd be crazy to turn it down." (1977:40-41).

I have quoted this passage at length because I believe Muggeridge has caught in it the atmosphere of frenetic commercialism which pervades television. But more importantly, this passage also raises the issue of the *power* of television to subvert and to subsume into itself the role of religious beliefs complete with gods, priests, priestesses and acolytes. It seems to me that only when religious groups are alerted to this religious dimension of television that they will be able to draft responses appropriate to their own ideals and objectives.

John Hartley reiterates this point (which he has made previously with his co-author John Fiske in their book *Reading Television*):

. . . as Fiske and I argue in *Reading Television*, the media have not simply supplanted the priest, the patriarch, the little old woman and the minor intellectual; they have, in both fictional and factual output, taken them over, and have used them in a mediating role to construct cohesion out of the fragmented "facts" of life. (1982:104).

Clearly then, in a masterpiece of subversion, television has extruded itself from the realms of entertainment, information and persuasion (the traditional role of the media) into the domain, once exclusively that of churches

and other places of worship, of religious experience. Though television has led the way in this extrusion of its ambit, radio and the print media have followed suit. The implications of this for religious groups are manifold, so that what I propose to examine here is the religious dimension of the media and television in particular, to show how needs which were once met by religious groups are now met outside them, and to pose some questions to which religious groups might address themselves in attempting to adjust to the demands of the mass-mediated society.

The village or suburban church was once a focus for social and community activities. It was not uncommon in fairly stable communities for several generations of a family to have been baptised, married and buried from the local church. Sunday worship was a ritual and belief, and though not an issue for discussion was nevertheless an assumption among members of the community. This is not to suggest that the twentieth century and the media explosion are alone responsible for the breakdown of religious activities. Rather, twentieth century developments are historically the results of the process of change which was motivated by the human quest for scientific knowledge — a quest that became more public and more highly motivated during the years of the European Renaissance. In the twentieth century, however, the processes of change at every level have been accelerated and even the churches, the most conservative institutions in society, have felt their impact. For instance, Australian Anglicans used *The Book of Common Prayer*, a 400 year old text, until a few decades ago; in the space of those few decades there have been unnumerable revisions culminating in the soon-to-be-revised *Australian Prayer Book*. Similarly, Roman Catholics, accustomed to their centuries-old Latin rubric, were hurtled into the modern world by Vatican II. As Alvin Toffler predicted, rapid change does not necessarily mean rapid adaptation; and in matters of religion as

with any others, there are those who champ impatiently at the bit ready to gallop headlong into change while others cling hopefully to the fast-submerging bulwarks of tradition and stability. Both sides exhibit the neuroticism born out of too-rapid change and maladjustment. Neither side is "right"; both sides are merely reactive to a process of discontinuity and disorientation.

But to recognise a reaction to change is not to slow it down nor to stop it. Change continues apace, driven by the frenetic neuroticism it causes — setting up a dynamic which is self-perpetuating. The victims are the human beings flung off this cycle of stimulation and response, and human beings traditionally look for guidance and leadership from their gods and heroes.

Today's humanity is no different. The process of media personality deification first became apparent in the movies. It is not surprising that a good-looking actor should become a "star" — that is, an entity from the firmament of the heavens. If the word "star" does not provide evidence for deification the transposition of metaphors associated with it redresses the lack — the word "divine" becomes an adjective synonymous with "good looking" or — possibly more accurately, — with "lust-arousing". From there it became common to speak of "screen goddesses" who were adulated not only by sexually stimulated males but also by females. With this process of adulation and worship, there sprang up an industry of gossip and fan magazines and "fan clubs" which on closer inspection show that very real awe, reverence and worship were being generated for "idols".

The advent of television exacerbated the phenomenon, simply because it was virtually impossible to hold aloof from it, since the dissemination of propaganda from television has permeated every corner of our culture. Nearly everyone has heard of Kylie Minogue and *Neighbours* even if they do not watch the program. In

fact, few people can enjoy the choice of whether they *wish* to hear about it: the messages are constantly bombarding them visually, aurally and unceasingly. But the making of Kylie Minogue into a (seemingly reluctant) media goddess is not where the real powermongering lies. The control of the mass TV audience is most subtly achieved through the broadcasting of the news.

Why the news is so important in the process of media deification is its consummately subversive propagandist mechanism. What happens is that the informational mode (the presentation of events of political and social importance) is subverted by the presentational gambits which are carefully orchestrated to create a kind of faith in the presenters themselves. This tactic achieves two things. First, it masks the selection and editing process which not only judges what audiences are to see, but how much of it they see; and second, it masks content itself by the simple process of emphasising the role of the newsreader as "interpreter" — a kind of Moses on the mountain, as it were, a spokesman for the final authority, an authority who, like the God of the scripture, remains unseen and communicates only through his prophets.

If this is the scenario, then, two questions need to be asked.

Firstly, what is the pedagogic role of the newsreader as perceived by the viewing audience? And secondly, how does this role operate to consolidate a deification of the television medium itself and consequently, if one might be permitted to add a rider to this second question, what effect might this have on the viewer's religious needs?

Australian television newsreaders, advantaged by the device of the autocue make prolonged eye contact with viewers. Eye contact, in Australian society, is equated with honesty, authority and established relationships. The common use of the newsreading duo, male and female, plays its part by providing another visual

focus for each of the newsreaders. This means that eye contact with the viewing audience is not unduly prolonged, since it has been established generally that eye contact for more than 2/3 of conversational time causes discomfort and arouses suspicion. Newsreaders are obviously trained in body language as well as in speech and paralinguistics and take account of the elements of their training. The audience however, drawn from a wide range of demographic variables, may not necessarily have access to the kind of decoding expertise which would allow it to bring to its viewing the kind of critical distancing which would effectively immunise it against the pedagogic influences of news presentation.

What happens, then, is that the audience is encouraged to see news readers as news *presenters*, as an authoritative source of news; as an entirely credible source of the news. This belief is encouraged by the promotions on billboards around viewing areas and in the station's own program time: X and Y 'bring you the news'; 'interpret the news'; 'know the news'. These promotional phrases all carefully work to create the illusion that the news (events, selection and editing) actually begins with and is somehow authorised by the presenters rather than with the unseen and anonymous station owners, managers, and editors, and beyond them the newswire services and government policies. The propagandist nature of news is thus concealed, not the least by the upper-middle class image of the presenters themselves.

This kind of news presentation contrasts markedly with the English and the European models. English BBC newsreaders are journalists and male/male pairings are at least as common as male/female pairings. There is little chatter between the two, and the whole issue of news "personalities" is underplayed. There is, despite the autocue, evidence of written texts from which the news is drawn so that the authority of and

sources for what are broadcast is seen to be located beyond the presenters.

The European model is even more textually centered. In the Federal Republic of Germany, for example, the text of the news on the State network is held aloft. Eye contact with the audience is limited; once every three minutes or so. Australian and American viewers would find this limited eye contact alienating, but it draws attention away from the presenter and to the text. It does more: it sets up the text as a kind of elevated sacrament, an icon in the Catholic/Lutheran tradition of the presence of God. The elevated, deified text becomes in a metaphorical sense the divine Logos, a graphic illustration, perhaps, of Jacques Derrida's now-famous adage, "il n'y a pas de hors texte" — "there is nothing outside the text". (1967:1974). The newsreader's part is little more than the mountain upon which the divine fire burns.

Perhaps the State television network in the German Democratic Republic exemplifies this deification of the text even more vividly. There, eye contact may be as infrequent as once every *seven* minutes (an almost intolerable distancing for an Australian or an American viewer) and the reader bends over the text in a position reminiscent of the priest at the moment of trans- or con-substantiation (depending on the tradition, Catholic or Lutheran respectively).

Once a viewer is made aware of the religious iconography at work in these European examples, it is possible to turn to the Australian modes of news presentation and to appreciate that they too present an iconography of the sacred, but not that of traditional religious practice. My guess is that fun-filled frolics, the fatuous remarks about the weather (and, not infrequently, about world events, too) and in general the male/female rapport carefully engineered between the presenters is religious iconography of a significant kind — a kind selected to suit the predilections of a viewing community given to hero worship

in sports and adulation of the beautiful people in society. It is a Graeco-Roman tradition which is activated for Australian television viewers, and what we see are gods and goddesses on Mt Olympus (television studios are often sited on a *hill*) disporting themselves and offering us mortals words of wisdom and information as befits the gods. The glamour of the set, the artificial sexuality which is created through expensive clothes and pancake makeup and the carefully scripted "adlibs" all signify that something special is happening and someone special is making it happen.

In a country where the traditional church is desperately in need of insights into how to reach the public, it is interesting to note that newer, non-traditional churches are using the medium — and the message — of the pagan tradition. In charismatic churches, the cult of the pastor/personality is clearly a major aspect of their appeal; he or she has godlike gifts (healing, prophecy and the like, rarely practised or even sanctioned in the traditional churches) and the congregation willingly submits to "discipleship", a form of disciplinarian control which varies from the benevolent and unstructured to the rigidly structured and at times exceedingly malevolent.

It is not true to say, of course, that all of these things have been constructed by the media. There was no television at Mt Olympus. But that is the very point I am making — that the media use older traditions for their own purposes. And if Christians and the other religious groups can see that the most effective religious influence upon 1980s Australians is that of the pagan traditions of ancient Greece and Rome albeit "modified for TV" as it were, then perhaps those whose business it is to enhance the churches' appeal can regulate their strategies accordingly. This society claims to be atheistic; it is not. But its gods are glamorous, sensual and somewhat inane; the principle is pleasure, even in the presentation of news of human suffering,

human weakness, and human shame. The religious climate fostered by carefully-constructed Australian television news broadcasts is a neo-pagan one. The measures taken by Christian churches and other religious groups to reach the Australian public must take account of the religious function of the media and of television in particular. How they achieve conversion for the neo-pagan Australian audience depends largely upon the degree to which this religious function of the media is recognised.

The New Testament shows a church

with such a dynamically different and radical approach from traditional paganism that long centuries of Christian hegemony followed. Now that hegemony is under threat from the very sources which it displaced two thousand years ago. A new dynamism is needed to meet the challenge.

It remains to be seen if Australian churches are equal to the task.

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