

Bernard R. Bonnot

Media: Superficial or Spiritual?

For some, to raise the question in the title of this essay is to answer it. Media spells entertainment or commerce or both. Many concerned with human depth conclude that media are therefore superficial, even anti-spiritual. That judgment often leads the religiously oriented to a carping attitude toward the media. Media professionals and friends frequently manifest a similarly negative attitude toward religion.

Perhaps both parties to this debate could get more comfortable with one another if both would appreciate the spiritual dimension of the media. Religio-spiritual types could then enthuse about the media as they do about other instruments they find helpful in nurturing spiritual life. If the media in turn were to acknowledge themselves as “spiritual” in some significant way, they could comfortably promote spirituality and the institutions which directly foster spirituality, that is, religion.

DEFINITIONS

A few definitions will help focus my exploration. “Media” here means primarily the electronic mass media, specifically television. “Superficial” here means that which primarily stimulates and stirs the senses (including imagination and memory) without provoking the deeper processes of reflection, thought, and search for meaning and value. “Spiritual” here means that which specifically stirs and stimulates reflection, thought, and the search for value and meaning, something to love, something to live for, something to die for. “Religion” is the complex of human institutions whose goal is to foster the spiritual dimension of human existence. “Culture” here means the webs of meaning and value we spin and the various symbols we create to share the fruits of our deeper inner lives with one another. Religion, with its core meanings and values, is a—some would say *the*—central operating system of culture.

At first encounter, the media do not seem spiritual at all. We experience them as “merely a routinized round of superficial sensual stimulations, leading nowhere” (Biernatzki, 26). Nowhere? Or simply somewhere not very deep and satisfying? In fact, television’s stimulation is designed to lead us into a commercial which by intent should lead to a purchase. The purchase should then satisfy some human need or want, profound (such as good health) or superficial (such as wavy hair or gleaming teeth).

MARSHAL McLUHAN AND THE MEDIA

Since TV's preponderant purpose and function in U.S. culture is commercial, one could conclude that media are indeed superficial (Baker). However, if one focuses more directly on TV's stimulation of the senses, leaving aside the message that stimulation carries, one finds surprisingly spiritual implications. Marshal McLuhan proposed that this "routinized round of sensual stimulation" effects profound changes in the human psyche and human society. McLuhan argues that TV and other electronic media have caused a major shift in the way human beings experience themselves and their existence. This shift has moved us from a predominantly linear, sequential mode of operation to a more concentric, simultaneous mode.

Such a change is not superficial. It transforms humankind at a basic level. As our dominant sense shifts, so too does our "sensibility." Our sense of time changes. This revolutionizes our sense of self and the meaning of life. In short, the media entice us to take a life-changing spiritual journey without telling us to get packed!

"McLuhan believed that the message of electronic media . . . brought news of the end of humanity as it has known itself in the three thousand years since the invention of the phonetic alphabet" (Wolf, 128). The print era generated a rational, linear humanity with primary reliance on vision. This spawned a secular, specialized sense of the world. Visually we take in life and the universe word for word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph.

The electronic era, on the other hand, engages several senses—aural-visual-tactile— together, all at once. TV is "music for the eye." It offers us a non-sequential, simultaneous, holistic experience of reality and conditions us to be that sort of person, that sort of society. TV overwhelms us with data. It overstimulates us. This sensory overload forces us to abandon attention to individual pieces of information and to discern the patterns involved. Repetition, which seems superfluous and impedes progress in a linear context, helps in this new situation. It gives us another chance to discern the pattern at play. TV's multiple images per second stimulate "patterns of thought" within. This new sensibility sees each part of reality standing for the whole and experiences the whole as somehow sacred (Wolf).

McLuhan recognized that this deep impact of communication has less to do with the content or "message" carried by the communication than it does with the communication's form. "The Medium is the Message!" More radically still, "the Medium is the Massage!" Media's impact on humans is sensory and physical and thereby spiritual. It affects our way of thinking, our grasp of values, our sense of meaning, our worldview. It cuts to that intersection of sensory data and spiritual

dynamism which generates the uniquely human sense of purpose in each person as each era unfolds.

PIERRE BABIN AND THEOLOGIANS

Religious educator Pierre Babin describes this novel effect of electronic media as an “imprint on our nervous system,” a “modulation” or vibration (Babin, 55). Babin welcomes this effect. The goal of religious education, he says, is not simply the speaking or conveyance of truth, but discipleship. The goal is not clear ideas but, getting people to relate to Jesus from their hearts and to follow him. In this perspective, the ability of the electronic media to massage people and open them deeply to God’s interior touch is a plus. The media stimulate people in ways that go far beyond their minds and thus enable spiritual conversion at a deep level. They impact what people think and what they think about, but also who they are and what they choose to be part of. Through “modulation,” the word becomes flesh.

God’s Spirit encounters the human spirit at this same intersection of body and spirit. We are embodied spirits and God deals with us for what we are. The Spirit’s impact on Mary, for instance, was not just a bright idea in her mind. It was the conception of a child in her womb. One of her eggs became fertile! One cannot imagine a more profound vibration or modulation of one’s innermost being. It was sensory, physical, and spiritual, with significance for all humankind, even for the universe.

Though we generally don’t “get it,” God’s Spirit impacts us in a similar way. The media of our time are often the angelic carriers of such divine messages/messages as Mary consciously welcomed.

The discovery of this deep spiritual dimension of the media has not escaped the grasp of theologians. Karl Rahner, for instance, taught that God’s self-communication to humans is the core of Christianity. Similarly, Bernard Lonergan’s analysis of human interiority, following St. Thomas, led him to communication as the very heart of the divine-human relationship (Stebbins, 49). Technically speaking, God communicates a “proportionate divine nature” to the graced person. That communication empowers us to “see” God in this life with the eyes of faith and enables us to become friends with God and with others in God. Once that communicated gift (sanctifying grace) is in place, something must activate it. Effective communication (actual grace) stimulates this profound spiritual capacity in different persons in different ways. Thus the spiritual life is by nature mediated and, according to St. Thomas, the mediation is always through our senses—as with understanding, as with sacraments. Thus do the media play a basic spiritual role. With this perspective, one can begin to appreciate television as an ideal device for mediating spirituality to the masses.

OBSTACLES TO APPRECIATING THE MEDIA

Yet something blocks this appreciation among us. The basic instincts and methodologies of European culture emphasize the rational, verbal, logical, mathematical, linear capacities of human intelligence. The Western cultural ideal favors universally available meaning, progressively grasped by our rational capacities, eventually articulated in ideas and words which become clear, distinct, and correct in all regards. That bias atrophies other kinds of intelligence—spatial, musical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal—with which God endows us. Western spirituality, both Catholic and Protestant, is shackled by this cultural bias. Consequently Christian religious authorities tend to find such sensuous media as TV too superficial when it comes to dealing with spiritual matters. Words, spoken or written, are deemed better since words more clearly, distinctly, and correctly project what authority judges important.

The electronic era in which we find ourselves is effecting a cultural shift toward some of the alternative ways people grasp meaning and value, which has been explored by Howard E. Gardner (Gardner). As a result, meaning today is far more diverse, plural, particular, and even individual, than a few decades ago. Theologies and religions proliferate. Meaning's construction has become as much the work of the receiving person or community and their capacities as it is an effect of some communicator's intention and effort (e.g., that of a religious authority). The result is far more creativity, far more engagement of persons in their deepest, spiritual parts, and far less control.

In this new era, an image with its accompanying sound often can be more significant and influential than the reality which gives rise to the images and sounds. At the 1992 Democratic political convention, for instance, presidential advisor George Stephanopoulos pointed to the floor filled with delegates and speakers and said, "That may be the convention, but this [pointing to the TV images of it] is reality" (Remnick, 172). More can be accomplished through the mediated presentation of something than through the event itself. Sales of records and tapes prove that. More people can be touched with an effective video version of the Mass or other spiritual event than are touched by the Mass itself when and where it takes place. Evangelical preachers and Pope John Paul II grasped this already a few decades ago. Many religious leaders are still trying to analyze their way to conviction. Most remain blocked by misgivings which derive from their conviction that reason's words should reign while the media's images and sounds are "superficial."

USING THE MEDIA TO MINISTER

I believe today's media are far from superficial. Even when they deal with trivia (such as O.J.'s gloves and Monica's dress) they engage

people spiritually. Authentic religious types are wise to use television's power to reach people in their spiritual depths. When they do not, others rush to fill the gap. The media mode of conveying religious reality and spurring spiritual growth is significantly different from the accustomed methods of evangelization and religious education, derived as they are from the print culture now fast receding. Print remains a powerful but distinctly secondary medium today.

Television conveys drama well but dogma poorly. Print's strengths tend to be exactly opposite. McLuhan understood that "attempting to force linear, logical, coherent plots and arguments into electronic dramas or discussions creates unintentional comedy" (Wolf, 184). It just does not work. It becomes a farce, boring or embarrassing, certainly not engaging or entertaining. Too many religious leaders do not understand that. They look for television to be spiritual the way worship, preaching, or teaching is. But televising church services or teachings will not automatically enhance the spiritual life of people today. In that sense, there can be and is genuine tension between television and religion. Such televised religion is superficial rather than spiritual. It can even be farcical and has proven to be so more frequently than one would wish.

On the other hand, religious leaders savvy to the media and devoted to their mission of nurturing people's spiritual lives are learning how to use the spiritual power of television to do their work. Luke Timothy Johnson has affirmed that "the primary task of theology is the discovery and effective presentation of the work of the living God" in the world. In that case, one of the best theological tools and effective modes of presentation available is television. But the media's nature must be respected. It must be used for what it is good at, in the way it is good.

Dr. David Clark of the Southern Baptist Broadcast Communications Group proposes that what TV does well is create awareness, inform, persuade, confer status, and set an agenda (Clark, 5). It does this largely through drama. Robert White affirms that television drama is able to produce "acceptable explanations to the great questions of meaning" of a given time. It does this mainly through the major characters in its stories. They reconcile in themselves, within the context of the story, the contradictions in a culture. This enables viewers, singly and together, to make fresh sense of their own lives in terms of the culture's major symbols. When the dramas integrate the gospel and its challenges, they can occasion religious conversion and growth (White 1996, 200-1).

White points out that St. Ignatius of Loyola did not convert by reading the Bible. He read popular accounts of the lives of St. Francis and St. Dominic! One suspects they were full of inaccuracies and exaggerations. But they stirred Ignatius' convalescing imagination and refocused his life.

TOWARD THE FUTURE

On the thirtieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, retired Cardinal Koenig of Vienna wrote that “more than in earlier centuries all Christians today . . . must rely on images (metaphors) in all talk about God and the goal of life. Only then, with the help of God’s grace, will it be possible to be freed from the fixation on the superficial . . . and to believe in God and his Son” (White 1996, 233).

Unfortunately many media professionals continue to be uneasy with drama that consciously highlights gospel tensions. Early in 1996 a *New York Times* reporter, Caryn James, fussed about the fact that *The Spitfire Grill*, an award-winning feature film at the Sundance Film Festival, was funded by a Catholic religious community. That connection made her worry that viewers might be proselytized without their knowledge (Wall, 443–4). Such knee-jerk discomfort with a religious presence in the media will continue until the media owns its own profoundly spiritual impact on people, intended or not.

So the media’s discomfort with religion continues to mirror religion’s discomfort with the media. In spite of that, already in 1978 Ellwood (Bud) Keiser, a Paulist priest whose Hollywood ministry has touched many creators of television drama, proposed that television is one of the Church’s most potent instruments for evangelizing people, that is, converting them spiritually. He affirmed its advantage in terms of two specific qualities. First, television is a “story-telling, myth-making medium which concerns itself with people, with their choices and problems, with what they value and with how they try to give meaning to their lives.” Second, television “is an experiential medium. At its best, it involves the entire personality of the viewer, mind and heart, senses and spirit, conscious and unconscious minds. It can elicit a depth experience” (Keiser, 361). In short, it is spiritual.

CONCLUSION

I have argued here that the media are spiritual, especially television. They can be used, experienced, and interpreted superficially. Religion can use them in a superficial manner and too often does because religion tends to underestimate how deeply the media impact people. When it does so, religion makes a farce of both religion and television. The media too often do the same thing because they treat religion as superficial and do not recognize their own spiritual dimension.

But in the way that the media operate, in the capacity television especially has to make a profound difference in the lives of human beings, the media are spiritual in the best sense of the term: they engage people on the level of spirit. They stir and stimulate reflection, thought, and the search for value and meaning. They help people find something to

love, something to live for, something to die for. Sensuously and powerfully yet gently, they mediate God's Spirit to the human spirit through images, sounds, and stories. Thus they bring people closer to God in Christ. The media are spiritual indeed.

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Bernard R. Bonnot is a priest of the Diocese of Youngstown serving as senior vice-president for the Religious Affairs for Odyssey, a Hallmark & Henson Network on cable TV that integrates interfaith programming.