



# Why Clergy Should Not Ignore Television

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TELEVISION SURROUNDS AMERICAN LIVES. 98.3 PER CENT OF AMERICAN HOMES have television sets, with an average of 2.2 sets per household. 79 per cent of American homes also have VCRs.<sup>1</sup> Television is turned on more than seven hours per day in the average home, with each individual watching approximately four and a half hours per day. By the time American youth graduate from high school, they will have spent more hours watching television than in school. By that point, they already will have viewed approximately 500,000 television commercials. Regarding our use of discretionary time (the amount of time remaining in our lives once we exclude the time we work, eat, and sleep), one authority calculates that the average American spends *eighty per cent* of his or her discretionary time watching television.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996) 561.

<sup>2</sup>William F. Fore, *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values, and Culture* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 16-17.

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*Given the overwhelming significance of television in American culture, it dare not be dismissed by clergy and church leaders. Television influences us through its specific and cumulative content and through the nature of the medium itself. Indeed, some suggest that television functions as religion in American life.*

In the face of such data, it seems silly to ask if television influences our lives. The only question is what kind of influence it might have. Yet, also in the face of such data, it is striking how little attention local churches and clergy give to television. Churches try to be relevant to the everyday interests and experiences of their parishioners by sponsoring parenting classes, clown ministries, support groups for the divorced, and worship services with contemporary music, all the while ignoring what is arguably the single greatest influence in the lives of their parishioners: television.

This essay has two basic intentions: to review three common reactions that have hindered the church from responding fully to television and to discuss the several levels of meaning television presents to us. The end result will be not so much an action plan as an agenda for reflection, encouraging clergy and other church leaders to examine the role television plays in American life and to reflect upon television's relationships with religion and its implications for persons of faith.

### I. DISMISSING TELEVISION

In conversations about television with friends and colleagues, I hear three reactions that help me understand why the church has not grappled fully with the reality of television in American life.

1. *"I don't watch television."* Many people claim that they seldom watch television and, if they do, it is usually public broadcasting, because everything else is a waste of time. Tyron Inbody sees such comments as part of a general suspicion of popular culture by the educated elite.

The leadership of the established churches and of the seminaries, despite public commitment to ministry to those outside an educated elite, has an innate distrust of anything popular or what the "average" person can understand and appreciate....The extent to which church leaders and seminary professors go to reassure their colleagues that they do not watch much television, or if they do they watch only "quality" television, shows how intrinsic this inclination against popular culture is to the personal and professional self-understanding of church leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Inbody's remarks highlight the fact that, even if some leaders do not view much television, the rest of the population does, including parishioners and others to whom churches would like to extend their ministry. If we dismiss television with an elitist scorn, we refuse to recognize a primary reality in the lives of most Americans.

There is also a question whether persons watch television as little as they claim. Studies that ask people to estimate their hours of television-viewing report significantly lower numbers than studies that use more careful monitoring methods such as meters or diaries. My own impressions might serve as an example of this inclination to underestimate. When presented with the statistical average of

<sup>3</sup>Tyron Inbody, "Introduction: Coke Bottles, Oxen and Utopias," *Changing Channels: The Church and the Television Revolution*, ed. Tyron Inbody (Dayton, OH: Whaleprints, 1990) 14-15.

four and a half hours of viewing per day, my immediate reaction is to declare that my life is much too busy for such a huge commitment of time. Yet a rehearsal of my typical day surprises me. As I shower in the morning and grab a quick bowl of cereal, I may turn on the "Today" show, even though I move in and out of the room where the television set is located. In late afternoon, after work, I often sit with my son for a few minutes as he watches a favorite program, slipping in bits of conversation. I watch local and national news during supper preparations and then limit myself to one half-hour or hour program in the evening, preferring to spend most of the evening doing something else. If I watch the late news and a little of "Nightline" or Letterman before retiring, I am approaching the average figure I quickly dismissed. I have done so without watching any of the soaps, talk shows, and children's programming that captivate so many, and without sitting down for a solid evening of prime-time programs.

One implicit issue in this narrative is what constitutes "watching" television. Should we count only those moments when we give a television program our full attention, or should we include the time when the television is simply on, as we engage in other simultaneous activities? One can make the case that even when the television is not the exclusive focus of attention, it is still a part of our lives, almost a member of the family. It is significant that single persons, both young and old, report that the television provides a kind of companionship, filling an empty home or apartment with sounds of life, even when it is in another room.

There are demographic differences in television viewership. Children and the elderly watch more than middle-aged adults. Persons with higher incomes and more education tend to watch less television. Yet the differences are ones of degree, with television remaining influential across the board. Even persons who live in those rare households with no television set still are surrounded by a culture in which television affects clothing styles, slang phrases, social and political perceptions, and consumer choices.

2. *"It's just entertainment."* Scholars committed to the study of popular culture frequently struggle to win respect from their colleagues, because their critics judge the subject matter to be lacking in intellectual depth and artistic merit. Interestingly, persons thoroughly immersed in television and other elements of popular culture often raise the same complaint. They indicate that they watch television to relax after a hard day's work or to escape from the stresses of life. It is simply entertainment, they say, and they are puzzled why scholars want to subject it to complicated analysis. Are not the scholars over-analyzing something that is meaningless and unimportant, making much ado about nothing?

Why should we pay attention to popular culture, especially television, the engine that drives much of American popular culture? What could we learn? The answer is summarized in the basic principles of popular culture analysis, an academic field that has boomed in recent years. Put most simply, *popular culture both reflects us and shapes us*, and the implications of that two-fold dynamic are profound.

On one hand, popular culture reflects us. This strikes many as common

sense, because it is the general public that makes something popular. For example, creators and producers offer new television series to the public every year, but their manipulation of publicity and time slots cannot automatically guarantee that a show will be a hit; the public decides, sometimes surprising the pundits. When “we” make something popular, it apparently touches a chord within us, perhaps expressing our assumptions and values or portraying our yearnings or providing moments of escape—or *something*. There has to be a reason (or reasons) that great numbers of people choose to watch one television series and not another. The trick, of course, is to figure out what the reason is. In the process, we are trying to learn about ourselves. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, in the introduction to a textbook about popular culture, state that we examine elements of popular culture “not as ends in themselves but as means of unlocking their meaning in the culture as a whole.” It is a “quest for meaning,” asking “why audiences choose one cultural element over another,” trying to discern what it says about us.<sup>4</sup>

Popular culture reflects us, our realities, desires, and fantasies, something like a mirror. However, we do not see a pure reflection in the mirror, because it comes back to us in altered fashion, influenced by the personal perceptions and intentions of the creative forces behind television and other elements of popular culture. In a sense, when we look at television, we are looking into a funhouse mirror.

Television’s messages and subtle themes shape us as well as they reflect us. Even when television programs reflect values we already hold, that reflection serves also to reinforce those values and deepen our commitment to them. At other times, the selectivity and emphasis of television’s images can subtly alter our perceptions. An example might be the television programs and commercials of the 1950s, in which African Americans seldom appeared. Consistent viewing of such programming helped the dominant society ignore or forget that African Americans were part of the nation’s community, and some African-American viewers received and internalized the message that they were marginal. Other examples of shaping influences, both positive and negative, that might result from our viewing of television include expansion of global consciousness, emphasis upon materialistic values, or desensitization to violence.<sup>5</sup>

Popular culture, including television, is worthy of our thoughtful consideration because it both reflects us and shapes us.

3. “Concerns about television pertain mainly to children.” The recent controversies and pressures upon the television industry to develop a rating system for its programs have been directed almost totally toward the protection of children. This focus expresses our society’s concern about influences upon impressionable children in their formative years, a concern that seems noble and appropriate. How-

<sup>4</sup>Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, “An Introduction to the Study of Popular Culture: What Is This Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of?” in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) 5-6.

<sup>5</sup>The preceding four paragraphs are slightly revised from my introductory essay to the forthcoming volume *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, eds. Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan (Berkeley: University of California, 1998).

ever, does this focus upon children serve to deflect attention away from considering how adults also might be influenced by living in a television-dominated culture?

Do *all* of the issues pertain only to children? Spouses sometimes argue when one spends more time in front of the television set than the other prefers. Adult assumptions about beauty or success are influenced in subtle and not so subtle ways by cumulative exposure to television programming. Adults rent videos for the weekend instead of inviting friends for dessert and conversation.

I have taught college courses about "Television and Religion," and one of the greatest struggles is to persuade adult students to apply issues we are discussing to ourselves. Akin to persons who consistently see someone else's shortcomings described in a sermon, we use our references to children as a technique to avoid reflection upon what it means for all of us to live in a television culture.

## II. CONSIDERING TELEVISION

If we acknowledge the important role television plays in American life, and if we wish to reflect on religion's relationship to this reality, what are potential topics for consideration? When people are asked to think about television and religion, the two predictable topics that come to mind are (1) television evangelists and (2) conservative Christian concerns about sex, violence, and profanity (sometimes called the "big three"). As interesting and appropriate as those topics might be, many additional themes about television and religion merit our attention.

I would suggest that themes about television and religion arise on four levels: (1) specific content, (2) cumulative content, (3) the medium itself, and (4) television as religion. *Specific content* refers to particular images, dialogue, or topics in individual episodes of television programs. Examples might be the portrayal of an unscrupulous evangelist on an episode of "Walker, Texas Ranger," or sexual references in a recent program of "Seinfeld." *Cumulative content* refers to overall patterns that emerge when one makes a collective survey of particular examples. For instance, if we discover that women in action dramas are often portrayed as victims while men serve as rescuers, we are discussing patterns of cumulative content. The influence of *the medium itself* has been considered by persons like Marshall McLuhan, who declared that "the medium is the message."<sup>6</sup> Explained further below, this discussion asks whether the very nature of television as a communication medium promotes certain ways of being or thinking, regardless of content, no matter what programs one chooses to watch. Finally, *television as religion* suggests that the role of television in American lives functions in ways analogous to religion, providing a basic worldview, symbol system, icons, and ritual patterns. Let us briefly consider each level of meaning and influence in relationship to religion.

1. *Specific and Cumulative Content*. The easiest and most common discussion of

<sup>6</sup>Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), reprint of 1967 volume with a slightly different title, *The Medium is the Massage*.

television is about specific content, as members of an adult Sunday School class talk about something they saw on television last week, or persons at work discuss last night's program during a coffee break. More important, in reflecting and shaping us, are the larger patterns of cumulative content, rather than the single, passing, unusual example. We have our own impressions of some patterns, and scholarly studies tell us about others, sometimes pointing out tendencies that have not occurred to us. One can look for religion in both specific and cumulative content in several ways: explicit religious content in commercial and public television, implicit theological themes, the treatment of ethical issues that matter to religious people, and religion-produced programs.

a. How does religion explicitly appear in commercial and public television (prime-time programs, news coverage, soap operas, music videos, etc.)? How often do ministers, priests, nuns, rabbis, Native American holy men, and other religious leaders appear, and how are they portrayed? Do persons ever pray or attend church or discuss spirituality in the midst of a comedy or a dramatic program? How often does local or national news include stories pertaining to religion, and what is the tone of the coverage?

These questions are important because they help us understand how religion is being portrayed in a very influential public arena. Until recently, the major issue was religion's absence from programming. For example, the popular *Cosby* family (original series) almost never went to church or thought about religion, except for one notable "church episode" produced in response to critics who noted the important role of religion in a high percentage of African American homes. In the last decade or two, religion arose with regularity in only a few successful series, sometimes unexpected ones: "The Simpsons," "Northern Exposure," various *Star Trek* series, "Amen," the "Father Dowling Mysteries," and "Highway to Heaven." Yet they were the rare exceptions that proved the rule. In general, one could watch an entire week of prime-time comedies, action and drama programs and never see identifiable religious figures or persons engaging in religious activity. The subliminal message of such an absence was that religion is marginal, not a major factor in modern life. Religion was not attacked; it simply did not exist or did not matter.

What were the reasons for the absence? Michael Medved, a former movie reviewer for "Sneak Previews," charges that it is the result of Hollywood's anti-religious bias.<sup>7</sup> Others suggest that the prickly, defensive reactions of some Christians to any portrayal of religion that did not exactly fit their beliefs and assumptions have been partly to blame. "You know, religion is so hard to deal with," said one producer. "You're always going to offend someone. We just try to stay away."<sup>8</sup> For whatever reasons, some Hollywood forces developed an assumption that religious content was bad for ratings.

Much has changed in the past two or three years, in part because of the

<sup>7</sup>Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) 37-91.

<sup>8</sup>Horace M. Newcomb, "Religion on Television," in *Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television*, ed. John P. Ferre (Ames: Iowa State University, 1990) 31.

unexpectedly high ratings of “Touched By an Angel.”<sup>9</sup> Commercial television consciously attempts to copy its successes, and we have entered a cycle of new imitation series and the insertion of religiously-related episodes into already existing series. Time will tell if this is a passing fad or a change in an ongoing pattern.

b. Even when religion does not appear explicitly, commentators discover implicit theological themes in many places. Human struggles in a comedy or a dramatic series may suggest themes of death and resurrection, or liberation, grace, or love.

For example, theologian John Wiley Nelson has argued that one can discern a full-blown belief system in popular culture, including television. As one watches a television program, or reflects on television programs cumulatively, one could ask:

- What is unsatisfactory about the present situation and what is its source? (nature and source of evil)
- How is one rescued from the unsatisfactory situation? (deliverance)
- What does a resolved situation look like, and what is the path to that resolved situation? (visions of fulfilled life)<sup>10</sup>

Most programs communicate implicit answers to these questions. Adherents of a traditional religion may find that the implicit beliefs they discern in popular culture may or may not be consistent with their own convictions, but they are theologies nevertheless.

Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence detect a common mythic pattern in most storylines of popular culture (they call it “the American monomyth”), and they are convinced that it is derived from religious tales of redemption. Their summary of the monomythic pattern, rooted in westerns and comic book superheroes, but widely discernable elsewhere as well, is:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaical condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity.

Jewett and Lawrence claim that the American monomyth

secularizes the Judeo-Christian redemption dramas that have arisen on American soil, combining elements from the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil. The supersaviors in pop culture function as replacements for the Christ figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism. But their superhuman abilities reflect a hope of divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Noel Holston, “Where Angels Go, Networks Fear to Follow,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 24 December 1995.

<sup>10</sup>John Wiley Nelson, *Your God is Alive and Well and Appearing in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 20-21.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1977) xix-xx.

Nelson, Jewett, and Lawrence are only examples of many who find implicit theology in television and other aspects of popular culture.

c. Andrew Greeley has referred to situation comedies as the equivalent of medieval morality plays, which suggests another entire category of television programming that relates to religion: ethical issues.<sup>12</sup> Religious people are not the only ones concerned about ethical issues, but followers of Christianity and other world religions do care deeply about a wide range of ethical issues and wish to be involved in the wider cultural discussion of them. The issues arise repeatedly on television: euthanasia, capital punishment, abortion, sexual standards, environmental concerns, family relationships, business practices, gender roles, violence, racism, and more. When they arise, they may not be about religion directly, but they matter to religious people, and they provide grist for family discussions or sermon illustrations.

d. Television programs produced and sponsored by religious leaders or groups are a subject in their own right, raising additional issues for reflection and analysis that are beyond the scope of this essay. Examples of these programs are Pat Robertson's "700 Club," Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), the many televised worship services and rallies of prominent television evangelists, and denominational and local programs. While space does not permit their discussion here, questions pertaining to religious television programming might include: Is television an appropriate vehicle for worship, education, or evangelism? What kinds of religion and theologies are emphasized in religious television now on the air, and why? Should mainline Christian denominations (now under-represented on television) attempt to develop a fuller television presence?<sup>13</sup>

All of the foregoing comments pertain to various ways that we might discover religion in specific and cumulative content on television: explicit representations of religion in commercial and public television, implicit religion, ethical issues, and religion-sponsored programs. It is important that we give attention to patterns in this content, because they reveal fundamental assumptions of our society and they shape public perceptions of religion. Yet there are still other levels upon which we might reflect: one is the character of the medium of television, aside from content.

2. *The Medium Itself.* William Fore, who headed the Communication Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ for many years, provides a provocative analogy.

Imagine that we are in a boat, rowing across a vast, slow-moving river so large that we cannot even see the other side. We view other boats moving back and

<sup>12</sup>Andrew M. Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago: Thomas More, 1988) 124.

<sup>13</sup>A beginning bibliography on this subject could include Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988); Peter G. Horsfield, *Religious Television: The American Experience* (New York: Longman, 1984); Tyron Inbody, ed., *Changing Channels: The Church and the Television Revolution* (Dayton, OH: Whaleprints, 1990); and Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991).



forth. Some are faster than others, some larger and carry more wealth, some are going in different directions. But all of us—ourselves and those we are observing—are unaware that *all of us are being moved by the river itself*.<sup>14</sup>

Is it possible that television exerts an influence upon us and our culture because of its very nature, totally aside from the particular programs we choose to watch? These influences would be felt even if we watched only public broadcasting, only religious programs of our liking, or only news. (Using terms of the analogy, it does not matter which boat we are in.)

One of the most effective exponents of this possibility is Neil Postman, who argues that American culture has moved from a print-dominated age to the age of television, and that the shift has literally changed our ways of thinking and the content of our culture. Echoing Marshall McLuhan, Postman maintains that print culture (the age of typography, of exposition), because of the nature of its mode of communication, encouraged coherent, orderly, serious rational discourse with propositional content. Television, he says, shifts us to an image-based culture that features explosions of images, fragmented rather than coherent, emphasizing sensation and feeling rather than rationality. Postman calls the television era the age of show business, because entertainment is its highest value. Television, by its very nature, employing images, movement, color, and sound, emphasizes feeling and amusement rather than linear, rational thought. He suggests that when programs of the televangelists are mostly entertainment, it is not primarily a result of the televangelists' deficiencies; rather, it is the natural result of the medium. The expectations that television develops in people eventually influence virtually everything in the larger culture, even when it is not on television. Education in schools should be entertaining, and religion, including local worship services, should be entertaining. Yet, does religion changes its basic content and character when it is presented as entertainment? "The danger is not that religion has become the content of television shows," Postman writes, "but that television shows may become the content of religion."<sup>15</sup>

Not everyone agrees. Quentin Schultze acknowledges that television may be an inferior medium for philosophical argument, but an image-based medium has advantages as well. "Intellectuals within the church are often highly suspicious of visual communication" because they are "steeped in the printed word." Schultze argues that the problems with television rest with the values, beliefs, and practices that govern it, not with the medium itself.<sup>16</sup> Whatever side one takes in this discussion, we are reflecting upon the inherent nature of the medium.

3. *Television as Religion*. Finally, some persons have suggested that television has virtually become a religion for many of its viewers. Art historian Gregor

<sup>14</sup>Fore, *Television and Religion*, 21. I apply this analogy in a way slightly different from Fore's use of it.

<sup>15</sup>Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985) 124.

<sup>16</sup>Quentin J. Schultze, *Redeeming Television: How TV Changes Christians—How Christians Can Change TV* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 27, 33.

Goethals has made the most forthright case, especially in her book *The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar*. Essentially, she argues that the role once played by religion, in providing a worldview and symbol system through which one interprets the world and in providing rituals that pattern our lives, has been taken up by television. Focusing her discussion on rituals, icons, and sacraments, she claims that

the mass media, especially television, have emerged as major conveyors of public symbols. Television has woven a web of myths, furnishing the rhythms, the visual extravaganzas, and pseudo-liturgical seasons that break up the ordinariness of our lives. It is a primary source of orientation to the social, political, and economic spheres of experience.<sup>17</sup>

For most persons in American society, what is the real reference point around which they orient their lives?

This essay has attempted to demonstrate that television presents us with many levels of influence and meaning that merit our reflection, beyond our simple first impulses, the easy criticisms of television evangelists, or complaints about sex and violence on television. The role of television in American lives is pervasive, and its relationships with religion are subtle and complex. Whatever action follows (education in media literacy, family discussions of programs, personal decisions about television viewing, campaigns to change program content, efforts to provide religious broadcasting, or whatever), we must begin by giving thoughtful attention to the implications of the television set that is the center of attention in most of our homes. When we are unreflective about its role, it operates upon us blindly; when we raise it to the level of consciousness and reflect upon it, we then have the power to make choices. ⊕

<sup>17</sup>Gregor T. Goethals, *The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar* (Boston: Beacon, 1981) 142. Also see Goethals, *The Electronic Golden Calf: Images, Religion, and the Making of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Crowley, 1990).