



# RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

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## Advertising and the Christian Imagination

The Review Article (pp.1-5) summarising current critical analyses of advertising reveals quite different stances of public morality regarding advertising. Some imply that there should be a reorientation of major political and economic institutions with the radical reform of advertising as we know it today. Others see both good and bad in advertising and they feel that although there should be guiding norms for personal and public protection, it is something to be tolerated for the sake of peace and freedom. However, virtually all are agreed on one thing: that advertising plays a central role in creating the values of our mass production, mass consumption societies.

The major function of advertising is to open the way for marketing by creating styles of life and dominant cultural trends centred around certain products. Advertising must rearrange value systems — even ultimate values — so that these are compatible with the production, marketing and consumption of these products. Once major institutions are adjusted and cultural norms established, the influence on our way of perceiving the world is indirect. We need never to watch television or read popular magazines. The myths that new products mean progress, better health, more happiness become the “normal” meaning of life. Those who think that they are above the “cult of consumerism” may be the most deluded. Not even the contemplative hermit is completely immune from the dominant world view of a society.

This thought should put us on the alert because as Christians and people who believe in God, we are committed to seeing the world through the eyes of faith, that is, seeing the world as God sees it and, for Christians, as it is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Growing in the vision of faith has been the perennial search of religious contemplation. But for us today, the concern is growing in the vision of faith while we live in the culture of a mass consumer society. And if we are people with some responsibility for religious communication, the challenge is particularly great because our popular media — starting with penny newspapers and evolving through film, radio and television — are organised around the institution of advertising and a mass consumer culture.

This number of *Research Trends in Religious Communication* reviews recent books which are dealing precisely with the influence of advertising on the religious imagination and the need for a Christian critical awareness of our culture of consumerism.

## Following Christ in a Consumer Society

John Francis Kavanaugh. *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981).

John Kavanaugh, S.J. presents here a method of reflection intended to develop a critical Christian awareness of the influence of consumer culture in our lives.

Fr. Kavanaugh is already well known to many religious communicators in the U.S. for his workshops on the techniques used by advertising to shape personal values. He is a film critic and was an invited speaker at the 1982 national assembly of UNDA-USA. As a professor of philosophy at St. Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri, he is familiar with currents of modern philosophy and has specialised in Marxist philosophies. He is also the Assistant for Social Ministries of the Jesuit Missouri Province and formed part of a team of American Jesuits who carried out an analysis of the socio-cultural context of Jesuit ministries for the purpose of planning Jesuit apostolates.

The author does not pretend to give us a socio-economic analysis of the causes of consumerism. He says explicitly at the outset, “I intend to lay aside the rigor of scientific investigation and philosophic method”. Reading this is much more like the experience of a directed retreat and, indeed, this would provide very good series of reflections for a spiritual retreat.

### The Lack of Moral Indignation in Christians

One senses in the author a deep dismay that in so-called Christian cultures there is so little moral indignation with the wasteful consumerism, racism, militarism and social injustices around them. Kavanaugh thinks that, ‘Christians have much to learn from Marx and from many Marxists. If Christians had the Marxist sense of critique, if they had a Marxist awareness of how the economic order is intrinsically related to the entire social and religious fabric of a society, if they had the wholehearted dedication to the betterment of humanity that many Marxists exhibit, their Christianity ... would be lived and real rather than nominal and superficial’.

At the same time, Kavanaugh has no illusions about the weaknesses of Marxism. ‘Marxists have much to learn from Christians and everything to learn from Christ ... At the center of Marxism is a gaping hole. It is an absence of spirit. There is little of compassion and hope ... a lack of faith in the freedom of men and women’.

The strong point of Marxism is the clear perception of the injustices that liberal capitalist societies attempt to cover over and a deep sense of moral outrage. Negatively, Marxist analysis is helpful

in revealing what is wrong with our society, but, positively, Kavanaugh finds in his Christian faith a path to build families, communities and nations in ways that make the value of the person central. In Marxism the author finds a method of analysing the root causes of consumerism and injustice. Above all, he finds a method of *becoming aware* of how the consumer society influences the pattern of our thinking.

### **Borrowing Tools of Marxist Analysis**

For the purposes of this book, Kavanaugh simplifies Marxist analysis to four basic themes of reflection. But at each of these four steps he questions Marx with a Christian critique. Thus, Marxist analysis becomes a form of Christian contemplation upon the society we live in.

The first theme of reflection is to see that each institution — the family, education, the economic production system — is intimately related to every other institution and to the logic of the whole society. We cannot understand how a husband, wife and children deal with each other in the family today without seeing the way the family is conditioned by the demands of our work, our system of education, our system of media, etc. Without a clear vision of this interrelatedness, we run the risk of living our lives in compartmentalised fashion: living a life of pious faith, but ignoring injustices around us; proclaiming oneself a pacifist, but promoting abortion.

Secondly, we must search for the underlying presuppositions and values that form the integrating logic and pattern of interconnection of all social institutions. In a liberal capitalist society, this central ethos is based on the marketplace. Everything and everybody take on meaning in terms of their saleability as a commodity in the marketplace. The measure is not the intrinsic value of the person but the commodity value. Thus, the whole system becomes dehumanised. All of us know in a certain sense that success in the marketplace is the supreme goal, but we lack a real insight of what this is doing to people. This “totalising critique” provides a new, deeper insight into how everything takes on the commodity form: people in the workplace are valued only in terms of their “productivity”; students are motivated with the ideal of competition in the marketplace and gaining access to consumer commodities; the elderly are abandoned when they lose their strength to compete in the marketplace.

Thirdly, we analyse how commodities become idols, ends in themselves and the basis of our secular faith.

The fourth reflection is the refusal to resign ourselves to this treatment of persons as things with excuses that are themselves framed in the logic of the Commodity Form: “they don’t deserve better”, ‘everybody has their own life’, etc.

### **The Commodity Form Vs. The Personal Form**

In the first part of his book, Kavanaugh shows how the ethos of the Commodity Form runs through the logic of technocratic, consumer societies. We relate not by sharing our mutual interior consciousness, but as things. Therefore, uniformity, competition, quest for power — not freedom and creativity — become the goals. The way of organising industrial production and scientific research, the prevalence of moral relativism — all are traced back to the Commodity Form of world view.

The second part of the book explored the forms that Christian life takes on in a consumer society. This Kavanaugh bases on a Christian view of what it means to be human (philosophical anthropology) and which he refers to as the ‘Personal Form’. ‘When I speak of the Personal Form, I am referring to a mode of perceiving and valuing men and women as irreplaceable persons whose fundamental identities are fulfilled in covenantal relationships. A covenant relationship is a mutual commitment of self-donation between free beings capable of self-conscious reflection and self-possession’.

The Personal Form is not the prerogative of any one church or even revealed religion, but the Christian discovers the fullest revelation of the Personal Form in Jesus Christ. This discovery is made in the faith covenant between the self-giving of God in Jesus Christ and the self-giving of the person who accepts Jesus Christ. This faith relationship defines the Personal Form and becomes the norm for perceiving reality. It is a perception of reverence and respect for the unique identity of everybody and everything.

Again, what is new in this reflection is the search for the interrelation of every aspect of the Personal Form and the degree to which the Commodity Form has been subtly absorbed. Kavanaugh emphasises that Christians living in a culture dominated by the Commodity Form must nurture the seeds of the Personal Form within different types of Christian basic communities. The community itself becomes an exemplar of the Personal Form.

## **Advertising and the Christian Imagination**

Virginia Stem Owens. *The Total Image: Or Selling Jesus in the Modern Age*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1980).

Virginia Owens argues that religious broadcasting, whether of the fundamentalist, ‘electronic church’ variety or the mainline churches, have failed miserably to communicate the real meaning of the gospel.

The key problems are the lack of any clear criteria of cultural accommodation and the desire to ‘make Christ dominate in our world’ by whatever pragmatic means that will work. Ever since the popular mass media have become a central cultural institution, the churches have been juggling three options: 1) *withdraw from the world*, a conservative point of view, now increasingly unpopular, which used to forbid seeing movies and television; 2) *reform the media in the model of Christian inspiration*, an alternative that some disheartened liberal media reformers still cling to; or, ‘the new entry’, 3) *beat them at their own game*. Option three is increasingly gaining adherents from both the conservatives and liberals who are impatient with the lack of results of their strategies. If technological efficiency is the genius of our age and the marketing-advertising experts have developed new modes of persuasion, then why don’t we Christians baptise these means to communicate (i.e., sell) the good news of Jesus Christ?

Owen thinks that in this third option, beguiled by the *power* of television, we are being seduced by the same reasoning that led

a previous age to endorse the Spanish Inquisition and to place missionary efforts under the power of the sword in order to insure the acceptance of Christ. Her book is a call to the Christian imagination to free itself from the temptation to get immediate results.

### **Image Advertising in the Electronic Church**

The author analyses in detail the insidious results of just one false accommodation to the current media culture: selling Jesus through image advertising. In her view, Christianity today has capitulated to a central concern: creating a good image. The goal is to put the object of persuasion in a visual frame so appealing that customers will want to see themselves within the frame. A product like Geritol may be distasteful, but, no matter, Geritol is not the centre of the frame. What you are buying are the health, wealth or youth or whatever may be the idealised contemporary life style. In the Oral Roberts show or in the publicity of the PTL (Praise the Lord) network for its new ‘Total Image’ retreat and training centre, everybody comes on stage with the same symbols of the typical variety show or talk show format — successful, svelte, glib and well integrated. Imperceptibly, says Virginia Owens, all are losing sight of the fact that what is being sold is not Jesus, but a ready-

made life style. In some circles the proper insignia are white buck shoes and friendly football players. In other circles it is liberation and lettuce boycotts. Christianity becomes a matter of selecting (buying) a life style for much the same reason that one opts for polyester double knit or prewashed denims.

### Communicating Christian Paradox

Like Malcolm Muggeridge, she sees a fundamental contradiction in the premises underlying mass media communication and the proclamation of the gospel. The purpose of the mass media is to 'persuade us to accept as real and conventional the world we see focussed through its lens. The proclamation of the gospel, on the other hand, is to draw attention to the rift between conventionally accepted reality and the reality of Christ'.

## The Symbiosis of Popular Media, Advertising and the Revivalist Tradition

William G. McLoughlin. *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: an essay on religion and social change in America, 1607-1977*. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Much of the discussion of America's 'electronic church' implies that Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell and other media evangelists have suddenly appeared on the national scene born with a charismatic ability to use the mass media. However, these 'prime-time' preachers are only the latest generation of an American evangelical revivalist tradition which has had a format of popular preaching and moving great masses of people for more than two centuries. Many have commented that the format of the electronic church — dramatic preaching, great choirs and/or gospel singers, spectacular healings and conversions, appearances of celebrity Christians — is all made to order for the mass popular media. In fact, this format moved straight out of the revival tent into the television studio. The revivalist 'media format' was developed in the early 19th century just at the time that the American institution of mass popular media was being formed.

### Revivalism and Mass Popular Media

William McLoughlin charts four great religious awakenings in American history. The first such awakening, from about 1740 to 1760, was a reaction to the breakdown of the original religious fervor of the initial Puritan migration to America. McLoughlin argues that it was also a major factor in forming the cultural-political consciousness underlying the American revolution.

The second Great Awakening, 1800-1830, coincided with the beginnings of the American mass market society and the formation of a new American society of mass democracy that de Tocqueville describes so well. This second awakening influenced the rise of the Jacksonian populist democracy. McLoughlin describes how the charismatic figure of this second awakening, Charles Grandison Finney, invented a mass media revivalist format for the age. Moving from town to town on the American frontier, he organised committees in advance, filled the town with advertising placards, involved all the principal leaders of the town, and invited all the churches to participate. The revival itself was a week-long event (or many weeks in major cities) with great mass meetings in large

What contemporary media communication cannot express is the paradoxical meaning of the gospel. Christ constantly communicated in terms of paradoxes. 'Unless the seed fall to the ground and dies, it shall not bring forth fruit'. Our culture, in its search for instant success and problem-solving, has eliminated the paradox so that the seed does not need to die to be reborn. Contemporary mass media technology tells us that to communicate we must always present an image of health and success, we must pour forth information, we must catch the attention of the masses, we must explain all in completely understandable terms. In contrast, the gospel insists on the grotesque, the weak, the poor. The Christian paradox of communication assumes that unless we value silence, hiddenness and mystery, we shall not revere or make understood our life hidden with Christ in God.

tents. It was intended to be as spectacular as possible to create a true 'media event'.

### The Roots of Advertising in Revivalism

Currently we may be inclined to think that advertising is the causal influence in dominant patterns of the religious imagination. However, Donald McQuade of Queens College, New York, who is preparing a book with the title, *The Promised Land, Advertising and Evangelism in American Culture*, proposes that advertising has drawn heavily on traditional forms of revivalist discourse. He notes remarkable 'thematic, structural and stylistic connections between patent medicine advertisements and the oratory of early nineteenth century itinerant preachers, most notably Charles Grandison Finney and Peter Cartwright. Since that time, advertising has continued to promote and capitalize on such popular conceptions as bodily impurity and sin as the causes of disease — beliefs that were carried down from the Puritan ethic and were rekindled by the evangelical fervor of the late 1850s, the spectacular ministry of Dwight Moody during the 1870s, the razzmatazz of Billy Sunday and the flamboyant revivals of the early twentieth century'.

In McQuade's view, 'the deep structure and purposes of American advertising are rooted in such Puritan and fundamentalist precepts as shame, sin, and guilt; public confession; conversion and rebirth; and various forms of millennialism. What is most notable about the continuing relationship between advertising and evangelism in the twentieth century is that advertising has assumed the primary role; where it once was the borrower, it is now the lender'.

'Such seemingly marginal figures in American life as the advertiser and the evangelist actually trade on values at the center of our culture'. It is the thesis of McQuade that both advertising and the revivalist tradition have played a key role in the formation of the central value configuration of American culture and that they have had a strong mutual influence at different periods of American history.

## Varieties of Popular Religious Media Formats

Michael R. Real, 'Evangelist Billy Graham' in *Mass-Mediated Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977).

The 'electronic church' owes much of its media format to the evangelical revivalist tradition. However, other religious traditions may have very different approaches to mass popular media and a different interaction with the advertising-shaped media.

Michael Real argues that to understand the phenomenon of a broadcast evangelist such as Billy Graham, we must study it as an aspect of popular culture with the conceptual methods of anthropology, cultural exegesis and literary criticism.

In his study of Billy Graham, Real finds that the social context for his audience is one of confusion about personal norms and alienation in an increasingly urban pluralistic society. Graham also plays upon the anxiety Americans feel in the groping attempts at world political leadership as well as the increasing cold war confrontation with Russian communism. The textual message is not just personal salvation through a return to faith in Christ, but coming back to the good old American values of Puritan sobriety,

individualistic competition, capitalist enterprise, the ethnocentric belief in the superiority of the American way of life and America's manifest destiny in the world today. The emotionally reassuring message is that if we all try harder, the traditional American way of life will triumph.

### Studying Other Religious Traditions

However, Real points out that there are other traditions of popular mass-mediated religion in America: the more hierarchical, but humanistic and rationalistic Roman Catholic tradition reflected in the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. Martin Luther King, with the more expressive, kinesthetic and socially conscious tradition than the neo-Calvinist fundamentalism of white churches is another dimension. Archbishop Romero, in his radio broadcasts in El Salvador, listened to daily by some 80% of the people, reflected the commitment of the Latin American church to the poor and dispossessed.

The colourful and attention-getting fundamentalist preachers have attracted the sociologists of religion and media researchers. Unfortunately, other traditions of popular, mass-media religion have not been studied. However, Real provides a framework for a systematic, comparative analysis of diverse Roman Catholic, Jewish and Protestant traditions of popular preaching and mass-communication styles. Such studies would have to take into consideration: 1) different theological foundations; 2) the differing socio-cultural contexts of both the major spokesmen of a tradition and the audience responses to their personal problems and anxieties; 3) how the media spokesmen approach issues of public morality such as race, money and economic power, politics and American

national ideology; 4) concepts of the relation of Christianity and modernisation in science and technology; and 5) techniques of using media formats and projecting religious symbols in media language. Perhaps most important are the differing concepts of ecclesial structure and the role of the clergyman in the different religious traditions.

### Contrasting Religious Media Figures

Real notes a number of cultural contrasts along the lines of the dimensions mentioned above. Theologically, the God of Billy Graham is remote and transcendent, while the Roman Catholic concept of God tends to emphasise the immanent, incarnational presence in history. The symbols of media language also differ. While Graham and his cast appear in stylish, slightly modish business suits and ties with the background of a huge crowd in a football stadium or Madison Square Garden, Bishop Sheen appeared in his episcopal robes with an instructional blackboard as his background. Sheen reflected the heavy emphasis on the Catholic school in the pre-Vatican II Catholicism. Billy Graham makes use of his associations with and support of the economic and politically powerful and is invited to appear on prime-time television. Martin Luther King and Archbishop Romero associated themselves with the dispossessed and could get air time only by creating a news event in the national media. The only radio station that allowed Archbishop Romero access was one that was being continually bombed and closed by government officials. And, of course, both Martin Luther King and Archbishop Romero ended their lives in circumstances very different from those of most prime-time preachers.

## Announcing...The CSCC-WACC Book Series, "Communication and Human Values"

Dear Friends in Religious Communication,

You will find enclosed an announcement of the book series being sponsored by the Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture in cooperation with the World Association of Christian Communication. I would like to tell you a little more about this series.

This is planned as a new service for religious communicators. We now have many newsletters and shorter articles, but we lack fuller information on key problems of religious communication that you can get only in a book-length treatment. For each topic we have invited the most competent authors we can find to give:

- A *comprehensive survey* of current discussion on a question of major interest to religious communicators.
- A very *readable presentation with practical recommendations* applicable to the work of a wide range of people in religious communication.
- *Guidelines* for church policy in communications and the position of churches regarding public communication policy.
- An *interchange of ideas* in the world-family of Christian communicators. We want to pick up experiences in religious communication from one part of the world such as Latin America and Asia and make them known outside their own continent and country.

- A *challenge to conventional positions*. Many of these books will be controversial, but we need new ideas and it is often the nature of Christian witness to be controversial.

For example, the first book, *Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications* by Cees Hamelink, is a survey of the key issues in the debate on the New World Information and Communication Order. It is a challenge to many accepted notions, but we feel it speaks to the Christian respect for cultures and the dignity of the human person. The second book, *Religious Television* by Peter Horsfield, to appear later this year, is a survey of research on this topic over the last 30 years with recommendations for the future. Ross Kidd's *Popular Theatre for Education and Development* (to appear later this year) is an international survey of small, inexpensive "Folk Media", now becoming so important for religious communicators.

We have worked to get the price down to ensure the widest distribution. You know that many books of this type now sell for \$25-\$30. First, we have arranged with the publisher, Longman, for a base list price of \$15. Then the CSCC and WACC are making a bulk purchase so that if you order directly through the CSCC or WACC, with a PREPAID order, you can get the book for \$12. AND WE PAY THE POSTAGE AND HANDLING. We can make this offer to subscribers of COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS, but also to members of UNDA, OCIC, UCIP and other organisations in religious communication.

This project is a big step for us. We ask for your support and also that you spread the word among other religious communicators.

Sincerely  
ROBERT A. WHITE, series editor