

# Larger Than Life: Religious Functions of Television

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## Redefining the religious

Traditionally the scientific study of religion had been limited to those aspects of life and culture explicitly linked with belief in a supernatural being or forces. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, for example, proposed that the study of religion is concerned with "the traditional acts and observances, regarded by the natives as sacred, carried out with reverence and awe, hedged around with prohibitions and special rules and behaviour. Such acts and observances are always associated with beliefs in supernatural forces." [1948, 17]

In recent years, however, there have been substantial changes within the scientific study of religion to include non-theistic systems of belief and ritual within its scope. The "functional" approach to the scientific study of religion, for example, identifies a particular behaviour as "religious" not necessarily by its supernatural referent, but rather by the distinctively "religious" functions being served by that behaviour.

Underlying this approach is the assumption that human beings are inescapably religious in the sense that we continually find ourselves in situations where decisions and actions involve unprovable "faith" assumptions. Because a person's philosophy does not include a supernatural element does not mean they cease to be religious in a functional sense. The question is not whether one is religious or not: it is in what ways is one religious and on what assumptions are one's religious ideas and behaviour based.

The problem in such an approach, of course, is how to define clearly the nature of the religious. Many different attempts have been made to effect such a redefinition from a functional perspective. The approach followed here is that of the philosopher David Tracy. Tracy identifies as religious those ideas and behaviour which reflect what he calls a "limit" quality: religious behaviour is that by which humans seek to adapt to, cope with, or understand dimensions of life beyond their explanation, prediction or control. [1975, 99FF] It is when we find ourselves in situations in which we must go beyond our human ability to explain sensorily, to predict, or to control the situation that our religious beliefs and behaviour come to be manifested.

Sociologist Milton Yinger suggests that in the absence of the generally readily identifiable super-natural referent, the most effective way to identify the operative religious faiths in society is through their ritualistic expressions. In his *The Scientific Study of Religion*, [1970, 17] he says, "I am inclined to say, Look for rituals first, then for the beliefs connected with them; there you will find the operating religion of an individual or group."

Some initial work has been done on teasing out elements of Australian folk religion. In this paper I suggest that television needs to be considered seriously as an operative religious

activity for a large proportion of the Australian population. That does not mean that the television industry would see itself in religious terms nor that people, if questioned, would say they use television as a religious substitute. But when one applies criteria of critical analysis, the correspondence between the content and uses of television and traditional religious practices is significant.

This proposition is examined in terms of the three universal expressions or functions of religious faith, whether theistic or non-theistic: the practical, or the system of worship or ritual; the sociological, or the system of social relationships; and the theoretical, or the system of beliefs.

### **The practical expression: ritual and worship**

There are many rituals associated with the use of mass media, but the ritualistic nature of television in modern society is perhaps the most readily identifiable. The loyalty which television has been able to elicit from its adherents is more pervasive than perhaps any other single social phenomenon in human history.

Television now consumes more time and attention of more people than all other media and leisure activities combined. In the process it has displaced in a significant way time once spent on other apparently important human activities such as social gatherings away from home, interpersonal interactions, and active participation in leisure activities.

Traditionally, the rituals of religion were identified as serving the major function of transcending present profane time. The ritual act withdraws us from the ordinary world of mortality and limitation into a special space, time and action in which the mundane and finite is transformed into something of eternal quality.

There are several characteristics which identify television as a substitute ritual for overcoming the profanity of everyday life.

Studies show that the major uses of television by the public are for entertainment, escape, and the filling of vacant time. Television in this regard blends complementarily with the present economic structures and sociological dynamics of Western technological and industrial society. Television has found a significant role in anaesthetizing the unresolved frustrations and fatigue arising out of the disjunctive life-style of much of the late 20th century Western society.

One of the main attributes of television is its repetitiveness, a significant parallel to liturgical practices which intuitively developed a similar aspect. The repetitive, ritualistic patterns of viewing provide a structure to life which may be considered as fulfilling a similar function to cultic/religious affirmations of a theistic divine order. Whether it be the inculcated desire to keep up with the progress of particular soap operas or sporting events, or the guilt felt when missing the evening news or serious documentaries, the effect is similar. Television has come to order our lives in such a way that it becomes gratifying to live in harmony with the order imposed by this thing beyond.

We have become so inundated and saturated with news and information that the content of what we see or hear makes little difference. It is the ritual of hearing and seeing that has become satisfying. As Thoreau noted:

I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burnt, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed -- we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for .. ....myriad instances and applications?

I would suggest that this social ritualism of television and its social implications will never be fully understood until its religious characteristics also are examined.

Channel 0 in Brisbane provides an illustration of this structural function of television. In a recent promotional spot, it showed a variety of people in boring, everyday situations -- an office worker at her desk, a woman walking along the street, an old woman struggling with parcels. Their lives were suddenly sparked by an encounter with the Channel 0 news team: the woman in the office receiving a beatific vision of the Channel 0 helicopter outside her office window; the one on the street seeing the News team at work; and the old woman being given help with her parcels by the Channel 0 news anchor. The ritual is extended! The promo ends with a woman returning safe again to the womb of her home, turning on to Channel 0, settling back, and hearing the words of a hymn (sorry, song) "Channel 0, you are the biggest part of me."

One does not need to watch for long to note the similarity of formats used and the development of identifiable sub-rituals: news, current affairs, sports, soap operas, situation comedies, drama, and the mini series.

What characterises all of these genres is the absence of demand. Demand and work are characteristics of the profane. Television transcends the profane by providing a media ritual which is at the same time engaging yet free of effort.

### **The sociological expression: relating meaningfully to the environment**

Another traditional function of religion is that of providing a system of meaningful social interaction, particularly in the field of defining taboos and reinforcing those mores without which social organisation would disintegrate.

In today's society there are two major threats to social maintenance: the abrasions of intensified social living and the frustrations of unrealised expectations.

Last century Marx criticised religion as being the opiate of the masses because it suppressed radical challenge to the system. Because it provided a supernatural rationale for the system as it was, and moral constraints by which dissatisfaction with the system could be managed, Marx claimed that religion suppressed genuine social change.

Today television may be challenged as being the opiate of the 20th century fatigued person. (This suggestion is not new. In the 1950's, Paul Lazarsfeld suggested that one of the major social effects of the mass media is what he called their narcotising dysfunction effect.)

Supernatural or theistic religion generally used a supernatural imprimatur for justifying the existing mores despite their discrepancies. Television has, as a secular tool, largely rejected the concept of God, but in the place of God television substitutes the larger economic order, and like the Christian religion has created its own "super-natural" agents or saints to help maintain and represent this order.

Television has a key stake in maintaining the present social system. Its owners are people who are successful within the system, who are key power brokers in the system, and whose livelihood is dependent on the system continuing as it is.

The main tools of television were not the characteristic religious ones of mystery, revelation and tradition, but fantasy and humour. Television presents and interprets factual and fictional stories in such a way that challenges to the integrity of the status quo are effectively managed.

An important element of this process is the supernatural hero. Like the saints of Christendom, television's heroes are identifiable and continuing characters who, while participating in our human situation, also successfully overcome its abrasions, anxieties and threats, thus reinforcing the integrity of the system. There are two identifiable expressions of the super-natural television hero: the dramatic and the comedic.

The dramatic hero is one for whom the tensions, dreads and abrasions of life do not exist. The message is: How can we dare to question the established order when there are some who obviously are unaffected by it! Two forms of the dramatic hero can be identified.

The first is the news anchor-person. It is easy to underestimate the significant symbolic function which the news anchor-person fulfils in our present society. Not only is he or she the means by which we receive news of breakdowns in our social organisation; he or she is also the guarantor of the system despite these breakdowns. Like a calm school principal handling a minor disturbance, the news anchor has it all under control. As the world seems to be falling apart, as crisis piles upon crisis, the anchor-person is totally unmoved by it. As the news has threatened to untie the system, the anchor-person is the one who at the ends ties it all back together again. Walter Cronkite, long-time anchor for CBS News in the U.S., used to finish each news program with the words, "And that's the way it is: Thursday, 3rd May, 1976. Goodnight!"

The second form of dramatic hero is the crime, drama, or sports hero. He or she is the person, very often a continuing character with whom we are encouraged to establish a vicarious relationship, who faces and overcomes threat or challenge and emerges, often bloodied, but always victorious. Whether it be Clint Eastwood in any of his many roles, Jennifer Carson on Carson's Law, the team on The Professionals, or Michael Kusak on L.A. Law, the essence of the role is that they are people who, like the Christian saints, struggle with the kinks in the system and resist the outward or inward threats to the economic faith and emerge triumphant epitomes of power, integrity and self-control. If they can do it, the message goes, so can you!

Television is adept at handling minority challenges in this way. When a deprived group raises its voice in objection, television responds by creating a suitable hero: a Mexican-American lawyer on L.A. Law, a female professional, a television evangelist. The message is the same yet again: how can you question the system when there are obviously people like you who succeed in it! Such a device is certainly an effective way of managing social change. In the process, however, the essence of the minority criticism tends to be reduced and deflated so that structural change to the system needs no further consideration.

For those who are unable to measure up to the stringent example of the dramatic hero, television embodies its own style of forgiveness and reconciliation in the form of the comedic

hero. The hero of comedy, in contrast to the dramatic hero, is the one who fails and becomes entangled or submerged in the pitfalls of the taboo, but who also demonstrates the socially acceptable way of being restored to "divine" respectability. Whether it is in the area of family problems, as in *Cosby* or *Mother and Son*, race relations and childhood preciousness as in *Different Strokes*, or chauvinistic ockerism as in *Kingswood Country*, the comedic hero reassures us of the presence of a divine guarantor by embodying our fears and facilitating their catharsis.

The similarities between all supernatural heroes of television lie in the narrowing of their personalities in line with the efficient fulfilling of the required task and their general reaffirmation of the status quo. Their answer to the abrasions of modern life is thus, again, to be found in unquestioning adaptation to the established order, not in change.

### **The philosophic expression: a basis for common belief**

The third of the major functions of traditional religious faith is to provide a body of belief structures which serve to harmonise the many disparate ideas, experiences and institutions within society in such a way that individual as well as corporate needs and aspirations are given expression. Today, that function is performed for many by television -- through shared ritual, stereotypes and consistent mythologies.

There is perhaps no social institution better equipped to provide a basis for common belief than television. It is more ubiquitous, more centrally administered, more attractive and more compelling than any other social medium.

It is also international. One of the best kept secrets and one of the major preoccupations of Western countries in the northern summer of 1980 was not the US presidential elections, but the question relating to the program *Dallas*: "Who shot JR?" One mid-Atlantic French flight interrupted its passengers to give them the answer as soon as it had been revealed on the program. When *MASH* broadcast its final episode, parties were held across the US to bring friends of *MASH* together to mourn its passing. (Personally, I wish I could have been there!)

But television's belief system is different from other religious belief systems. Most religious faiths are based on a revelatory event or on a significant content or meanings, either cognitive or experiential, which serve to organise human experience. Common belief or fellowship communities often become organised around these shared meanings.

In television, the faith assumption that underlies television's message that we are urged to accept and respond to is that the sponsoring system is able to meet all human need. This economic order is fundamental.

Within this overarching belief structure, the emphasis is not on normative content or meaning, but on accumulating people to sell to advertisers. The content of television is totally subservient to this purpose. Television's philosophy is reductionist. The common denominator, out of which it builds a philosophy and which most coincides with the requirements of its financiers, is human enjoyment. Its basic mode is entertainment, even in presenting such unlikely entertainment as human suffering and tragedy.

That television is effective in creating or extending common belief patterns among viewers is

demonstrated by research. Studies show consistently that heavy viewers of television begin to reflect the perceptions and myths which television subtly propagates. Television constantly presents and reinforces the following beliefs:

- \* Success in life is best measured by one's possessions and power. Less tangible qualities such as depth of character, personal integrity, or quality of relationships find little place.

- \* The world is an increasingly violent place, and one is justified in protecting oneself by the adoption of violence also.

- \* Social violence is basically irrational, not a reaction to resolvable social conditions.

- \* Happiness lies primarily in acquiring goods and services, not in developing personal goals and relationships.

- \* There is greater worth in being young, male, and white than in being old, female, or coloured.

- \* Finding easy ways to avoid one's problems is more desirable than resolving them through disciplined and intelligent effort.

- \* Most of life's pressing problems have simple solutions, and those solutions are generally found in the purchase of a product, the passing of a law, or the application of a technology.

One could easily identify others, or go into more detail in these. The important thing is that television is laying the foundations of a consistent and integrated system of belief which fails to reflect the diversity of social reality but which is consistent with the economic system which has given it birth and serves the needs not primarily of people in society but of its corporate managers.

It is interesting to note, therefore, that an increasing number of advertisers, particularly the multi-national conglomerates, are presenting themselves in terms whose double meanings have religious dimensions of omniscience (all-knowledge) and omnipotence (all-power), such as

Coke: "Coke is it!"

General Electric: "We brings good things to life."

Sanyo: "I said, That's life! Sanyo."

MacDonalds: "We do it all for you."

The more the mass media come to be controlled by large corporate conglomerates which have broad social interests and world-wide organisations, and which all serve the one economic system, the more this will become the case.

The danger is that because meanings and purpose are significant motivators of human activity and creativity, the consequences of television's functioning as a religious phenomenon may not be social motivation but acquiescence in the status quo. Two factors contribute to this.

One is that a significant effect of television's violent content may be not increased aggression, but the magnification of fear and social anxiety. A major effect of television's "religious" functioning may be a greater willingness of people to abnegate their individual social

responsibility and acquiescence to totalitarian figures and institutions who appear more able to handle the perceived increasingly chaotic social situation.

A further effect may be that of an increased consumerist attitude: the belief that my needs and my wants have ultimate importance and validity. While such a philosophy may serve well while the attraction and possibility of improving one's lot are viable, as a social philosophy it has few resources for dealing with unavoidable deprivation or frustration, human finitude, sacrifice, or the search for justice.

This religious nature of television content and use is posing a challenge to established religious bodies. People's conditioning in consumerism in subtle ways is changing the theological concept of faith, so that in certain theologies God is seen not so much as the object of service and obedience but as a convenient device by which one's religious needs are met. It is interesting to note in this regard the growth of large churches whose approach is that of offering what amounts to a "comprehensive religious service" to what has become an increasingly discriminating and mobile religious clientele.

As mentioned earlier, I am not suggesting that the mass media would see themselves in such religious terms, nor that the mass media could be conceived as replacing theistic religion. But in the syncretistic way in which people today put together their own religious belief and life-style packages in ways that meet their individual needs, the mass media in their characteristic uses and contents are becoming a significant component of those belief systems. They are meeting needs and fulfilling some of the functions which people once found in theistic religion, and in the process are modifying some traditional expressions of religious faith.

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