Teaching Theology in a New Cultural Environment

Peter Horsfield

Characteristics of the culture in which the gospel is expressed have long been recognized as an essential component in the theological task. Theologian Paul Tillich, for example, suggests that theological thought continually moves in a dialectical tension between two poles - "the eternal truth of its foundations and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received"(1) (although even this statement of the situation hides the reality that even the "eternal truth" of our theological foundations is culturally embodied).

What has not always been recognized, however, is that "culture" is not a universal, homogeneous phenomenon. In the past few decades liberation, feminist and Asian theologies have been instrumental in reaffirming the reality that culture is specific to particular groups or regions. They have also raised awareness of the extent to which most theological thought in this century has been filtered through a very specific cultural perspective, namely that of Western male academic theologians.

While these particular theologies have been successful in explicating other cultural perspectives not addressed by Western theology, there is one important cultural perspective that is still largely ignored in theological thought and theological education, and that is the cultural context being created by national and international mass media.

The mass media both nationally and internationally are rapidly becoming not just an aspect of social cultures, but through their increasing ubiquity across cultures, their functional interrelationship, and their place within the international market and economic system, are becoming the vanguard of a new international culture whose web is touching and influencing almost every other cultural system. The mass media are forming a new symbolic environment within which societies organize and express themselves.

Australia provides us with an example of this. The environment in which most of the population today are living and thinking has changed its character in the space of little more than one generation. Australians move about their daily life today within an environment that is shaped less by the need to harmonize with the demands, opportunitger necessary.

The dramatic changes which have taken place in the activities and patterns of people's social lives over the past two generations are of major theological significance in themselves. Of further significance, however, are the changes in the overarching symbolic environment within which these activities are taking place and the meanings which this environment imposes on life's events.

The ghetto of theological education

Despite these major implications, the structure, content, functioning and theological ramifications of the mass media remain largely unaddressed in the work of most theological

thinkers and theological education institutions. Where they do appear, they tend to be relegated to a minor section of the curriculum, tend to be seen as optional rather than central, and tend to be seen as "soft" rather than "serious" theology. There appear to be a number of reasons for this.

Many, if not most theologians and theological educators still see the mass media basically as tools for sharing ideas and content. The different media are seen as individual and separate functions, with little connectedness or commonality. Because most theologians' own training and preoccupation has focussed on the rational discrimination of ideas, the concept of the mass media as integrated power and meaning-generating systems which are actively creating a mythological and heuristic milieu to serve particular social and economic interests is foreign to most theological educators.

To a large extent the popular media are ignored in theological education because of the dominant media habits and cultural orientations of theological teachers. Most theological teachers, as with most academics, tend to see print as a superior medium for organizing and communicating ideas. Books and journals therefore are stock in trade in theological education and comprise almost the entire collection of most theological libraries. While theological teachers may use electronic media such as television, videos or radio for "elevated" purposes such as news, documentaries, current affairs, "good" music, or relaxation, "popular" programming is generally unpopular. While it may have some value in relaxation and entertainment, as a source of theological truth most theological educators would see the popular media as lacking in depth and a waste of time.

The culture addressed and referred to in most theological education, therefore, has tended to be an elite culture, one which is considered by most theologians as more appropriate for the elevated task of theological thought and reflection. The problem is that while such culture may give elevated and cultured expression to theological truth, "elite" culture does not adequately express or touch the lived situation of the majority of people. If that remains the dominant cultural form within which ministers are trained, then the foundations laid in theological education will be increasingly inadequate for understanding theologically a large part of the world in which ministry will actually be exercised.

Complicating this whole process is the traditional discipline structure of much theological education and the inability of that structure to handle the multiplication of information and expansion of ideas characteristic of modern society. Most curricula are already stretched to breaking point by the attempt to include in some way the increasing number of different issues ministers are expected to deal with. Given theological teachers own perceptions of media, the addition of a further requirement such as media studies is seen as of low priority compared to what is seen as the more foundational disciplines of biblical studies, church history, and systematic theology and the rapid increase in information to be communicated in those areas.

Seeing the mass media as shaping a new and distinctive cultural environment rather than simply as tools of communication may require a significant conceptual leap for many theological thinkers and educators. When one makes that leap, however, a number of profound implications for the task of theological education and ministerial formation may be identified.

Theological implications of the media reality

Marshall McLuhan many years ago drew attention to the idea that the form as well as the content of a communication carries meaning. Jacques Ellul in his many writings is one theorist who takes seriously the idea that there is ideology inherent in technology with the consequence that the adoption of particular technologies has implications for social and religious meaning and expression. Consistent with this strand of thought is the insight that how the mass media function within a society has a strong shaping effect on how a society understands itself. This occurs in two ways.

On the one hand, the media shape social understanding and expression by virtue of their nature and organization. Mass communications in themselves are strongly ideological: their messages are highly centralized, largely impersonal, machine mediated, lacking opportunity for user feedback and participation, and restricted by their technological characteristics. This is compounded by the nature of their economic and social function.

This ideology which is present in mass media by virtue of their nature and social organization then shapes how they represent social reality through processes of selection and reinterpretation. Studies of mass media indicate that a distinctive and consistent picture of social reality can be identified across the content of various mass media within a culture. These media "myths", which are a function of the factors mentioned above, can be seen most distinctively in television but are common in different ways across most media. While they are rarely explicitly stated, they emerge in dramatic or narrative form in almost all forms of fictional and non-fiction programming: news, sports, drama, situation comedies, advertisements, soap operas, and children's cartoons.

Extensive studies of the content of American television, for example, have found that television programming repetitively presents a particular and consistent dramatic view of the world and life: what is good and what is bad, what has reality and what does not have reality, what power is and who holds power, how relationships should be conducted, and how one should behave in particular situations. These "myths" generally serve the ends of those who exercise power within the media or society, not the needs of the broader strata of society.

The important implication of this is that television in particular and the mass media in general (particularly the commercial media) are presenting a consistent and integrated system of belief and social interpretation as a pattern for social understanding and development. This system of belief and social interpretation generally does not reflect the diversity of social reality there is within the society, but is consistent more with the economic or ideological system which has given it birth and its corporate managers who hold power within the system and benefit from it.

These constantly repeated messages have been shown to be effective agents of social change: not so much by producing direct change in individual behaviour, but by slowly affecting perceptions of social reality and meaning which underlie behaviour. Research shows that the more one watches television, for example, the more one will tend to see and interpret events and situations according to the television picture of life. This change in one's perception of life then changes how one subsequently responds and behaves in particular situations. (2)

The content of these pictures of reality arising from media culture need to be taken more seriously as the stuff of theological work, reflection and education and in the work of proclamation and evangelization.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the extent to which the media context is beginning to be taken seriously by other professional and educational organizations. In medical care, for example, it is being found that prescribed treatment given by a doctor is often not acted upon by patients because the doctor's diagnosis conflicts with the patient's self-diagnosis which is frequently influenced by media sources including talk shows and even soap-operas. In at least one medical school in Australia, prospective doctors are being taught to take seriously the role media might be playing in shaping their patients' self-diagnosis and how this might affect the patient's receptiveness to medical treatment.(3)

A prominent hospital in Australia has also found it necessary to run its own media campaign addressed to doctors to counter the over-prescription of drugs by high-powered media promotional campaigns of pharmaceutical companies.(4)

Theological education needs to take more seriously than it has that the mass media may be having a marked effect on religious faith, not just by the media's presentation of religious issues, but by the influence the media are exerting on perceptions of social reality within which religious faith is understood and experienced.

Hermeneutical implications of the media environment

The development of a media environment holds implications for the contextualization of Christian thought. In his book The Secular City, theologian Harvey Cox in 1965 presented a significant challenge to Western theological thought by highlighting the difference which existed between the natural agricultural environment in which biblical thought had developed and the urban social environment of modern life. Cox pointed to the significant work of hermeneutics which needed to take place in order to translate the gospel message from the biblical rural environment to an urban one. The emergence in recent years of a new media environment which overarches the urban-technological one takes that hermeneutical challenge a step further.

Much of biblical thought, Christian theology, apologetics, preaching and church practice is based on an assumed environment of the world of nature. Biblical writers were continually making inference from the environment of nature to nature's God. Much of traditional and contemporary Christian proclamation, apologetics and worship assumes an innate "suspicion" within people that for the world to be the way it is there must be a greater power behind it - note, for example, Paul's statement to the Romans: "There is no excuse at all for not honouring God, for God's invisible qualities are made visible in the things God has made".

The modern environment of the mass media, however, presents a quite different world. It is not a world we have inherited as a gift: it is a world that we ourselves have manufactured and largely control. It is not a world in which the invisible qualities of God are made visible: it is a world of wall-to-wall technological processes in which God is significantly absent and apparently not necessary. It is a world in which the subconscious "suspicion" of God's existence and presence, on which so much of our Christian apologetics and proclamation have depended,

may be disappearing. Bishop Bruce Wilson summarised the situation in the following way:

"Everyday life ceases to appear as something manipulated by vast, mysterious forces beyond human control or understanding and becomes a world that is manipulable, predictable, and intelligible....When you can get by happily enough without God, even if you do believe in him, why bother with him at all?"(5)

Preparation for ministry in a mediated consumer society

A further implication for theological education arises from the close link that the international mass media have with western consumer philosophy. The underlying assumptions of consumerism have significant religious overtones: that satisfying one's needs and wants is the desired goal of life; that each individual has a right to have their needs met regardless of the cost to others; and that most needs can be met by acquiring a product or service. Western commercial media are the vanguard in the promotion of this philosophy.

Against such a background, the Christian message of the ultimate supremacy of God, the importance of personal discipline, the postponement of gratification for sacrifice and service, and the limiting of one's own wants and demands for moral reasons can sound jarring, unrealistic, and fraudulent. One Australian prime minister ten years ago received strong criticism and contributed to loss of an election by saying on television: "Life wasn't meant to be easy!" No politician since has repeated the mistake!

What needs to be explored is the effect this constant conditioning in consumerism is doing to the common understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to be religious, and what it means to have faith. At its simplest level, as Colin Morris notes in God in a Box: Christian Strategy in a Television Age, the church in western societies now finds itself in a totally competitive communication marketplace, vying with the mass media to capture people's attention, time and energy with an answer to their needs. This competitiveness is not restricted solely to the West. A Sri Lankan pastor told me that the time of a church service in his area had to be changed recently because of a conflict with the broadcast of the American television drama, Dallas.

At a deeper level, as people are conditioned to a consumer outlook, the church finds itself under challenge to present the Christian faith in a way that meshes with people's desire for answers, and in a more pernicious way for a faith "product", that will meet their needs with a minimum of effort and disruption. Virginia Stem Owens has suggested provocatively in her book The Total Image that Jesus increasingly is being commended, not through proclamation, but through marketing in a subtle way that favourably blends the Christian message with identifiable consumer life-styles.

The ways in which churches are responding to this situation reflect the full spectrum of options suggested by H.Richard Niebuhr in Christ and Culture. What is lacking, however, is a clear and articulated theological perspective to justify the different positions or by which to critique them.

The Church Growth Movement, for example, has responded by adaptation, utilising the technologies of marketing analysis, business administration and mass communication to help

churches grow. A principal strategy of the church growth philosophy has been to identify the major demands people are making and tailoring the message and methods of the church to meet those demands, right down to the type of minister needed, the types of programs that should be offered, the type of theology to preach, the best places to build, and the most productive market segment to target with one's "packaged" message.

Another example of this approach is the American evangelical broadcasters. The grandeur of their productions, the images of "success," their "positive thinking" messages, and their offering of gifts and goods in return for donations translates the Christian message into an attractive consumer package that reflects a cultural form similar to that of media consumerism.

A range of questions are raised by this phenomenon. Have such churches grasped the new nature of social reality as it has been created in our subconscious by television and the other mass media? What are the theological implications of a change away from the biblical position where God is seen as supreme to the position where people's religious needs are seen as supreme? What are the implications for ministry in an environment where faith is transmuted away from an emphasis on the service of God to one of selection of aspects of faith and churches according to what one perceives one's needs are? Is there a valid integration of the consumer philosophy with the Christian revelation? In what ways must Christian faith accommodate consumerism, and in what ways must it challenge it? Should Christian faith be communicated in consumer terms in order to address people where they are, but nurture them towards the service of God when they are converted from consumerism?

What is the gospel?

Awareness that there are particular cultural situations rather than a universal culture within which the gospel takes form raises, of course, the obvious question: what is the gospel? This is not a new debate. Within Christianity it is as old as Paul's argument against circumcision. It has been raised again more recently in the face of the cultural challenges to dominant western theological formulations by liberation, feminist and Asian theologians.

A dimension which has been missed in this ongoing debate, however, is the extent to which the medium through which the gospel is mediated adds a cultural dimension which also needs to be considered in discerning the nature of the gospel. Dimensions of this issue have already been raised by different thinkers. Marshall McLuhan did initial explorations in this in his proposals on the medium of communication shapes the message and how the dominant media of a society structure how individuals and the society perceive and conceive truth and reality.(6) Jesuit thinker Walter Ong has identified different ways in which religion is given form because of differences in the media dominant in the society. Jacques Ellul has written extensively on the nature of truth in relation to different media forms.(7)

A number of major issues for theological education can be seen to arise from this debate. A useful starting point for theological educators is a personal one: in what ways do one's own sub-cultural media preferences shape and proscribe one's perception and teaching of the faith?

If one grasps the significance of that question, a number of related ones begin to emerge: What then is the gospel? By what principles can one evaluate the truth of different expressions of the gospel in different media without confusing differences of truth with differences of taste

and without lapsing into an indiscriminate media form relativism on the one hand or an exclusive media form chauvinism on the other? By what principles does one provide a critique of the various media cultures from a standpoint of the gospel when one's understanding of the gospel has itself been mediated through a specific media culture? How does one translate truths of the gospel gained from print sources in theological education to people whose understanding of truth is dominated by oral or audio-visual communication?

A deliberate theological study of the mass media can also give new insights and perspectives to the ongoing theological debate about the contextualization of theology. A simple example may be helpful. There has been ongoing discussion in Australia, as there has in many countries, into identifying characteristics of Australian culture which may serve as a basis for developing a genuinely "Australian" theology. Many of the characteristics which have emerged in this ongoing discussion, however, have not reflected the actual social realities within Australian society, but have reflected more some of the media myths about what Australians are really like. The same may apply in other countries: when one seeks to develop theological forms which arise out of "people's" culture, what sources are being used to identify people's culture and what is the role of the interpretive power of the media in shaping those sources?

Social dimensions of international ownership

The structure and functioning of the international media are a major issue of social justice. Most international media systems and news services are western owned and controlled. News gathering is to a dominant extent centered in the hands of four First World agencies and two major television news agencies. Control of international communication cables and satellites, development of technology, and access to information is firmly in First World hands.(8)

The flow of news, therefore, is grossly imbalanced in favour of the West. Even when news does flow from Third World countries it is generally through the eyes of Western journalists. These patterns of control frequently make it easier for countries in the Third World to receive news about what is happening in the West than it is to receive news about what is happening in a neighbouring country.

The export of cultural products, such as television programs, is a major item of world trade. Most U.S. programs are paid for before leaving the U.S. The price at which such programs are made available to other countries is generally adjusted according to a nation's capacity to pay, making them much cheaper than local programming and therefore almost irresistible to local broadcasters. In 1980-81, for example, one major Australian broadcaster spent $61.4 million for Australian programs which comprised 35.6% of program time, and only $12.7 million for the remaining 64.4% made up of imported programs.(9)

Other issues relate to national control of the means of social communication. Ownership of Australian media, for example, after being bounced around like a football for the past five years, has become amongst the most concentrated in the world. Television in Australia has become dominated by three corporations, each of which has access to around 60% of the country's population. Rupert Murdoch, who is no longer an Australian citizen, now controls seventy percent of the total circulation of Australian newspapers and has reduced competition significantly by purchasing major competing newspapers and closing or amalgamating

them.(10)

Of further interest is the direct effect international media concentration and control may have on the development and extension of religious thought. What will be the effects, for example, of the large number of amalgamations and the growing commercialisation of religious publishing in the U.S.A. and Britain? Will serious religious thought be displaced by coffee table theology?

The mass media as a functional religion

Over the past few decades, occasional articles or books have appeared analysing ways in which people's use of mass media takes on religious characteristics.(11) These analyses, by utilising a functional definition of religion,(12) indicate different ways in which the mass media are serving a highly ritualised, integrative, value-forming, and community-cohering function similar to that which has traditionally been served by the established and recognized religious faiths.

Partly under the impact of constant conditioning in consumerism, people in western democratic societies increasingly are putting together their own religious belief and life-style packages in order to meet individual needs. The mass media through their content and in the way they are used are playing a significant religious role in this process. This is not to say that the mass media would see themselves in such religious terms, nor that people would acknowledge that they see their use of mass media as parallel to participation in a religious faith. But in practical terms the mass media for many people are playing a major role in meeting their needs for integrative ritual, self-transcendence, social integration and shared belief.

If one can recognise the vital role which the mass media are playing in this regard and understand some of its major mythologies, exploration of the process and media mythologies offers a rich resource for theological reflection and the cultural contextualization of faith.

The appropriate use of different media

Greater emphasis tends to be given in theological education to the analysis and formation of ideas rather than their communication. This factor, along with the largely unquestioned preference for print and the spoken word, has meant that inadequate attention is generally given to other factors which play a vital role in formation and communication of faith, factors such as the way in which the medium used may influence the substance of the message, the potential which exists in media other than print or voice for communicating the gospel, and the principles which might guide ministers in the most appropriate selection and integration of the different media.

Other media, such as the visual arts, music, drama, dance and audio-visual modes of communication are noticeably absent in theological education. Not only does this absence miss a rich potential, it inculcates in potential ministers a patties and rhythms of the natural world, and more by the rhythms, images and constructions of a mediated consumer economy and its associated mass communication systems.

Australians today, particularly those living in urban or suburban contexts, spend almost the whole of their life in the context of mass mediated messages. They encounter a constant

barrage of visual messages on books and cereal boxes, bumper stickers, posters, billboards, newspapers and magazines. They are enveloped in a panoply of constant constructed sound through radio talk and music in the kitchen, by the bedside, in the car, and even while we ride in the tram or on their bicycles. The recreation of Australians is permeated by a highly stylized mythology of contest through such things as mediated news, sports and drama, videos, fun parlours, and computer games. Australian urban and suburban society has become an environment shaped by the scientific and technological method in which God is not only apparently absent but is functionally no lonern of communication which is carried into practical ministry.

There is a need in theological education therefore to address also the practical and theological questions of media utilization, questions such as: What is the appropriate relationship between inter-personal, group and mass media in communicating the gospel? What aspects of faith may be communicated by mass means, and what should be communicated inter-personally? What principles should guide one in selecting the different media? What are the practical guidelines governing which media to use, when to use them and how to use them?

NOTES

(1) Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology. 3 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63, p. I:3.

(2) For further elaboration of this concept, see particularly the extensive work of George Gerbner and his associates at the Annenberg School of Communication in Philadelphia.

(3) The Newcastle University School of Medicine.

(4) Gib Wettenhall, "A dose of their own medicine," Australian Society, May 1987, pp.25-26.

(5) Bruce Wilson, Can God Survive in Australia? Sutherland, Albatross, 1983, pp.34,41.

(6) see Understanding Media, Signet, 1964.

(7) see Jacques Ellul, The Humiliation of the Word, Eerdmans, 1985; Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word, Methuen, 1982.

(8) Bill Bonney and Helen Wilson, Australia's Commercial Media, South Melbourne: MacMillan, 1983, pp.48-50.

(9) Ibid, p.89.

(10) Paul Chadwick, Media Mates: Carving up Australia's Media, South Melbourne, Macmillan, 1989.

(11) see for example, William Kuhns, The Electronic Gospel, New York: Herder and Herder, 1969; George Gerbner with Kathleen Connoly, "Television as New Religion," New Catholic

World, April/May 1978: 52-56; Gregor Goethals, The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar, Boston: Beacon Press, 1981; Peter Horsfield, "Larger Than Life: Religious Functions of Television." Media Information Australia, 47 (Feb 1988): 61-66.

(12) see for example that proposed by Milton Yinger in The Scientific Study of Religion, New York: Macmillan, 1970.