



RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

Freedom of Expression in the Church

Long before John Stuart Mill wrote his essay, *On Liberty*, the gospels had proclaimed, "The truth shall make you free". Yet, ironically, the contemporary church has, in many circles, the public image of obscurantist, of systematically suppressing the truth. We must humbly admit that truth often has a difficult time making itself present through the bureaucratic maze, timid leadership and, simply, the bad communication within the church.

A few examples of the failure of new ideas, such as Ricci's proposal for the adaptation of Christianity to Chinese culture in the 17th Century, have become famous. How many more generous responses to the gospel or inspirations of the Spirit have died without a hearing or have not even been allowed to come to full consciousness because of fear of suppression, we will not know until Judgment Day.

The Pastoral Instruction of Pope Paul VI on communication, *Communio et Progressio*, and other statements of the churches have emphasised the importance of free circulation of thought in the church. Yet how these general principles are to take flesh and become a reality has been little explored. Very few specialists in communication have been called to study how the institutional conditions of freedom of expression could be better developed in the church.

In this issue, John Phelan, long a student of communication ethics and problems of censorship, presents a brief original essay, and we review books by Patrick Granfield and Gregory Baum and Andrew Greeley on communication in the church.

Censorship and Christianity: Reflections of Principles

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Soul Control

Censorship, like politics and sex, two of the principal areas wherein it is most encountered, tends to arouse more knee-jerk condemnations and furious justifications than dispassionate analysis. As C.S. Lewis pointed out long ago with regard to a far more slippery concept ("nature"), censorship can only be clearly understood when we have clearly delimited to what it is opposed. Censorship has quite a list of dialectical opposites; here are a few: Intellectual honesty, artistic integrity, objectivity, non-partisan independence, self-indulgence, social irresponsibility, propaganda, intellectual hubris, unauthorized representation, character assassination, racist dogma, seditious libel, pornography.

Honest and truthful people, educated in one of the traditions of the Western democracies, rarely quarrel over the very idea of censorship. They disagree over its employment because they do not agree on the nature of the communication it seeks to silence. Nabokov's *Lolita*, when it was published in the fifties, filmed in the sixties, and now staged in the eighties, was and is variously perceived as a work of artistic genius, as an anti-American tract, as a piercingly honest portrayal of a serious problem, as an elaborate literary joke, as a gratuitous slap at psychoanalysis, as propaganda for godless Freudianism, as a

high-minded indictment of mass culture. Depending on the interpretation, outright condemnation to total promotion, with all the intermediate steps of textual revision and restricted distribution, have been and still are proposed for the work.

There are a few purists on the libertarian side who do not want anything ever censored in any form, on the theory that the puritanical and dogmatic drives of mankind are too dangerous to be unleashed in however a small degree. On the totalitarian side, there is a rather larger troop of extremists who believe that everything should be subject to some form of social control on the view that you can't trust anyone not to do some mischief, given half the chance.

Frequently, of course, censorship controversies are conducted neither honestly nor truthfully. Advocates of control maintain that they are "not really proposing censorship," but "guidance," or some other Orwellian euphemism. Parties behind a particular work, message, or report often label legitimate criticism and editorial control as "censorship".

If our philosophical bent is toward Protestant individualism, we will tend to be opposed to social control of communication for the most part, meanwhile deploring the excesses of the media and the mendacities of merchants. If we share a tradition of

Christendom, and a desire to embody specific forms of Christianity in our cultural practices and political policies, we will tend to favor the employment of some official organs of censorship, with mild or stringent sanctions, depending on our politics. The danger of the individualistic or libertarian approach is that it favors a climate of isolation, the anomie and alienation so long associated with the relatively prosperous cosmopolitan centers of the global North. The conservative tradition of Christendom, in its turn, too easily identifies cultural preference with universal principle. Belloc's "Europe is Christianity" and the apotheosis by Catholic Spaniards and English Protestants of their own civilisations to divinely appointed norms for their colonials is massive testimony to this tendency.

In this context censorship is a special case of the rather more broad question of the culture-personality connection and of the individual-society tension. In ecclesiastical terms, the church censor must be located in the nexus between the City of God and personal salvation, between the particular judgment and the universal Last Judgment.

How Grand is the Inquisitor?

A church is a society and all societies must exercise censorship or simply cease to be. The question then is what form should censorship take and to what degree should it be applied. In American constitutional law this question has been treated in the context of the First Amendment with a byzantine subtlety redolent of the Reformation predestination debates. Nonetheless, certain useful beacons steadfastly shine through the fog.

American law has a presumption in favor of the individual and in favor of equality before the law. Special circumstances may alter cases, but it is presumed that everyone has equal access to "the truth," ability to recognize it, and a right to express it. There is no privileged class — no priesthood, if you will — in communication. Bureaucrats may save some of their secrets and journalists may continue to ask impertinent questions, but it is the social function, not any inherent superiority, which guides the law in regulating and protecting them.

American Christians in the main stream, Catholic and Protestant, share these assumptions. If their church has a message, perhaps even a uniquely true message, it must share the podium with other churches. If their clerical or presbyterial leadership bears the glorious burden of stewardship over a proprietorial truth, that is their vocation, but there is no need to outlaw any other individual or group from peaceably disputing or competing with this leadership. To many Americans, for instance, the Vatican treatment of Kung appeared "medieval," that is, springing from a pathetic adherence to outmoded Christendom.

As in all theological disputes, the participants are sorely vexed by inability of the indifferent to heed the subtleties of difference and their quickness to stereotype the opposing camps — "the little man" against the "big corporation", for instance. Perhaps Americans would understand the politics of the Vatican position better if they could see Kung as a high official of a company who refuses to carry out company policy and at the same time wishes to maintain his high company status, especially its role as representative of the company's values. But then it may be easier for some kinds of Catholics to see the Church as a sort of global corporation than it is for others.

There are ironies here. The secular editor who ridicules the "secret knowledge" of the religiously dogmatic will not brook challenges, particularly from a young reporter, of his "editorial judgment", mystical power conferred on selected communication executives. The invoker of the memory of Galileo will dismiss criticisms of government safety standards for radiation and micro-emissions as "unscientific" because not blessed by the official priesthood of government scientists.

The ironies of public life and the drama of politics are so

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His recent books include *Mediaworld: Programming the Public* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), a study of how the mass commercial media are influencing the mind set and values of the public. The Review Article discusses his latest book, *Disenchantment: Meaning and Morality in the Media* which has long sections on censorship and the electronic church.

He is now establishing a major, long-range programme for the study of the implicit ethical models that have shaped the modern media and the use of communication technology.

intriguing that I know of no study (literature apart) that leaves these areas to take up the more difficult moral question of the soul of the censor. Is censoring, as a personal activity (never mind its social inevitability), consonant with the Christian character? Can we see Christ Himself as a censor?

From the perspective of communication, Christianity is fundamentally a matter of witness to the Truth that sets us free. Christ, in His death, was the supreme witness. Put this way, Pilate and the Sanhedrin are seen as censors, official custodians of corporate truths endangered by the witness of Christ's ministry. In this light, Joan of Arc and Thomas More seem rather closer to Christ than the church officials who aided their final silencing. Truly, we cannot imagine Alyosha Karamazov "correcting error," although we have no difficulty seeing a Loyola or a Luther doing so.

This is the heart of the Christian paradox. The guileless behaviour of a Gonzaga or a Little Flower held up as epitomes of Christian virtue stands in contrast to the sophistication of an Erasmus or a Bellarmine. It would seem that the urge of a broad program of Church censorship as a moral and doctrinal necessity are hoping to create a world of little Alyoshas and Thereses firmly and filially under the thumbs of a few wise men who risk the damnation of adulthood for the sake of the sheep.

The censorship problem thus reductively becomes the sanctity problem. Do we have a view of human perfection and perfectibility which is essentially future-orientated? Is sainthood essentially an achieved state of perilously maintained adulthood, of responsibility for one's decisions, meeting of risk, facing of conflict, involvement in sexuality and aggression, calculated generousities and conscious sacrifices? Or is this type of sanctity unthinkable except for a small elite? Is the more proper and divinely planned, if you will, economy of salvation one in which meticulously detailed "guidance" and constantly accessible "direction" is provided for the children of God, for the little people?

The latter view, in some form, seems to be consistent with the policies of most governments, and with the mundane history of almost all church affairs, as well as with the public relations practices of capitalists and communists alike. The former view, in some form, resonates with our own personal experience of our own lives, with the raising of our own children, with modern developmental psychology, and with some substantial portions of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. As a man, Christ showed a naive trust in the Apostle's ability to somehow muddle through without a detailed instruction booklet.

Callings and Hearings

Having established that Church censorship is inevitable and that the people assigned to carry it out are in a morally unenviable position, we must return to our original question

of defining a specific form of censorship by defining its contextual opposite — the disease for which it is the proposed cure.

Legitimate Church censorship, in my view, can only be opposed to unauthorized representation. Unlike the CIA in America or those agencies in the U.K. covered by the Official Secrets Act, the Church cannot claim that lives will be endangered by revealing certain facts or even by sensationalizing a scandal. Since the Battle of Lepanto is long past, the Church cannot claim a "Father-knows-best" warrant for withholding the presentation of views too sophisticated for the doctrinally naive.

What is left is a form of licensing, anathema if used by the State but quite proper in the ecclesiastical context. The Church should simply refuse to authorize as representative of official teaching any thesis or theology judged in fundamental contradiction to central Church dogmas. That is all and that is quite enough. Given the disputatious delicacies of moralists and theologians it will be difficult enough to implement.

This policy would seem to make an absurdity of any such thing as a confessional chair in a university. A university teacher and researcher, by the principle of academic freedom, is free to commit any act of intellectual folly in the hope that he or she may advance thought. Do doctrinal custodians want to

authorize the speculations of a university theologian or verify the correctness of historical research? Do bureaucrats have any business looking over scholars' shoulders? Official doctrine is clearly in a world divorced from free academic inquiry.

There is an old Russian joke about Stalin's brutal imposition of Socialist Realism. A classical painter, it is told, paints what he sees; an impressionist what he feels. And a socialist realist paints only what he hears. Historians and theologians should report what they find and state what they think.

In the end, then, our view of censorship depends on our view of human nature and our view of Church censorship depends on our understanding of the divine economy. There must be some censorship or there can be no society, no cultural cohesion, no doctrinal tradition. But how much and for what ends? The answers are determined by the risks we prefer to take.

Will the children of God risk damnation because unprotected? Or will the saintly elite turn dictatorial, nasty and anti-Christian in methods and matter?

History provides us with ample precedents for both dangers. Yet, unless we feel a profound conviction that we have been elected to the "solemn troops" of sophisticated sanctity, I believe most of us will risk trying to grow up ourselves.

The Changing Attitude of the Church Toward Censorship

The church has not always understood or appreciated the principle of freedom of expression. The process of acceptance has been a slow and painful one, from the period of the *Syllabus of Errors* to the II Vatican Council.

A sample of the attitude of the Catholic Church in the early Nineteenth Century toward freedom of the press is indicated in a paragraph of the encyclical, *Mirari Vos*, published by Pope Gregory XVI on August 15, 1832.

"Here belongs that vile and never sufficiently execrated and detestable freedom of the press for the diffusion of all sorts of writings: a freedom which, with so much insistence, they dare to demand and promote. We are horrified, venerable brothers, contemplating what monstrosities of doctrine, or better, with what monstrosities of error we see ourselves buried, with what wide diffusion these errors are everywhere disseminated in a great multitude of books, pamphlets, written documents — small certainly in their size but enormous in their malice — from which goes out over the face of the earth that curse which we lament." (Cited by Benito Spoleitini in *Comunicación Social e Iglesia*, ediciones paulinas, p. 13).

One Hundred and Fifty Years Later

The Pastoral Instruction of Pope Paul VI on the Means of Social Communication, Communio et Progressio, has been a landmark in the views of the Catholic Church on communication policies. The sections of *Communio et Progressio* on the freedom of communication and dialogue in the church suggest the development of thought.

Freedom of Communication

44. This right to information is inseparable from freedom of communication. Social life depends on a continual interchange, both individual and collective, between people. This is necessary for mutual understanding and for co-operative creativity. When social intercourse makes use of the mass media, a new dimension is added. Then vast numbers of people get the chance to share in the life and progress of the community.

47. This freedom of communication also implies that indi-

viduals and groups must be free to seek out and spread information. It also means that they should have free access to the media. On the other hand, freedom of communication would benefit those who communicate news rather than those who receive it if this freedom existed without proper limits and without thought for those real and public needs upon which the right to information is based.

Dialogue within the Church

115. Since the Church is a living body, she needs public opinion in order to sustain a giving and taking between her members. Without this, she cannot advance in thought and action. 'Something would be lacking in her life if she had no public opinion. Both pastors of souls and lay people would be to blame for this.'

117. This free dialogue within the Church does no injury to her unity and solidarity. It nurtures concord and the meeting of minds by permitting the free play of the variations of public opinion. But in order that this dialogue may go in the right direction it is essential that charity is in command even when there are differing views. Everyone in this dialogue should be animated by the desire to serve and to consolidate unity and co-operation. There should be a desire to build, not to destroy. There should be a deep love for the Church and a compelling desire for its unity.

119. Since the development of public opinion within the Church is essential, individual Catholics have the right to all the information they need to play their active role in the life of the Church.

120. The normal flow of life and the smooth functioning of government within the Church require a steady two-way flow of information between the ecclesiastical authorities at all levels and the faithful as individuals and as organized groups. This applies to whole world. To make this possible various institutions are required. These might include news agencies, official spokesmen, meeting facilities, pastoral councils — all properly financed.

Free Flow of Information in the Church

Ecclesial Cybernetics: A Systems Analysis of Authority and Decision-Making in the Catholic Church, With a Plea for Shared Responsibility. Patrick Granfield, O.S.B. (New York: The Macmillan Company & London: Collier-Macmillan Publishers, 1973).

Communication in the Church. Ed. by Gregory Baum and Andrew Greeley (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978).

Both of these books are concerned with introducing into the church a process of communication for continual self-renewal and continual growth. They address the general problem of rigidity in decision making and immobility in responding to the spiritual needs of Christians and non-believers as well. Fundamentally, it is a problem of "the free flow of information" in the church and "freedom of expression" in order to ensure new forms of spirituality, new commitment to the gospel and new ways of preaching the Good News.

Applying Communication Theory to the Church

Although there has been a great deal of discussion of the need for freedom of expression within the church, the study of Granfield is unique in that he examines, in detailed fashion, the historical, theological, institutional and communicational bases for accomplishing this. A better title for the book would be "Ecclesial Democracy", that is, how participatory decision-making might develop in the church. In this, he is taking his cue from the II Vatican Council which above all stressed open communication in the church, co-responsibility of all the faithful, the principle of collegiality and the recognition of the charismatic role of all members of the Body of Christ. But he is quite justified in his analysis of the church in cybernetic terms because cybernetics is precisely at the heart of the computer-information management revolution which is creating the "information society" of today.

In the first part of his book, Granfield analyses the church in terms of its cybernetic, information flow aspects. Part Two illustrates how feedback and decision-making - and obstacles to this - have operated in four crucial controversies of the church: slavery, birth control, ecumenism and priestly celibacy. Part Three goes into the historical and theological justification of a more participatory church. Part Four analyses the problems of democratisation in the church and, all too briefly, suggests some innovations.

Lack of Credibility in the Leadership

A number of the articles in the book edited by Baum and Greeley (part of the *Concilium* series) analyse problems of communication between the Vatican, bishops, clergy and laity. Greeley, in his article, "The Communal Catholic, The Two Churches: Fitting a Model", echoes a theme frequently touched upon by Granfield: the lack of credibility in the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church as teacher. A substantial number of Catholics simply do not think the church is to be believed when it speaks on race or sex because it is their impression that the church does not know what it is talking about. "God may know what he is talking about, but you don't know what you are talking about." One might back up Greeley's observation with the example of Pope John-Paul's world-wide visits. Nearly everybody immediately finds him a charming media personality, but many are not listening to or accepting his message.

There may be many reasons for the loss of credibility, but Greeley thinks that it was because those in official or unofficial leadership did not listen carefully enough to the problems of ordinary people. Instead of more talking in encyclicals, statements and meetings, there must be more listening.

Horizontal Communication

In the final part of his book, Granfield outlines four institutional conditions for better communication and for more responsive decision-making in the church.

The first refers to the conditions for fostering deep religious commitment. Intense commitment becomes increasingly difficult in proportion to the size of the community. The anonymity and impersonalism of parishes of several thousand people make the growth of identification and cooperation very difficult. Granfield thinks that the movement toward small ecclesial communities, as part of a larger parish or diocesan structure, is evidence of the need. Essential to a more participatory Church are the small semi-autonomous Christian communities. As in the case of thousands of basic Christian communities in Latin America, these local groups became a spiritual, discerning union selecting their own local leadership and deciding issues which concern them.

A second condition is the affirmation of the principle of pluralism. Pluralism implies organised minority power within the church with the freedom to meet, exchange ideals between competent professionals and to make these ideas public. Such creativity and freedom needs protection if they are to contribute to the church's self renewal. An attitude of suspicion toward any new idea, the suppression of every kind of dissent and severe restriction of academic freedom should be alien in a church that holds freedom in such high esteem.

Unity Through Mass Media

A third condition concerns the means of communication in the church which affirms the fundamental oneness of the church in creed, code and cult while at the same time the church moves toward greater local autonomy and flexibility. In Granfield's view, the use of the mass media within the church can be an important means of creating this unity. He is referring especially to the use of the press and broadcasting for internal communication. He admits that, in fact, the religious press is declining and that in many parts of the world the church has not learned to use the electronic media effectively. The solution, he proposes, is better professional training to improve quality of programming, a broadening out from the often parochial interests of the religious media, and more institutional support, especially from the bishops.

Fourthly, in order to make information and alternatives available to decision-makers, there should be better use of study commissions in the church. He specifically questions the effective use of the Pontifical Commissions in the Catholic Church. There should be more careful selection of the members, a wider spectrum of opinions, ample provision of time and facilities, and respect for the conclusions reached. Too often, commissions are democratic window dressing for decisions that will eventually be taken behind closed doors or they are used simply to delay a decision.

Finally, a key condition for greater circulation of new ideas is a more adequate system for selection of leadership, especially the selection of bishops. What is needed is a broad participation by all segments of the community: bishops, priests, religious and laity.

Granfield's book is an important example of the application of communication theory to ecclesiology in a systematic way, and is a valuable analysis of how information is actually used in the church. It is the final section of the book which needs to be expanded by Granfield or other researchers. There is need for more detailed proposals for institutional innovation to improve communication in the church.