

Reviews

RELIGION AND THE MEDIA : AN INTRODUCTORY READER edited by Chris Arthur. *University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1993. Pp. 302. £12.95.*

Even a generation ago the all-encompassing presence of the modern media in our world was largely ignored in most of the institutions in Britain training people for Christian ministry. Now most of these places (with some surprising exceptions) teach their people the basics of how to produce presentable parish bulletins, relate to the local press, behave in front of a microphone, use audiovisuals in liturgy and even how to look moderately pleasant on TV. Yet in theological colleges still little, if any, time is given to teaching students something about the role of the modern media in our society, and about how these media have affected the place of religion in nearly everybody's life.

Dr Chris Arthur has sought to fill this gap with this introductory reader. It is a book which ordinands and theology students should at least be required to dip in. Nineteen contributors have written it, and it has the weaknesses and strengths common to symposia. Some things are said tediously often (for example, that TV has a "religious element") or not said at all (there is a lot on "the dominant medium", TV, and hardly anything on all the others). On the other hand, we find present here quite a wide range of opinions. Viewpoints are, in fact, more varied and more nuanced than what is said about the contributions in the editor's introduction suggests.

Being an introductory book intended primarily for students, few of the opinions and facts printed here are new; what is new is that they have been brought under one cover. All but four of the texts have been commissioned for this volume. Nearly all are by media theorists "particularly concerned with the implications which the media have for programmes of education in these areas" (p.3), so more space is given to what the media do to us than to what we can do in the media.

Two opinions are particularly prominent in the book.

The first of these is that television has (to quote Eric Shegog) "usurped the role previously played by religion as the communicator of myths which embody values and give meaning to life" (p.79).

In fact, the book opens with Gregor Goethals (author of the fairly influential book *The TV Ritual*) arguing that TV has assumed an iconic role in modern society, being a disseminator of potent myths. The writers on the role of soaps all repeat this opinion, and Peter Horsfield of Melbourne, in his article on the problems facing teachers of theology in a media-made culture, refers fairly respectfully to analyses which, using a functional definition of "religion", claim that "the mass media are serving a highly ritualized, integrative, value-forming, and community-cohering function similar to that which has traditionally been served by the established and recognized religious faiths" (p.51). Theologians protest that analyses of this sort are working with an inadequate and even misleading definition of "religion", but the point writers like Goethals and Horsfield are making is that soaps, TV news etc. appear to meet at least some of the needs met by religion. Horsfield goes on to say that, partly under the impact of constant conditioning in consumerism, people "increasingly are putting

together their own religious belief and life-style packages in order to meet individual needs" and that the mass media are playing a significant role in this process.

What should be the Christian response to this? Here we come to the second opinion particularly prominent in this reader. In the words of Professor Duncan Forrester, Christianity is "essentially against the stream, at odds with the *Zeitgeist*" (p.74).

Even Jim McDonnell, who is anxious to emphasise the benefits we receive from the media, says in his article on the values conveyed by the media: "television tends to assimilate every aspect of public communication to its own form — and that form is essentially the form of show business"; furthermore, "the implicit religious values found in the media are strongly individualistic. ... The quest is for personal identity" (p.97). He also admits that television is relativizing, and so inevitably undermines commitment.

But most memorable in this book is Dorothee Sölle's trenchant critique of advertising, that industry inseparable from the media. She attacks it on the grounds that it promotes consumerism, a way of seeing the world and myself which is "an attack on my dignity" (p.234). The most urgent question which reading the book is likely to leave in the mind is: How can Christianity fight consumerism?

Yet, though *Religion and the Media* makes clear that the modern media present a challenge to Christianity, it is important not to exaggerate the challenge. William Biernatzki, in his article on the intercultural communication of religious meanings, reminds us of the stability of fundamental beliefs and values in a culture. Whatever comes through the media cannot wipe these out in a couple of generations (cf p.135). And S.A. Shleifer's article on the differences between the Islamic and Western criteria of what good journalism is (pp.163ff) is a warning against uncritically accepting the Western media's own values as being necessarily universal and definitive. Moreover, it would be a huge mistake to assume that the way of preserving Christianity in this media-made world is withdrawal. Scattered through the reader are suggestions for better preaching of the Gospel in this kind of world: for example, the need to explore further how to translate religious meaning from print sources to people whose understanding of truth is dominated by aural or audio-visual communication, and how to convey ideas through story-telling (as TV does and as Jesus so successfully did). Forrester believes that "if Christian communicators do not lose their nerve or compromise with the false values and untruths so often promoted in our society, they may find that the media can trigger and strongly assist important styles of theological renewal" (p.77).

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BAPTISM AND CHANGE IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES c.200 – c.1150 Peter Cramer Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought CUP 1993 Hdbk £40

This is a very unusual book which engages the reader's attention from beginning to end. The author's primary aim is to examine the genesis and nature of the sacrament of Baptism; but he is also occupied with studying the fundamental nature of liturgy as such. Baptism is a case study, which illustrates the theology and meaning of liturgy. The specific historical