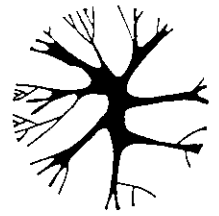


RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION



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Coming to Terms with Video Culture

For centuries the Church has been one of the main guardians and dispensers of culture in the Western world. The history of music, art, theatre, architecture, painting, philosophy and science is inconceivable without explicit and constant reference to Christian inspiration. Only in recent times has the centre of culture slipped away from the Church, a movement well illustrated in the forms and inspirations of contemporary art. The loss of the Church's privileged position in the cultural field has caused disorientation, confusion and disappointment among many Christians; but the same loss has also served to underline the fact that Christianity and culture are not one and the same.

It is beyond doubt that Christianity must be incarnated in particular cultures; but it is equally true that it cannot be identified with any one culture. The emergence of non-Western cultures onto the world stage has brought home the realization that Western culture is only one among many (and not the highest) and that the Church must more clearly distinguish between the cultural forms in which its message is expressed and the message itself.

Even in Europe, the heart of traditional Western culture, new cultures are coming to the fore. The Church is beginning to realize that it will have to pay more serious attention to popular culture. In his book *Jesus and the Christian in a Pop Culture* (London: Robert Royce, 1984) Tony Jasper concludes that "One thing remains without question: the Church cannot speak to young people reared in the pop culture if it refuses to recognize the existence of such a framework".

Popular Culture Is A Video Culture

In this context the spread of video is yet another indication that modern popular culture is overwhelmingly a visual culture; and it is a culture in which most Church leaders are least at home. However, as the reports in this issue of *TRENDS* indicate, the Church is, albeit slowly, trying to come to terms with the video revolution, at least in terms of recognizing that the Devil should not be allowed to have all the best videos!

Still lacking, however, is a deeper understanding of the cultural implications of the video phenomenon. Despite the efforts of people like Pierre Babin, who has long been writing about the Church in an audio-visual culture, Church leaders remain preoccupied with the secondary problem of how to use video technology. If this situation is to be reversed Church leaders must begin to take seriously the reflections of people like Babin and Gregor Goethals, the author of *The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981).

Goethals has argued that television has begun "to perform one of the oldest traditional functions of images: to visualize common myths and to integrate the individual into a social whole". In other words, television (and, by extension, video) is the dominant force in the creation of those myths, rituals, and symbols that constitute the popular cultural environment.

The irruption of VCRs into the media environment makes it more urgent than ever that the relationship between the Christian message and video culture be studied. The controversy surrounding the "electronic" church raises disturbing questions which go beyond the activities of specific ministers and evangelists. Is this video medium as it currently exists, irredeemably unsuited for conveying a supernatural message? What is happening to the imaginations of contemporary men and women who are increasingly bombarded with electronic images? What symbolic worlds have those images brought into our minds? Are those symbolic worlds transforming, substituting or discarding the sacred icons and rituals which formerly bound people to Christian belief?

If it is to begin to answer these questions the Church must enter, and enter creatively, this new video culture. Otherwise it is likely that the values and meanings it holds will continue to become a marginal part of popular consciousness. Goethals expresses this challenge concisely when she warns that "until institutional religion can excite the serious play of the soul and evoke the fullness of human compassion, television will nurture our illusions of heroism and self-transcendence".

Pastoral and Catechetical Use of Video in Europe

The recent spread of VCR technology has renewed the impetus to use such technological innovations for direct evangelism. The words of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* seem ever more pressing: "the Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect. It is through them that she proclaims from the "housetops" the message of which she is the depository".

In the spirit of those words the European Catholic bishops in July 1984 asked for a survey of church video use in Europe. Similar surveys have also been undertaken in Latin America and Africa. A study of the results of these surveys leaves the reader with a twofold impression: great, if vague, expectations and indecisive, timid, and patchy use of the new technology.

In July 1984 the European Catholic Bishops in charge of communication asked the International Catholic Organization for Cinema (OCIC) to carry out a survey of church use of video in Europe. In February 1985 questionnaires went to 120 addresses in 21 countries. Answers from 18 countries representing 48% of those questioned were received. (The results were published in the newsletter OCIC-INFO June/August 1985).

The survey tried to get answers about: 1. the extent of church coordination of video activities; 2. the production of catechetical and pastoral programmes; 3. the distribution of such videos; 4. the use made of video by the church; and 5. the principal users of catechetical and pastoral videocassettes.

Coordination of Video Activities

France (Chrétien Medias), West Germany (Zentralstelle Medien), Ireland (Veritas) and Luxembourg (Office Catholique des Communications Sociales) coordinate church video work. Switzerland (Filmbüro SKFK) and Belgium are planning to improve coordination. In Italy nominal responsibility for coordination rests with the Ufficio Nazionale per le Comunicazioni Sociali, while the Holy See has its own separate production agency. In several countries, notably Britain, Belgium, France, Denmark and Switzerland, there is ecumenical cooperation in video production, in the exchange of material and the sale of religious programmes.

Production and Distribution

The survey revealed that there are still only a few professional institutions and individuals producing catechetical materials. Their catalogues mostly contain videos of previously made films or audiovisuals. The scarcity of new videos is ascribed to the high cost of production, including the cost of purchasing copyrights, the limited market, and video piracy. A study of markets and the possibility of co-productions is being carried out but does not appear

too promising. At present a few producers are issuing a few videos each year."

The demand for religious videos is partially filled by the distribution of videotapes of television programmes recorded "off-air". This practice seems to be tolerated in some countries, e.g. Belgium, but would be considered piracy in others. The German church has set an example by not breaking copyright regulation in its offering of 200 quality films on videocassette. These films are chosen with for viewing by families and young people and are distributed through 'video galleries' in Catholic bookshops.

Videos are generally distributed via Church institutions, diocesan centres, catechetical bodies, and Catholic bookshops. In Britain the Catholic Truth Society tries to make videos available to schools and parishes. There is a single Belgian reference to the use of a commercial video-club.

Video Uses and Users

The uses and the target audiences for religious cassettes mentioned in the survey are as follows: adult catechesis, catechesis for the sick, general catechesis, liturgy, preparation for the sacraments, religious training for teachers, training of parish choirs, information, Christian education for parents, evangelism, community and communication, training in media language, leadership courses for adult groups, military and prison chaplaincies, homes for the disabled and mentally handicapped, archives, religious courses, renewal movements.

The most popular use for video is catechesis (23 mentions), followed by youth retreats (11), and preparation for the sacraments, and use with schools and missionary groups (each with 8 citations). The most frequent users appear to be priests, parishes, and schools (15 mentions each), followed by catechists and leaders of various types of church groups, e.g. prayer groups.

Conclusions

The survey points up the lack of training among ministers and catechists, not only in production skills but also in the lack of effective use of audiovisual materials. Another key point is the lack of support from Bishops' Conferences, though the Irish Bishops finance and support the Irish centre while the Scottish Bishops are said to be about to establish a closer link with the Church of Scotland video unit.

In view of the difficulties highlighted by the survey the final recommendation emphasizes the need for coordination: among producers in the same country; in the making of international catalogues of religious programmes; and in the effort to bring about international co-productions.

Church and Video in Latin America

Jeremiah O'Sullivan. *Diagnostico de Centros de Produccion y Uso Pastoral del Videocassette en America Latina*. Caracas, Venezuela, 1985.

A similar survey was carried out by the Latin American section of OCIC in 1984 among 40 centres engaged in the production and use of videocassettes in 18 countries. This study is prefaced by an examination of the historical relationship between the church and the communication media in Latin America. The earliest church attitude to the media is identified as defensive and suspicious. Eventually this attitude was superceded by a feeling that the church should "conquer" the media in order to use it for its own purposes. In recent years this attitude in turn has been modified: now the church argues that the media should become instruments of "liberation".

In addition, O'Sullivan claims that there is a consensus among communication experts that the mass media are not suitable tools for evangelism. Indeed, the Puebla Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1979 stressed the need to intensify the use of "group media" which "offer the possibility of dialogue" and are "more suited to a person-to-person type of evangelism that will evoke truly personal adhesion and commitment". In this context the video cassette has been accepted as a medium which can be used by groups to stimulate discussion and exploration of a variety of topics.

Video and Social Development

Though the survey covered 18 countries the most complete data and the bulk of the information came from five: Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. The survey findings are summarized in the following points:

1. There is a spectacular growth in the production and use of video cassettes throughout the continent. The existing number of centres in 1984 was forecast to double during 1985.
2. The use of videocassettes is integrated into a strategy of social development designed to aid the most needy people. This strategy is rooted in the conviction that, in the words of Pope Paul's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, "between evangelization and human advancement, development and liberation, there are in fact profound links".
3. The use of the videocassette is an instrument of a catechesis and an evangelism which includes the development of critical attitudes towards the social, political, economic and religious aspects of present-day society. This "critical awareness" is expected to lead to a deeper commitment to create more just institutions.

The survey found that only six of the production centres were engaged in the production of catechetical material; the rest were geared to social development. The majority of centres produced a video at a time; there were few series.

Recommendations

O'Sullivan ends with five recommendations:

1. that the church should plan its communication activities properly. The lack of planning is considered the most crucial

problem facing the church in this area;

2. that video should be used to show "the face of the church" and, in particular, to reveal how the church is interested in both evangelism and social development;
3. that efforts to impart skills training at all levels should be intensified;
4. that an adequate distribution system be developed nationally and internationally; and
5. that the quality of video productions be improved.

Seminar on Church and Video

On the basis of O'Sullivan's study a seminar on the *Pastoral Production and Use of Videocassettes* took place in Lima in August 1985. There were 16 participants from nine countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela) who discussed the survey and issued a report with comments and recommendations.

Regarding video production, the seminar pointed out the need for material suited to the reality of the church in Latin America. On the distribution question the church in each country was urged to set up a national centre to channel domestic production and to serve as a link with other centres on the continent.

Finally the seminar underlined the importance of proper professional and technical training for those using video as a pastoral tool in the group media context. Also stressed was the crucial importance of able group leaders. It was emphasized too that groups need not confine themselves to using church videos; many secular dramas and documentaries available on video lend themselves to pastoral use.

Church and Video in Africa

Centre des Etudes sur la Communication en Afrique (CESA). *Les Usages d'Eglise de la Vidéo en Afrique*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, CESA, 1985.

ICIC commissioned CESA to undertake a survey of church video use in Africa, which was carried out in September 1985. The goal of the survey was to provide information on VCR use that could be used to help design pastoral strategies for Africa.

A total of 421 questionnaires were sent to 268 individuals and 153 organizations in 48 countries. In response the survey received 119 answers from 39 countries. Zaïre, Nigeria and Rwanda contributed more than 10 answers each. Questions were asked about the use, production, distribution, and recording of video cassettes for catechetical, liturgical, evangelistic and information purposes.

African Video Use

The research identified three main characteristics of church video use in Africa: 1. The use of VCRs by the church is for group rather than individual viewing; 2. There is an appreciable number of locally produced programmes: "religious, African, in the vernacular languages"; and 3. There is an urgent need to coordinate production and distribution throughout the continent.

It was discovered that in the whole of Africa only 90 VCRs were either owned or on loan to 53 centres (individuals or organizations) linked to the Church. Top of the list came Nigeria and Rwanda with 11 VCRs each. Of the 90 VCRs 30 were listed as gifts, 28 as bought and 5 as being rented. Answers regarding format revealed that 63 VHS, 13 Betamax, and 8 U-Matic recorders were being used. Some 33 VCRs were installed in permanent locations and 31 were mobile. Because there is no television standard for the whole of Africa, 14 VCRs were multi-standard, and 16 could handle both the PAL and SECAM systems; of the others 19 were PAL only and 4 were NTSC.

Of the 53 centres 33 identified off-air recording as the main source of their material, while 27 used pre-recorded cassettes and 26

produced their own programmes. Just 28 centres in 17 countries had video cameras. The richest video libraries are in Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Togo, Zaïre and Kenya. Zaïre has a library of 800 cassettes and Kenya one of 200 items. Only the replies from Sudan and Zaïre mentioned video clubs linked to the church.

Audiences And Programmes

The main audience for video is young people. Some 18 centres cater for youth only and only 4 solely for adults. The majority of centres (30) catered for both adults and young people. The main target audience varied from country to country: in Nigeria it is people with a low level of education, in Rwanda and Togo it is intellectuals, and it is both Christians and non-Christians in Mali.

In asking about the content of programmes the researchers distinguished between "religious use" and "religious programmes". By religious use they meant cassettes which, though not explicitly religious, could be used for catechetical or pastoral purposes, e.g. as aids to group discussion. It was found that these kinds of cassettes were used more frequently than purely religious programmes.

Among the religious programmes, several countries mentioned *Jesus of Nazareth* by Zefferelli, Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*, and the French film on St Vincent de Paul, *Monsieur Vincent*. Another frequently mentioned film was Richard Attenborough's *Ghandi*. Local productions seem to be limited to coverage of community religious events (pilgrimages, weddings, ordinations etc), representations of Biblical plays and local religious songs.

The researchers noted that there was a great deal of enthusiasm for using video in the Church's work, but they remain cautious about the possibilities of video use expanding, particularly in view of the high cost of equipment.

Christian Reflections on Video Violence

Francis Bridger. *Videos, Permissiveness, and the Law*. Bramcote (Notts., NG9 3DS, UK): Grove Books, 1984.

Despite the fact that much of the pressure for the British Video Recordings Act (see *Review Article*) came from evangelical Christian sources, many Christians have been unconvinced that the case for tighter censorship of videos has been made. Francis Bridger, lecturer in Social Theology at St John's College, Nottingham, is one theologian who has tried to place the "video nasties" controversy in a broader context. His booklet is a careful examination of the arguments for and against censorship and a theological reflection on the problem.

After reviewing the "video nasties" debate, Bridger offers four considerations which he considers relevant in assessing the use of violence in any given production, video or otherwise. These considerations suggest one way in which Christians might be able to discriminate among video programmes, (including music videos, which he does not discuss). His considerations also avoid the simple dismissal of all productions which portray violent acts.

These considerations are: 1) What is the purpose of portraying violence in a particular way? 2) What is the overall plot and message of the film and what kind of philosophy underlies it? 3) Does the film illuminate or provide insight into what it means to be human? 4) What are the effects of portraying violence upon the participant?

To illustrate how these considerations might be applied to a particular film, Bridger undertakes an analysis of the film *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan*. His conclusions are that the use of "realistic violence, is, in fact, essential and integral to the film. But it is handled sensitively and carefully". *Greystoke*, he claims, "raises important questions about man and his world, the distinction between animal and human social orders, and the universality of death and suffering as moral, and not merely existential, phenomena". Thus, Bridger is able to argue for the merits of a film which some people, concerned only with the amount of violence shown on screen, might regard as simply an up-market and "artier" version of a "video nasty".

Great Britain: Church Leaders and Attitudes to Video

Brian Brown and Judy Turner-Smith. *Video in the Churches: A Survey*. Oxford: Television Research Unit, Oxford Polytechnic, 1984.

In 1983 Trinity Trust, a Christian foundation, established Trinity Video as a separate commercial organization to offer a comprehensive range of "Christian teaching programmes and Christian films, feature films, children's programming and self-education programmes". The aim was to offer an alternative to "the video shop that stocks everything". Trinity Video was also concerned to promote the use of video in the churches. It therefore funded the Television Research Unit (TRU) (now known as TRUMEDIA) to undertake a project to establish an indication of the level of interest in video within the leadership of one of the mainstream churches. The Television Research Unit was chosen because it has a particular interest in religious programming.

Methodist Leaders and VCR Ownership

The TRU decided to carry out a survey of leaders in the Methodist Church. The Methodists were chosen for three reasons: 1) the researchers were Methodists; 2) the Methodists had a long-established involvement in and experience of film and video evangelism; and 3) Methodism's Autumn and Spring synods in each Methodist district bring together into one place many of the most influential leaders in the Church. It is claimed that the leadership of Methodism is largely similar to that of other mainstream Protestant churches.

Questionnaires were eventually distributed at the September Synods of 12 Methodist districts and 606 were completed out of a possible total of 2,000. Of this sample 68.3% were men and 30.7% women (1% did not specify), a ratio typical of Synod representation. Some 31.8% (193) of those answering the question were ministers or deaconesses and 63.9% (387) were lay. The majority of respondents were between 36 and 65 years old, and most of the laity belonged to the professional and middle classes. (As VCR penetration tends to be higher in working class homes this social composition biased the sample in favour of those who could be expected to be less enthusiastic about acquiring a VCR).

As anticipated, the number of Methodist leaders owning or renting a VCR was relatively low (12.9%), compared with the 1983 national penetration figure of 26%. When asked why they did not have a VCR the most popular reason given was that there were more worthwhile things to spend money on, closely followed by "financial reasons" and the opinion that the VCR was an unnecessary luxury. Those using a VCR indicated that they mostly used it for "time-shifting" of television programmes. The next most popular

uses were the showing of rented films and the recording of BBC/ITV religious programmes.

Video in Church Life

The leaders were asked "to what area of church life can you see the most immediate benefit from video material?". Their most frequent responses were that it could be used in special teaching courses (e.g. during Lent), in housegroups, in Sunday School and in youth groups.

Because of Trinity Video's interest in distributing videos a number of questions were concerned with video clubs. It was found that membership of video clubs was restricted to 11 out of 191 ministers, and 18 out of 386 laypeople. The most frequently cited responses to the question "what would you look for in a good video club" were discretion in the distribution of "adult" films, a complete range of films, and low rental charges.

In addition to the general questions about video clubs, the respondents were informed that consideration was being given to the setting up of Methodist district and circuit video clubs. They were then asked about the priorities they thought such clubs should have. The clear priorities were: 1) organization on an ecumenical basis; 2) a full range of good quality Christian films; 3) religious education material; 4) wide range of family films; and 5) free access for the whole community.

Recommendations for Church Video Use

The TRU researchers make a number of recommendations on the basis of their survey. They argue that the survey showed that there is a need for more information on video to be made available to churchgoers. In addition, more attention should be given to raising church awareness of those areas of church life in which video might be useful, e.g. as a resource "for teaching, training, information, housegroups, worship aid in small congregations, ministry to the housebound, etc."

One recommendation of the TRU researchers in particular deserves to be investigated further. They note that "given the penetration of the VCR into the domestic market is higher among the working classes, if the Churches are serious about reaching the people, we recommend that the Churches take video seriously as a possible tool for effective outreach". That recommendation offers a real challenge to churches which are becoming increasingly the preserve of the middle classes.