

Editorial: The Christian and the Media

The essays in this issue address the theme, 'Christians and the Media'. The conjunctive adverb presupposes that a relationship between Christians and the media do obtain. This relationship can of course be either positive or negative. But the ubiquitous nature of the media in our culture makes it important for the nature of the relationship to be thoughtfully articulated. The fact that we live in a mediated culture is inescapable, and the startling developments in technology are often followed by the exponential growth of the media and its influences. Discussions on the Christian's attitude towards the media are often dependent on sociological studies on the media in modern society. To be sure, studies on the effects of the media on societies are prolific, and show no sign of abating. These studies have produced alarming statistics. For instance, George Gerbner, the Dean Emeritus of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, an authority on violence on TV, has reported that scenes of violence appear at an average of six times per hour in prime time TV in the evening. In the same study, he reported that in children programming there are between 20 and 25 violent scenes per hour. These figures become even more alarming when they are analysed in light of the fact that an average North American watches 10,000 hours of violent entertainment, and witnesses something like 36,000 murders on the screen before the age of 21.

The important question is of course, Does TV violence influence behaviour? This is where findings have proved ambiguous. The evidence that TV violence does affect behaviour is far from conclusive. The famous Yale psychologist, Dr Leonard Eron, believes that TV violence does affect human behaviour. In 1960 he studied the causes of aggression among children. He interviewed families on the amount of time their children spent in front of the television, and the type of programmes they preferred to watch. Ten years later, Eron interviewed the same families, and concluded that the best 'predictor of aggression' among the boys who were then in their late teens is the amount of violent TV programmes they watched. Needless to say, not all of Professor Eron's colleagues approve of his method. Professor Eron's reading and interpretation of the data is not unproblematic, and his conclusions have not gone uncontested.

Jonathan Friedman of the University of Toronto conducted a comparative study of the two Americas. He argued that although the children in Canada and the United States watch virtually the same

television, the murder rate and the rate of violence in general in Canada are much lower than in the United States. When the comparison is extended to Japan, it is found that although the Japanese watch the most lurid and graphic television in the world, the rate of violence in Japan is minuscule compared to Canada and the United States. Friedman is compelled to conclude that 'If television violence really had a substantial effect, these differences among countries would be unlikely. It makes it clear that if television violence had any effect at all, it is vanishingly small'. No consensus has been achieved, and criticisms of the media have been mostly elliptical, with much of the underlying premises left unexamined and unarticulated. As we have seen, the thesis that the media is harmful is challenged by the equally convincing anti-thesis that it harmless, and that others facts must be commandeered to explain aggression and violence in some societies.

But reflection on the Christian and the media must attend to more fundamental issues. Theologically one must say that the media, like the technology that advances it, is a gift from God. The imaginative power that energises and inspires mass media is an aspect of the foundational image of our humanity, the very quality that distinguishes us from animals, a characterisation of the image of God in which human beings are made. The media therefore is a means by which we are able to transcend ourselves as well as the evidence of that self-transcendence. In and through it, we deepen our self-knowledge and self-understanding. To be sure, the media is not the only way in which we accomplish this. But that it is one way in which we do should alert us to the fact that a totally utilitarian understanding of the media will not suffice. The mass media is a means by which human beings respond to and pursue their vocation; it is a means by which human beings grow in their capacity to expand and develop in order to mirror more fully the Triune God who created them. In a word, it testifies to our capacity to be created co-creators.

But the media also has destructive possibilities because of human sinfulness. Thus the media can be a dangerous tool in the hands of those whose energies are directed towards satisfying their insatiable desire for profit and thirst for power. The media can be used for evil, to serve their manipulative goals. Media that is used to distort truth, rob human beings of their dignity and humanity, and work against authentic human development cannot be in keeping with the divine will. The media can create a culture that imprisons and confines, a totalitarianism that puts every person in an ideological strait-jacket. This is a world that is described so well in the parables of Orwell, particularly *1984* and *Animal Farm*. Whether the prison

wardens are right- or left-winged ideologists is inconsequential; the gates are equally impenetrable. Propaganda of whatever type is an example of this. Whether it is misplaced patriotism or blind consumerism, propaganda through the media has the power to produce such cultural strictures that distort the truth. Equally serious is the trivialisation of life itself that the media can sometimes encourage. Screen advertisement is an example. Not only does it shade and nuance the truth, it also distorts one's perception of priorities in life. It thrives by making beauty, wealth and status the ultimate goals of life. 'When a population becomes distracted by trivia', writes Neil Postman in his celebrated *Amusing Ourselves to Death. Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 'when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility'. All this means that the media, in their ambivalence, is capable of both good and evil. The essays in this issue are sensitive to this. They invite us to reflect rationally and rigorously on the complexities that arise from the ambivalent nature of the media.

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