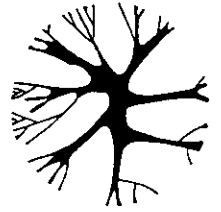


# RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION



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## Mass Media and the Religious Imagination

### The Role of Popular Arts in Experience of Transcendence

In the 'culture' of the church, there has long been an underlying attitude of distrust toward the popular media of film, radio and television. It has been especially difficult to see in the living, light-hearted, ever-changing fashions of the entertainment media a genuine expression of the human spirit. Seminarians, for example, were kept away from the popular media because these were considered useless or even harmful distractions. The cloud of censorship still persists in the desire for a media education which will inoculate TV viewers from the expected bad effects. At best, film and TV are relegated to a marginal world of 'mere relaxation'; religion is placed in the more important realm of purposeful, rationalistic discourse. Official statements of the church admit the powerful cultural influence of the mass media, but consider it to be 'good media' only when they are used for serious, didactic aims. Rarely is it accepted that the imaginative, affective experience of the everyday popular culture might have a value in itself.

This is changing. There is increasing recognition that periods of leisure and entertainment provide some of the most important moments for exploring personal identity and celebrating human community. John Shea is representative of a growing number of theologians who think that much of the motivating symbolism in contemporary religious experience comes out of popular culture and specifically from current novels, theatre, film and day-to-day television.<sup>1</sup> These theologians affirm that the experience of transcendence— what Shea calls a 'revelation-faith experience' is always mediated through cultural symbolism. Although there is an enshrined religious, church vocabulary, this symbolization is often too remote from the everyday, common-sense language of people. Artists of the popular media are some of the first to capture in inchoate form new religious sensibilities. As was noted above in the Review Article, television, of all the popular media, is the least time-bound and is constantly translating both new knowledge and classical mythic themes into contemporary symbols to form a new state of common-sense knowledge.

#### Symbolization in Revelation-Faith Experience

For Shea, key motivating symbols are brought to light when people tell their life stories. In the background of these stories there is often

a long, groping search for a plan or broader meaning in life which does not appear to have a direct religious significance: choosing a career, thinking about marriage, or, in mid-life, planning retirement. In the foreground of the story—the point at which the story begins to touch the religious meaning of a life—there is often an account of an event which ruptures the secure world-view or ordinary pragmatic routine of their life. It might be a moment of failure and frustration, a death, a major crossroads which causes deeper questioning of the meaning of life. Most central to the story, however, are events, movements, persons or direct media experiences which reveal an ideal, a life goal or a pattern of meaning in an otherwise chaotic, confusing situation. These ideals are presented in the form of a striking motivated symbol which provides a sense of integrating harmony in a life story and relates this particular life story to a broader history going on around us.

#### Faith is Mediated Through Culture

Shea detects in life stories five dimensions of a revelation-faith experience which suggest the importance of popular culture and popular media in the religious imagination.<sup>2</sup>

1. The focus of the consciousness is not directly God, ultimate Mystery or the knowledge that ultimate Mystery exists. I am most aware of the symbolic ideal that gives meaning to my life story at this stage. This is a *religious* experience insofar as I am also aware that this symbolism and my life story do not make sense except as part of a larger frame of intentional, loving meaning grounded in ultimate Mystery. The young college girl who is inspired by Mother Teresa to a life of service is not simply aware of the possibility of an interesting, satisfying life, but that this is *THE* meaning of life. The heart of revelation-faith experience is the sense that my life is bonded to the ultimate ground of existence. Most important, the relation to ultimate Mystery is mediated through a very concrete cultural symbol such as Mother Teresa who makes sense to a Malcolm Muggeridge or thousands of other people because she is seen as responding to what is lacking or possible in our contemporary culture. What Shea wishes to stress, following the theological

anthropology of Rahner,<sup>3</sup> is that the awareness of our bondedness to God does not happen outside the ordinary processes of perception, feeling and immersion in our culture. The sense of relatedness is present in the ideal or motivating cultural symbol itself.

2. Along with the flow of images which interprets my life story comes the awareness that this meaning is not something of my own making or something culturally predictable. I am aware that it comes from the structure of meaning and Mystery outside the expected development of my life. The mediating symbol is full of paradox: both part of culture but also transcending culture and standing in judgement of the man-made-ness, relativity and even the foolishness of contemporary culture.
3. There is a sense that this new life trajectory responds to an incompleteness in my life—something I *must* do if I am to fulfill my personal history—because, like all symbols, it brings into harmonious synthesis all facets of my personal history and makes whole the broken culture around me.
4. Although the sense of meaning in my life may come in a moment of striking clarity, the different facets of the symbolic ideal unfold and become fully clear only as one meets new challenges through the journey of life and one is forced to continually reinterpret the symbolic ideal in the light of new circumstances.
5. For Shea the most problematic dimension of the revelation-faith experience is finding a symbolic language to express it. Most people do not express the experience precisely in terms of traditional religious language but in a new language which is close to their personal story, their cultural context and the catalyst of their religious experience. In fact, most great religious innovators (including Jesus himself) have had the problem that their vision seems to be at odds with the official language sanctioned by religious leadership.

Shea suggests that revelation-faith experiences will always find some expression, but if the inherited language is closed to the experience, the expression is severely limited. 'Our relationship to Mystery is articulated only in the language of the present age; and if that age is 'unmusical' (as ours most certainly is), we are tempted to Bergman's silence'.<sup>4</sup> Our luck is to find in the various languages of our contemporary culture one that is particularly open to transcendence. Shea thinks that the language of poetry, myth, folktale and the visual arts is particularly open to experience of transcendence because they incorporate the dimensions of human values, story, and intentional aspirations.

### A Case Study of Mediated Symbolism

Ignatius of Loyola's autobiographical account of his conversion is a particularly apt example because it is a real story that brings together many of the elements we are discussing: it is situated in a virtually completed life story, it presents a vivid consciousness of motivating symbols in the moment of conversion, and it reflects both the background culture and the role of popular media.

Ignatius' life had been disrupted by a cannon shot that shattered his leg and seemingly ended his career as a courtier and soldier in the service of the king and the governing class of sixteenth century Spain. In the quiet months of convalescence in the castle of Loyola, he wondered how he could put his life back together again. To while away the hours he asked for some of the books of chivalry which were then popular in Spain and which Ignatius particularly enjoyed. But the only books available in this Basque house were a Spanish translation of the *Vita Christi* by Ludolph of Saxony and a Spanish version of the lives of the saints by Jacopo da Varazze. Both were written as popular, imaginative recreations.<sup>5</sup>

During the intervals in his reading, his thoughts wandered back and forth between the ideals of chivalry and the imagery from the lives of the saints. In his autobiographical description, Ignatius remembered that at times he thought of 'what he would have to do

in the service of a certain lady...and the deeds of service which he would do for her'. At other times the imagery from his reading the lives of the saints became increasingly stronger. 'What would happen if I should do the things that St Francis and St Dominic did?' He began to think of the many difficult and great things he could accomplish if he followed their example. 'St Francis did this? Then I must do it.'<sup>5</sup>

In the foreground are the ideals of the saints which shaped the future course of Ignatius' life and led him toward prayer, poverty and placing himself completely at the service of Jesus, the King and Lord. In his personal reflection on the struggle of two ideals, that of chivalry and that of service to Jesus, he became aware already in this initial revelation-faith experience, of the influence of contrary motivating symbols, and this led toward the discernment of motivations as a fundamental aspect of Ignatian spirituality. The full significance of this initial experience became evident only with successive stages of life as he began to guide others in his own spiritual insights and eventually gathered around him the group which would found a religious order. What is striking in this story is the influence of the popular media of the day in the shaping of his religious imagination.

### Popular Religiosity and Theology

It is evident that the imagery of Ignatius' experience is much influenced by the popular piety and popular theology of his day. Then, as in Europe generally before the nineteenth century,<sup>6</sup> the culture itself, with its customs of pilgrimages, shrines and popular devotions often managed largely by lay, civic leaders, was the carrier of theology. The integration of popular theology and contemporary culture, however, is itself forged and maintained by creative symbol-making in folktales, poetry, folk drama and imaginative religious preaching.

Shea would argue that a theology can best provide a language for religious experience if it is drawing its expression from the popular arts. 'The best textbooks for contemporary natural theologians are not the second-hand theological treatises but the living works of artists who are in touch with the springs of creative imagination.'<sup>7</sup> It is artistic expressions that are the first forms of contemporary revelation-faith experiences. Theological thinking springs from those first products of the imagination's contact with the divine; but it does not, as it has so often been tempted to do, leave those forms behind. While both image and concept are needed to fully understand any revelation-faith experience, the initial language of the encounter is not 'I have five theses to present' but 'I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple.'<sup>8</sup>

### Linking Theology and the Folk Culture

Shea is part of a contemporary effort to overcome the overly rationalistic emphasis in theology, particularly characteristic of the neo-scholastic attempt to respond to the rationalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This rationalistic, 'iconoclastic' theology hastened to find its way into catechetics, homiletics and the public symbols by which the Church projects its image in society.

Shea suggests that the only way to bridge the chasm between contemporary religious experience and a religious language which is time-bound and distant from the folk culture is to fashion 'rope ladders' of intermediate cultural symbols which are both experiential and religious in meaning.<sup>9</sup> This calls for, on the one hand, an attitude within our contemporary religious culture which legitimates as a potential religious language many of the emerging 'languages' of our culture. And, on the other hand, the interpreters of the inherited religious language must recognize and be sensitive to the motivating symbolism in revelation-faith experiences and be willing to incorporate this living religious symbolism into contextual theologies.

The most notable efforts to build links between theology and the popular culture are liberation or, more broadly, contextual theologies.<sup>10</sup> Surprisingly, contextual theologies have only recently begun to pay more attention to the language of popular religiosity in the mass, popular media. For good reasons, there has been a wariness about seeing in soap operas, *telenovelas* or mass-produced films of Hollywood or Bombay, the forms if not the content of folk religiosity. It is difficult to avoid the fact, however, that the mass, 'popular' media have always been an important source of the religious imagination in every culture whether these media are the oral telling of folktales and folk drama or the contemporary mass media experience of novels, film and television.

### What are 'Popular Media'?

The term 'popular' refers, in the first place, to forms of dissemination of culture which reach to virtually all social classes, age groups and regional sectors.<sup>11</sup> The popular media therefore use a common language of symbols and widely accepted cultural myths understood by virtually all of the members of a society. There may be many forms of interpretation and expression according to different taste, cultures and interests, but the underlying, core message will be the same.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, the popular media tend to deal with everyday, ongoing events and human experiences in news, sports, soap opera drama, situation comedy and talk shows—to cite but a few genres. The popular media are the public 'marketplace' where many subcultures and specialised interest

groups meet to debate the current issues and celebrate major cultural events considered central to a common cultural heritage. As was noted in the Review Article, the popular media are like the ongoing conversation of a family or a community. Thirdly, because the popular media speak in a language of core values and myths of a society, it is an area sensitive to social control and will engage the attention of the major social institutions which are concerned with the maintenance and cohesion of a society.<sup>13</sup> The preoccupation with violence in the media is but one example of this. This very social sensitivity makes the popular media of central importance, and no group or person who wants to project a message to society can afford to ignore the popular media. This makes the popular media a matter of transcendent human and social seriousness.

A final characteristic of the popular media in our industrial societies (but probably in all ages) is that they are commercially and industrially produced for a market. Their production is often more of a public function by skilled technicians rather than the subjective artistic expression which we often associate with creative spiritual insight. But as David Thorburn and Horace Newcomb would argue, this 'mass production' leads the popular media toward a language of 'consensus narrative', that is, a constant repetition of essentially the same story themes, heroes and fundamental human problems.<sup>14</sup> The very centrality of the popular media to a culture, ironically, often makes its expressions of deeper human significance.

## When is Television a Language for Religious Expression?

Some might agree that the mass media can be a source of religious inspiration if the content is directly or indirectly religious, but they would consider the contemporary popular arts too much of a sentimental, superficial play upon emotions or an expression of exploitative commercial interests little related to the religious imagination. Some would contend that even the fine arts have lost contact with the great religious questions once art began to be defined in the late eighteenth century as an iconoclastic, subjective expression of the artist rather than functional public beautification and celebration.<sup>15</sup>

John May, in *Religion and Film*<sup>16</sup>, has summarised three major approaches to discerning the religious significance of mediated artistic expression (literature, film, music or television) that often is not manifestly religious. A first position, *heteronomy*, suggests that a film, for example, can be judged religious only on the basis of theological faith criteria which are *outside* and *above* the imagery and formal story line of the film itself. Typical of heteronomy in the religious interpretation of a film is the attempt to find in the biography of film directors explicit statements of their intentions to convey religious convictions through film. This becomes problematic, according to May, in the face of films by non-believers capable of inspiring profound religious reflections. Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* and Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* are cited as two examples. May also finds lacking another form of heteronomy, the attempt to judge the thematic content of a film according to traditional theological or moral criteria such as concepts of grace, freedom or the transcendent, which are not related to the total context or the theme in the film. Too often the religious press expects a film to be a treatise on moral or dogmatic theology. Finally, the Hollywood spectaculars such as Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* or *The Exorcist*, which attempt to translate religious events into film literally, end up being more spectacle and suspense than an artistic, religious perception of reality.

May's evaluation of a second position, *theonomy*, refers back to Tillich's theological premise that faith is an expression of man's ultimate concerns and that all literature is religious to the extent that

it treats of the concerns of man. Often this interpretation assumes that the motives of characters in films, such as those of Bergman or Fellini which touch on deep human concerns, are a quest for the ground of being, namely God. May doubts that this assumption can be made.

### Religious Analogues in Media Languages

A better approach, according to May, is the claim that certain films are or are not open to a religious world-view regardless of the author's intentions or the presumption that man's ultimate concerns are inherently religious. May suggests that we should respect the *autonomy* of film as an art form and explore those dimensions of the formal structure of film (or other media) that represent the visual *analogue* of religious questions. Film is a narrative medium, and the formal structure is discerned in narrative composition, movement and editing. May finds the analogical meeting-ground of religion and film in the theology of story and specifically in two dimensions of story, myth and parable, that are present in the language of both film and religious expression.

The Review Article (pp. 1-6) pointed out many of the formal elements of television as a language: its narrative, folktale structure; the essentially oral, common-sense structure; the use of symbolic codes with clear references to events and experiences in the culture; and mythic formulas. However, the analysis of the religious analogues in the content and formal structure of the media captures only a limited aspect of the religious significance of a medium such as TV. More than film or other media, TV is meshed into the everyday routines of work and leisure, the affective interrelations of the family and the way we participate in local or national cultural events.

McLuhan speaks of the media as *extensions* of the senses in that the particular media—oral, print or electronic—filter information to the senses in different ways and permit us to see, hear or feel the world in different modes. James Lull expands the notion of extensions, pointing out that TV has become an extension not only of our everyday pattern of activities and pattern of social interactions but also an extension of our personalities and values.<sup>17</sup>

Most important, TV has become an extension of our strategies for defining personal identity, for discovering the broader meaning in life and of our expressions of religious experience. These extensions, especially TV as a liminal experience, must be

considered as integral aspects of the formal elements of TV.

Thus, our central question is: To what extent are the dimensions of TV discussed in the Review Article analogues of religious experience and a language for revelation-faith experience?

## The Evolution of Media as Entertainment

One can trace the genealogy of mass popular media back to the origins of the newspaper in the early 1600s. The first 'newspapers' in the English language were called 'ballads' because they put into print the curious combination of fact and fiction that was the subject matter of folktale ballads: reports of foreign battles, fantastic tales of humans giving birth to monsters, gory accounts of hangings, the lurid lives of criminals, etc.<sup>18</sup> Although public pressure pushed newspapers toward reports of verified facts, the stringent libel laws inspired by the governing class' fear of press influence encouraged many newspaper writers in the 1600s and 1700s to use a quasi-fictional, allegorical story-telling style. In the early 1900s the new 'penny press' attracted a mass market by adapting to newspaper formats enjoyable forms of oral, face-to-face entertainment.

People had always entertained themselves by exchange of local gossip about sensational crimes, disasters, the spectacular actions of the wealthy and aristocratic, and rumours of major political debates. This became the news of the popular press.<sup>19</sup> The genres of story telling—from traumatic histories of families to strange tales of the preternatural—entered the newspaper as short stories or serialised novels. Similarly, sports, humour, advice on folk health remedies and other forms of popular entertainment and communication were adapted to newspaper formats.

Once the entertainment, leisure-time use of popular media was established as customary by the press, this was followed in the marketing of other new communication technologies. When Edison invented methods of recorded sound, he idealistically envisioned it being used for largely educational and business purposes. But financiers decided that they could sell millions of records and record players if it were a means of carrying music hall songs into homes. Likewise, film, radio and eventually television became defined culturally as primarily entertainment and as ways of filling leisure time.

### The Meaning of Leisure

The industrial revolution not only generated the new communication technologies and the great urban concentrations that needed a new form of 'mass' communication, but it also created a new pattern of leisure. With industrialisation life routines tend to be rather sharply divided into periods of work, when people must do the bidding of rationalised manufacturing or bureaucratic organisations, and time after work in evenings, weekends and holidays when time is essentially our own.

Leisure has an enormous personal and cultural significance in our contemporary societies. Leisure is the time when we leave behind the alienation of mobilised action to achieve the goals of productivity of a highly organised society and get back into contact with the subjective course of our most personal feelings. We can enjoy the intimate relationship of family and friends, when we can talk about seemingly trivial things, when we can allow our imaginations to roam freely in reading, films or television, and when we can rejuvenate ourselves physically and spiritually.

Earlier theories of leisure in our cultures tended to define leisure in relation to work. Leisure was considered that time when we were not working and could refresh ourselves sufficiently to return to work. There is much truth in the Marxist perspective that the captains of industry have allowed more leisure so that workers would be more motivated and able to work. Shorter working hours permitted people more time to consume more products and keep the industrial establishment going by utilising its manufacturing capacity.

### Leisure and Personal Identity

Recent theories, however, see leisure as having a personal and social meaning in itself. Leisure is the space in our lives when we can develop our own personal identities and establish our own personal values.<sup>20</sup> Leisure is the time when we form community: family and neighbourhood community, communities of interest and religious worship, and also our national community. The values which emerge in leisure pervade and give meaning to our working hours. The importance of leisure in establishing our personal identities and organising our 'life stories' is highlighted by recent research on leisure, which shows that in transitional periods of our life leisure becomes more important in exploring and mapping out our future. The freedom of youth, that period between the dependency of childhood and settling down to our own careers and families, is such a time of exploration and integration. In mid-life, when we have reared our families and wish to sum up our lives, we seek leisure to explore new roles, greater interiority and a final personal integration.

The fact that the mass popular media have become a major form of leisure activity has meant that they are a major component of the leisure experience of exploration and definition of personal identity. There has been a major shift in the perspective of media scholars from a view of media as capable of impressing specific effects on a relatively passive audience to a view of the audience as much more active in selecting elements of media to construct their own personal world of meaning. This has generated a much deeper understanding of how media contribute to our efforts to define our personal life stories.

Story telling and leisure have always in all societies provided an important cultural space for the development of the religious imagination. The definitions of media – especially television – as story telling and as leisure have been crucial factors in understanding the popular media as a language and context for opening lives to religious experience.

### The Religious Significance of TV Folktale

The drama, news and comedy of TV have a folktale structure because they tend to select out of the confusing details of everyday life a clearly defined human problem and then rather artificially order events in a plot line that leads to a relatively simple, happy solution. Successful television producers are especially sensitive to the typical questions and anxieties of the audience, and part of the enjoyable entertainment of TV is enabling audiences to make some sense and meaningful order out of life's frustrations. As John Navone emphasises in his theology of story,<sup>21</sup> hearing stories is a crucial starting point for constructing our own life story because for the young, who are still forming their identity, or for people drifting through life with a false sense of security, stories pose questions or problems that logically imply an answer or solution.

Folktales, unlike sacred nationalistic or cosmic myths that elevate the actors to a quasi-divine status, are about everyday people and events made just slightly larger than life. Good producers are aware of the popular characters and values just emerging in the contemporary culture and fashion them into symbols audiences can easily identify with. The iconic realism, immediacy and quick response to current events of television invite audiences to enter into the plot with the characters and explore with the characters alternative decisions. Television's stories do provide 'heroes', villains, and plot lines for the symbolisation dimension of

revelation-faith searches, but our increasing knowledge of how audiences pick and choose elements of television to construct their *own* world views suggests that they do not blindly imitate what they see on the screen. Television stories, like all folktales, enable audiences to see more clearly and link their unique life story with the socio-cultural reality they are encountering. As Shea and others emphasise, our relationship to ultimate mystery is rarely an abstract philosophical or theological concept, but is embodied in a concrete story and vivid symbolisation that is thrust out to our attention. Stories, in John Navone's view, express faith in an ultimate order and meaning touching implicitly fundamental questions of life and death.

### **The Religious Significance of Leisure and Media Liminality**

As was noted in the Review Article, leisure provides a space in life for exploring new roles, defining personal identity and constructing one's life story, especially in transitional periods such as youth or mid-life when one is preparing for retirement and the appropriate conclusion of life. Leisure in modern societies is also the locus of what anthropologists of ritual, performance and leisure, such as Victor Turner, have called the liminal. Liminality is a space of cultural freedom and exploration in which persons or communities disengage from commitments to pragmatic, short-term goals of economic survival to live momentarily in a ritual, symbolic world of ultimate mythic reality and then return to the mundane world with a new evaluation of the meaning of life. The classic example of liminal experience in pre-industrial societies is the cycle of communal ritual celebrations in which the mythic origins and progress of the nation are re-enacted symbolically and the divine maintenance of the history of the people is invoked. Turner and others consider theatre and the popular media, especially in television, to be major sites of liminal experience in contemporary societies.<sup>22</sup>

Turner describes liminality as a cultural anthropologist, not as theologian, but, given his Catholic religious imagination, he frequently intimates that characteristics of the liminal, such as freedom of the human spirit, are analogues of religious experience or the cultural context of religious experience that could be conceived of theologically in the light of religious faith.

### **TV: A Space for Refocussing Faith**

A first analogue of the religious in liminality is what Turner calls a 'subjunctive' wish, desire, and symbol that express what the world could possibly become in sharp contrast to the 'indicative' mood of facticity and analysis of the world as is so characteristic of the pragmatic, mundane areas of culture.

Silverstone and other media scholars insist that the language and mode of thought of television are precisely mythic and liminal in that they create a cultural space between several horizons of knowledge: 1) the inherited national or cosmic, myths; 2) new specialist, scientific explanations or information about very different cultures and subcultures outside one's immediate subculture; 3) what is considered irrational or mysterious; and 4) the world of everyday common-sense knowledge. Television is a liminal experience particularly well attuned to modern society with its constant inundation of new information because it enables viewers to enter momentarily into a world of possibilities and integrate in some orderly, meaningful way classical mythic explanation and new knowledge in the language we use to cope with everyday human problems.

The liminal experience of television is an analogue or context of religious experience because the crisis of faith and the reconstruction of my life story in a revelation-faith encounter often begin with the confrontation of my religio-mythic conceptions with new scientific information or knowledge of alternative cultural value systems. In contemporary societies, constructing my

life story demands a continual re-integration of new sets of factual data into my personal mythic world-view of intentional, possible life goals.

### **Television as Experience of Utopian Community**

A second analogue of the religious in liminality is what Turner called *communitas*, a moving out of the world of authority, social ranking and competition to a world of communal sharing, equality, participation and unlimited love.<sup>23</sup> The communalism of the 1960s counter-cultural movement is one contemporary example of this quest for liminality. At the centre of *communitas* is a preoccupation with transcendental, ultimate reality and the conviction that before the transcendent all humans are both equal and linked with a common destiny.

In contemporary urban societies with extremely diverse occupations, personal interests and philosophies of life—often with little direct interaction in neighbourhoods—TV is virtually the only major experience of sharing in common symbols and mythic hopes. National crises, the cycle of national holiday celebrations or the presentation of national leadership touch the lives of people of different social class, ethnic background and region simultaneously and evoke common sentiments largely through TV. Media events such as coronations, inaugurations of presidents, funerals of national figures, ceremonial visits of the Pope, technological feats such as a 'moon shot' or the recognition of national heroes are our principle communitarian rituals.<sup>24</sup> These events are a form of civic religion, but they are also the source of communitarian symbols in personal life stories.

Although Shea emphasises in his description of a revelation-faith experience a very personal, individual discovery of an integrating, motivating symbolism, these experiences are more frequently part of a much broader religious revitalisation movement.<sup>25</sup> The background of these movements is a collective sense of psychological stress and vague awareness that there is no satisfying pattern of meaning in our time. At the heart of religious revitalisation movements are prophetic figures who express extraordinarily well a new formula of meaning that provides a pattern of meaning for thousands or millions. The central symbolism of these movements captures particularly well the language of the contemporary popular culture and popular media. Part of the experience of these movements is a radical sense of community that cuts across the lines of social class, ethnicity and regionalism. The central symbolism touches so deeply into the life story and is such a common language of experience that people feel completely of one spirit. To return to the example of Ignatius of Loyola mentioned above, the symbolism of the spiritual kingdom of Jesus, which originated in Ignatius' own experience, translated itself almost immediately into a fraternity of intense *communitas* that was expressed in the name of the religious order, the '*compania*' (inadequately translated as 'company') of Jesus.

TV, with its language and institutional organisation built around the 'star system' is an unusually strong medium for creating community through the projection of prophetic personages and symbolism. Stewart Hoover in his study of the televangelists in the USA has concluded that the significance of the electronic church is not so much in its individual conversions but in the ability of the televangelist to create a sense of militant *communitas* through identification with the prophetic figure and the public symbols that are projected in TV.<sup>26</sup>

### **The 'Poetic' Experience**

A third religious analogue of liminality is that every aspect of the human personality, especially the expressive emotional and imaginative playful aspects, comes into play.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to the often alienating rationality of the pragmatic world, there is freedom for one's 'true self' to come to the surface. The liminal allows one to get back into contact with the flow of one's personal, unique life

history and, from a religious perspective, is the opening to a personal awareness of a relation to ultimate mystery. Bernice Martin emphasises that popular rock music was central to the expressive and, at times, ecstatic liminal experience of the 1960s counter-cultural movements, but suggests that TV with its combination of music, imagery and dramatic story is the most generalised experience of relaxing expressiveness today.

### The Experience of Integrating Insight

A fourth religious analogue in liminality is the experience of a flash of insight which provides an integrating meaning in the midst of a welter of often conflicting detailed demands and goals of mundane existence.

At a more intense level, this 'flash of insight' is the experience of the author of a novel or of the writer of a TV drama who discovers what was referred to in the Review Article above (p. 5) as the 'mythic formula', a formula that becomes the logical structure and plot resolution of a story. The author may be primarily intent on

simply telling an entertaining story that makes sense to an audience in a particular culture at a particular historical moment. The integrating insight, however, often hits upon or rediscovers an archetypal logic such as the 'death and resurrection' and Christ figure which Roger Silverstone detected in his structuralist analysis of the TV series, *Intimate Strangers*. The plot resolution revolves around the hero's letting die the career ambitions which had been the centre of his life and discovering a new set of deeper values in this crisis. Undoubtedly very few viewers of *Intimate Strangers* interpreted the experience of the hero in terms of the archetypal Christian logic of paradox, namely, unless the seed fall to the ground and die, it shall not bring forth fruit. Nevertheless, this logic as one solution to a typical clash of human values is present. As the viewers identified with a hero and the events so symbolic of life in the 1970s Britain and, insofar as the story touched on questions and problems particular viewers were experiencing, they could also identify with a world-view that was profoundly religious and Christian. The mythic formula could become part of the viewer's integrating insight for their own life story.

## TV Supplies the Sacred Icons of Today

In her book, *The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar*, Gregor Goethals points out that every culture presents its unifying world-view to the public in terms of visual images or *icons*.<sup>28</sup> For the Greeks, the statue of Apollo was not just the representation of a handsome young man, but a symbol of the balanced, integrated human perfection that was held out to the Greek people. Moreover, the statue of Apollo recalled visually a whole mythic history of what it meant to be a Greek people. Likewise, the icon of Jesus is not just a poor photograph of the historical Jesus, but in its design, colour, etc. a symbol revealing the incarnate wisdom and love of God and the mythic Christian salvation history. At its best, a Christian icon not only allows the divinity to shine through the symbolic forms, but is sacramental in that it lifts the beholder onto the plane of transcendence. Icons thus have a double function according to Goethals: 1) In the midst of a confusing, capricious world, icons provide a sense of sacred order, an awareness of origins and destiny and an invited participation in that order; 2) icons provide models for the integration of the personality and for developing our personal histories around concrete ideals.

### The Ritual Context of Icons

Icons are not scattered pieces of pictorial adornment, but in rituals are woven onto the plot of a dramatic story. Drawing on the thought of Mircea Eliade, Gregor Goethals defines ritual as the symbolic re-enactment of the mythic history of tribal communities, nations or religious groups. In the background of ritual are the logical, cognitive explanations that organise a multitude of values, formulas for life, and social institutions into a grand coherent history. Ritual dramatises this history and draws participants in as actors in creating this history. We become deeply involved in the social effort to make mythic aspirations a reality. By appealing to all the senses through music, song, dance, incense but especially through visual images or icons, we relive the whole history in a short space of time. Ritual reveals the power of divine providence or sacred destiny that is moving history toward its end and confers upon the participants the power to become co-creators of this history.

Goethals suggests that in our contemporary cultures the growth of a purely mechanistic, technological conception of history has drained away our confidence in ritual and icons as revelation of transcendent meaning and wisdom. Present-day abstract, imageless art is conceived of more as a revelation of the individual subjective feelings of artists than as a public revelation of the beauty and meaning of the universe around us. In American culture (both

in America and in its extensions around the world) a traditional 'protestant' distrust of sacrament and icon as well as the emphasis on the written text as religious revelation have reinforced this 'iconoclastic' spirit in the culture.

### The Icons and Rituals of TV

When cultures try to do away with one form of ritual and icon, it usually comes back in another form. Today, suggests Gregor Goethals, TV occupies such central credibility that it has become a major source of popular icons and ritual. TV thrives on the visual representation of heroic stars, public spectacle and iconographic experience drawing us in as actors in our mythic history.

Katz and Dayan, in their studies of national media events—what they refer to as 'contests, conquests and coronations'—have analysed the production techniques that make a national audience feel actively present at a turning-point in history. TV gives everybody in the audience equal access to the event, makes them present everywhere in the action, shapes the story in a form familiar to the audience, gives a reverent presentation, constantly reminds us that the event is historic, and invites an emotional commitment to the symbols displayed.<sup>29</sup>

Gregor Goethals proposes that American TV has been particularly adept in incorporating into its programming three icons of major importance in American cultural history: 1) the *family*, with the proliferation of family dramas and situation comedies from *Dallas* to *All in the Family*; 2) *nature*, a particularly American romantic view of the unspoiled wilderness of forests, deserts and mountains that form the background and silent actor in so many Westerns, Disney productions and animal shows; 3) the *machine* and *technology*: the myth that there is a mechanical, scientific solution for every problem, dominates science fiction programmes. Many of these touch basic archetypal mythic themes and are the basis for the appeal of American programming around the world. Students of British TV have pointed out that the working-class community portrayed in *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* or the idyllic English village are icons and rituals for British society.

In Goethals' view, much of the enjoyment and popularity of TV is due to the fact that we are 'sacramental creatures'. Images, objects and human gestures communicate in ways that words cannot. The icons and rituals of TV may carry us toward trust and loyalty in civic religion, but they reveal that we need icons within the realm of popular culture. 'Until institutional religion can excite the serious play of the soul and evoke the fullness of human passion, television will nurture our illusions of heroism and self-transcendence.'

## The Visual Dimension in Religious Imagination

Thomas Martin argues that film and television are particularly important for a religious perception of reality because all human thought is cast in a visual or spatially organised way.<sup>30</sup> In seeking the meaning of the world around us, sense images and abstraction are not separate operations. Furthermore, what is important for the religious imagination are not the random images, but the basic spatial organisation of a multitude of images in a coherent world-view or *imaginative construct*. For example, while literature, myth and ritual dramatisation in agrarian societies are dominated by the cyclical images of seasons and nature, the imagery of modern Western culture is increasingly filled with a linear evolutionary world-view heavily influenced by contemporary science and social engineering.

For Martin, an imaginative construct is religious in the most basic sense insofar as it perceives persons, events and things as essentially interrelated because all are rooted in a unified whole or life force. Martin thinks that much of the contemporary religious crisis is due to the fact that our culture does not provide a visual, imaginative construct which sees the world in an interrelated way.

Martin finds in contemporary film at least five dominant imaginative constructs which represent fundamentally different ways of organising reality visually and spatially. These are also 'mythic formulas' or logics for resolving the narrative plot of a story with a definite meaning of human action. Each embodies in visual, spatial form a different religious or theological imagination or, in some cases, an essentially a-religious world-view.

1. The *supernatural* model of spatial arrangement, typical of Hollywood biblical films, places God above and the world below with a set of hierarchical layers of being—angels, humans (soul and

body), animals, etc.—which are more perfect as they approach the supernatural. The resolution of a narrative plot is presented in terms of moving up toward the supernatural, usually through the intervention of divine power which lifts history and human consciousness 'up'.

2. Films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* embody a spatial organisation of *evolutionary progress* stretching on a plane from primitive beginnings into a continually expanding future. Plot resolution is in terms of greater harmony with a unified source of energy that carries the seeds of perfection *within* it.
3. In the *romantic* tradition the movement and plot resolution is *back* into nature and into the mysterious depths of the pulsating soul which animates growth. An example is *The Gods Must be Crazy*.
4. In the *secular*, 'Man in Control' world-view, man is above nature, the lonely heroes who can expect no help from divinity or nature and must artificially impose some meaning on a reality that has no meaning or coherence in itself. This is an essentially a-religious construct.
5. The spatial organisation and plot resolution of psychological films such as Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* are a journey into the subconscious to discover the true self away from the alienating demands of a cultural world.

All of these world-views reflected in contemporary film are in a mythic mode of thought in that they affirm the possibility of resolving human and social conflicts and finding orderly patterns of meaning *within* a particular construction of history. Whether the formula is evolutionary progress or harmony with nature, myth constructs a story of ultimate reconciliation and unification out of *existing* human vision and insights of our culture.

## The Specifically Christian Imagination

Martin does not mention another form of story which is more expressive of Christian religious faith, namely, parable.<sup>31</sup> As was noted in the Review article, parable highlights the contradictions and absurdities in our culture in order to deliberately show the limitations of myth and question the arbitrary constructions of the expected course of history. Parable affirms risk, not security; weakness not strength; and the paradox that the seed can grow only if it first dies. Both myth and parable are essential elements in a Christian world-view, but unless myth exists in dialectical tension with parable, the hope embodied in Christian myth becomes triumphalism, pride and barren legalism. Christian parable affirms that precisely in the frustrations of human constructions of orderly meaning there is openness to the grace and mercy of Mystery that transcends all culture.

It is difficult to find in media stories a pure expression of Christian parable, but the films of Bresson (*Diary of a Country Priest*) are often pointed to as an example. May suggests that the films of the American, Robert Altman, (*Nashville* and *The Wedding*) are simultaneously an exposé of the empty hubris of American society with no easy liberating formulas evident and also a celebration of a substratum of popular wisdom in the weak, the poor, the ignorant and outcasts of this society. Television, with its folktale structure, may be less often a medium for parable, but one finds in situation comedies such as the American *All in the Family* simultaneously a critique of the culture but also a tolerance of the ambiguity of values in that no character emerges as a clear-cut, self-assured hero.<sup>32</sup> Again, wisdom emerges from the weakness of the often rattled, incoherent mother who, as a female and housewife, has the lowest status.

Sallie TeSelle notes that contemporary novels often lack plots, clear mythic resolutions and developed heroes.<sup>33</sup> She suggests that the parable, which is a story of a certain type, is a more appropriate guide for our times for, unlike more developed narrative, it does

not call for the same degree of faith in cosmic or even societal ordering. It is a more sceptical form with regard to such matters, insisting that the gap between the human and the transcendent is closed only through personal risk and decision. It only insists that the secular and the human are the place of God's presence—a presence for the most part hidden under ordinary events of everyday life. It insists, in other words, on faith, not on an ordered structure built into the nature of things upon which the individual can rely. The parable seems to be the form for a secular people who have lost what Ricoeur has called the naïve faith in myth and are able to penetrate beyond myth to a more mature second naïveté, a faith which grapples with the ambiguities of the raw contact with Mystery in reality.<sup>34</sup>

### Footnotes

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