

# Media and the Spirit of God

## Redefining the human person

*John B. Foley*

I HOPE WHAT FOLLOWS WILL NOT SEEM an attack on modern culture and media. The many benefits of both are everywhere and I meet them with gratitude. Yet surely there are several negative characteristics of contemporary life, particularly a couple of the mass media's practices, that deserve notice. I will start with these less savoury aspects, then suggest some struggles that face Christian spirituality as a result.

I am in St Louis, Missouri, in the heart of the United States. A beautiful scene flashes on to the television screen, an automobile making its way through luxurious scenery. A voice, somehow familiar but just beyond identification, tells me how fabulous the car is. It promises the manufacturer's 'greatest accomplishment to date'. My ears perk up. Have they eliminated exhaust? Have they cut the need for fuel? Have they increased safety? The voice pauses provocatively, then says, 'We now bring you a car that can save . . .' (pregnant pause) '... your soul'. The commercial finishes and another one takes its place.

I am shocked each time this advertisement comes on. My friends in the United Kingdom can watch BBC and avoid such commercial provocation – though it is present in many other ways. For me, there is no time even to react to this 'automobile-Christ' figure; the television hurtles onwards with programmes and commercials. I ask myself what has happened to civilization in the western world? How can people hear such a fraudulent claim and not object? The succeeding commercial presents a sleek image of its own Great Product and intimates that my happiness, stability, safety and comfort depend upon purchasing it as soon as possible.

Obviously advertisers borrow images that are already established elsewhere. What happens when they borrow the charter belief that God alone is the one who can 'save your soul'? But maybe I am overreacting. What harm is done? Religion has not been deprived of its image, just made to share it. 'This is only a commercial', we say, or 'it is only a motion picture', or 'they don't mean it'. Besides,

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there is no real competition between what are really two separate realms, spirituality and commerce.

So I go to a movie. I find I am not surprised that there is ample use of God's name. The movie is for young people, but it is replete with the expletives 'My God!' or 'Jesus CHRIST!' or, for variety, 'JESUS H. CHRIST!' At times these are presented in combination with crude four-letter words formerly taboo in the West. The occasion in the screenplay is not very serious, just everyday talk. Again I find Christianity loaning out its images, in this case the most holy name it has, the name above all names at which every knee should bend (Phil 2:9-11). The only objection I have ever heard to this widespread practice was itself a commercial: Bill Cosby recommends a cable channel in the United States because it shows movies that 'don't have all that cursing'. A nice old-fashioned sentiment.

### *Strategic looting*

Certainly there is not time to monitor mass media for such examples; everything is moving too fast. It is much simpler to leave such sins as part of everyday life, nothing to worry about. But it is our silence that makes me stop. Is mass communication so new to the world that the world's citizens have a blind spot to it, that they give blanket approval to something more powerful than any other force in modern life?

Borrowing of sacred images is an important strategy of media. They, the makers of movies and of television advertisements, surely do not have a systematic plan to degrade the ancient images of religion, to redefine spirituality's terms. Their purpose is simply to sell the product. I have seen images borrowed for this purpose from the home, from men drinking together, from the beauty of nature, from sexual allurements, from the love of parents for children, from teaching a child about life, and so on. Advertising plucks forth from culture's large heap of images whichever one it needs. The goal is to redirect buyers' impulses to the product. Images are considered only in so far as they do this. 'Salvation of the soul' hooks into people's fear of death (and perhaps of life) together with the religious promise of safety. No one thinks the automobile is Christ, but the advertiser hopes that some desires connected with salvation will transfer to the car. When that happens, the purpose is fulfilled: the product is rendered more desirable and will elicit more sales.<sup>1</sup>

I worry about the effect of this usage on the original symbol. I am not convinced that no harm is done. 'Salvation' seems degraded, un-moored. The secular misuse of it mars the religious one. As far as I know, borrowing the sacred for a secular purpose does in fact desecralize that which is borrowed.

As consumers we grant the advertisement aesthetic distance. We agree to let it try to convince us, and to use any image it can find to do so. One effect of this permission is a subtle but far-reaching discontinuity. An otherwise honest image is tacked blatantly on to a different purpose, one that really has very little to do with it. An advertisement shows a man caring for his mother by advising her to take sleep medication: a lovely scene, but it is actually a way to sell sleeping pills. Actors speak and act as if they were, for instance, a worried business-owner, or a satisfied toothpaste-user, whereas in reality they are only professionals hired to *seem* this way. Is there an abiding discontinuity between the covert purpose (to sell product) and the appearance (home-maker, ordinary housewife etc.)? Does it in the long run compromise our ability to react at an honest, one-for-one level with the situations of our lives? What happens when we meet the real business-owners, toothpaste-users etc.? If manipulation can be defined as causing someone to act in a certain way without their realizing the cause, then advertising must be at least 99 per cent manipulative.

### *Planting pictures in our heads*

The media also implant new images. A conspicuous example is the horror movie genre, though I note immediately that many images of our media-culture partake in this phenomenon. Audiences like being thrilled by situations of grave danger from which there is no escape. The knife hand comes down again and again on the woman in the shower; creatures from outer space invade; hand-to-hand combat takes place at the edge of tall buildings; a boy and his mother scream in unquenchable terror. As technology has advanced, the quality of special effects has made such scenes quite convincing. 'That was so real,' movie-goers say. Are we becoming more able to imagine brutality as normal?

And what of sexuality? No one wants to be prudish or behind the times; no one would deny that sex is part of everyday life and therefore could and perhaps should be included in any artistic depiction of life. But questions have to be raised about gratuitous depictions of sex acts. More than half the motion picture plots today do it.

Characters meet for the first time and have sex, often portrayed in detail. How does this affect us? Does it not supply virtual life-experience that renders infidelity normal? Moreover, we also know that the actors are real people. Naked actors who literally have just met go through intimate sexual situations in order to portray their characters. Then they take their salaries and never meet again. Movie-making must be more important than consonance in sexual relations. Can spirituality hold that sex is a special, loving act when such free sexual relationships are the plot and in the mechanisms of so many entertainments?

New research speculates that nervous systems are re-structured by experience, as shown by research on animals. First, 'seizures are "kindled" in an experimental animal . . . by applying an electrode to a relevant part of the brain and passing current'.<sup>2</sup> After enough intermittent stimulation, the animal finally has seizures on its own, without any stimuli at all. By implication, violent or depressive experiences in a human being might start as a reaction to real stimuli, but gradually they need no cause because kindling has successfully rewired the brain. 'Some cells die, others "sprout", or change shape.'

Symptoms become 'unmoored' from their historical antecedents, and people who have suffered serious trauma later find themselves vulnerable to what for others would be minor losses or threats of loss.<sup>3</sup>

Could it be that our very capacity to receive images of darkness and horror is being enlarged and honed? Might we say that repeated, strong, emotion-laden media-images enable the receiver to experience resulting moods more quickly and successfully, even without stimulation? What does traditional spirituality say to this possible re-forming of the person?

### ***Redefining the human person***

These questions go around in my mind. What about the borrowing or looting of images belonging to others' realms of value, the highlighting of jagged images that would otherwise not be strong in a person, and the possibility that nerves are actually re-structured, making negative experience easier? All three have the effect of inducing an unstable and undependable self-image in the modern person.

Years ago I saw an interview in which a business executive said the following: 'Our company has great powers of research at our disposal. We want to examine the youth of today from every aspect . . .'; already I was happy to hear these words and was certain the man would talk about helping young people find themselves and become productive citizens. As Abraham Maslow put it,

The more we learn about man's natural tendencies, the easier it will be to tell him how to be good, how to be happy, how to be fruitful, how to respect himself, how to love, how to fulfil his highest potentialities.<sup>4</sup>

I expected the business executive to say the same thing. His company would examine the youth and . . . what? He continued, ' . . . and with that knowledge help them define themselves as consumers'. My jaw dropped. A new and seductive definition of a human being had arrived: one who consumes. Taken seriously this means a person is an emptiness waiting to be filled, a set of desires kindled and then slaked by the purchased goods. I consume, therefore I am. Even consumption cannot be too successful, since future products need emptiness to fill. Is the consumer-definition coming true in our time? As far as I can see, there is a weakening of the structure of human personalities as a result.

Perhaps music videos are giving us a covert signal about the resulting state of society. Any adult who has watched MTV (a music, video and life-style channel for young people) will surely have noticed the lack of a common narrative thread in MTV's videos. Raw images tumble over one another, organized mainly by their inclusion within a single time-span. Immediately another song replaces the first, bringing yet another set of fast-paced, disconnected but brilliant images. These productions seem to bear a resemblance to apocalyptic literature, spawned in a time of social upheaval and featuring short, barely connected sense data. What are these videos revealing? Do they reflect a fragmented, unorganized state of the human person? Have we been kindled to emptiness, with its accompanying need for more and more consumption?

### ***Establishing a world-view***

Obviously spirituality will have to object to the supposed definition of the human person as a consumer. Religion is not a product in which godly images (instead of secular) are stuffed into the

empty, echoing soul. But what is it that spirituality should try to accomplish, then, as regards the images, memories, purpose and definition of a human person? I want to put forth several small reflections on this great question.

First, perceptions form the person. Our marvellous perceptual ability has been honed through aeons of time. Not only do we observe the individual moments of life, but we also build a comprehensive picture of reality out of these daily perceptions. Gradually each individual develops a background understanding of what the world is like, what can be expected, what would be impossible, what life is all about. This understanding is more than an intellectual idea; it consists of a complicated and inchoate pattern of felt expectations, memories, sensation, intuitions, etc. Above, I have been referring to these as 'images'.<sup>5</sup>

A brief example: I just heard a clump of keys being rattled around at the table behind me in the coffee house where I am writing. I was aware, simultaneously and 'inside' those sounds, of the presence of my mother. When she used to pick up a cluster of keys the sound meant many things to me as a young child: safety (she was a reality bigger than me), adventure (we are going for a drive), admiration (she was vivacious) and many other reactions to her person. In a word, I was back in her safe and exciting world. Parts of that world have lasted, though she is no longer here. By allowing me to live within her perspective she gave me the chance to appropriate parts of it and to develop my own picture of the world. That world-view once gained allows me to go through each day, to relate with others who inhabit a similar world-view, who understand and agree on what is important and what is not.

Until very recently every person developed his or her sense of reality in and through this slow-moving, familiar style. The child needs time to correct mistakes, to gain confidence, to move forward at the right pace. For most of history the speed of experience was appropriately slow. That is changed now. Now a person can experience products of the media which are so effective in their image-building that they compete with actual experience of the daily, real world. No wonder: much virtual experience is packed into small, potent presentations in movies and advertising. Of course the mind knows the difference between artificial and real, but the background perceptual system of human beings is not able to distinguish. That perceptual system is the part of us that assembles our inarticulate

but necessary world-view. The more virtual worlds we experience, the more we are subject to being defined by artificial realities.

***Human capacities in the new virtual world***

There is much room for discussion on the merits of the various virtual worlds and whether it actually matters if people spend time in a real or in an artificially constructed environment. The question would pivot upon whether human beings even have the capacity to become coherent adults if they are nurtured mainly in fast-moving, image-laden virtual surroundings. However that may be decided, the dangers I have pointed to above remain. Powerful virtual worlds can be (and perhaps must be, in the case of advertising) manipulated to achieve an end that has nothing to do with human development. Human needs and capacities are utilized according to an economic plan that remains indifferent to them in principle.

It seems that most people believe too much in the goodness of those who create such images. Most citizens are confident that movie-makers and advertisers will remember values, morals, honesty, fairness, and therefore will not create virtual worlds that will harm other people. But is this true? There is only one structural necessity in capitalistic commerce: profit. All other values can be set aside in service of that necessity if the bottom line is under pressure. Many of us would object that our values would nevertheless remain firm in any such situation. But would they? Communication's persuasive ability is at the service of the great persuader itself, greed. Great power is in the hands of few. It is becoming increasingly difficult to resist.

Christian spirituality says, on the contrary, that persons at essence are by no means simply consumers. Though a feeling of emptiness or vacuity is endemic to our times, the emptiness does not mean what it seems to. Human beings are built for love and that is why emptiness bothers them. The postmodern world asks 'Is that all there is?' precisely because of a frustrated expectation that there should somewhere be more. Instead of a consumer, the human person should be defined (poetically) as a delicately prepared readiness, an openness that can receive without being stuffed, and that can let go without being empty. At our best we should be defined by this best part of ourselves, which is created in the image and likeness of God.

### *Retrieving the Spirit*

For people with Christian insight, life is rooted in the Holy Spirit. Christian spirituality has never rested secure with images, even with the sacraments, as a full basis of life without remembering the Spirit's presence. The real locale of salvation lies at the open centre of the human soul, the place that receives and forms even the world picture I spoke of above, that underlies all images, thoughts, symbols, sensations and feelings. It is a silent and still point within each human being, a rich ground, an exquisitely nuanced readiness. Before and beneath all images, the human self is infinitely open to God, is the expression of God's own openness when spoken in human terms. Here the Holy Spirit dwells and will always startle us poor sheep back from the edge of emptiness, if we can hear its quiet voice.<sup>6</sup> The Spirit strives along with the person to find the true depths, and to pray in groans too deep for words (Rom 8:26). If there is a media storm in today's world, that storm 'still seeks its end in peace when it strikes against peace with all its might'.<sup>7</sup> There is an ocean beneath the storm, tossed and roughened on the surface, but huge and calm below. If we return to our souls we can strive, along with the striving of God's own Spirit, to find and re-find this very basis for personhood, the basis for our images and our definition of full Christian life.<sup>8</sup>

There are some trends that lean in this direction. Stress-relief, centring, contemplative withdrawal etc. have made inroads. The book *Full catastrophe living*, for instance, gently details a method for being mindful of oneself in the present moment, in order to be attentive to the world. It adopts from eastern traditions the awareness of one's breathing, an alertness with the entire body so that it can spend time each day in openness to what is. The monk John Main proclaims the reconstitution of monastic traditions and spiritual life by a daily practice of mantra contemplation. Bede Griffiths seconds this suggestion, augmenting it with his own considerable experience in eastern religions. The practice of Transcendental Meditation promises the same kind of renewal, with theoretical backing from the thought of Maharishi.<sup>9</sup> That kind of contemplation, important as air to the Christian person, seems to be calling out to modern culture. Perhaps society in the so-called first world will overburden itself with media dross and will finally toss off its heavy load.

What can anyone do about the loss of Christianity's images and the degradation of them? I think the only really satisfactory recla-

mation of secularized, formerly sacred images is to experience again at their depths the meanings in which these images are rooted. We in the postmodern world can never wholly escape the media-ills that harm us, but perhaps Christians can take the struggle to a deeper, more soul-full level. Maybe we can become a people whose roots are nourished by God's quiet Spirit, no matter how noisy the winds of the world. Maybe we can find, in God's Spirit, ourselves.

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#### NOTES

1 I thank my friend, John Staudenmaier SJ, for this insight.

2 Peter D. Kramer, *Listening to Prozac* (New York: Viking, 1993), p 110.

3 *Ibid.*, pp 112, 113.

4 Maslow, *Toward a psychology of being* (Princeton NJ: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1962), p 4.

5 'We do not need to rely on the poets of psychiatry for confirmation of the actuality and power of images and symbols. The most commonplace existence swarms with images, the most "realistic" man lives by them. Let us repeat . . . symbols never disappear from the reality of the psyche. The aspect of them may change, but their function remains the same; one has only to look behind their latest masks', Mircea Eliade, *Images and symbols: studies in religious symbolism*, trans Philip Mairet (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), p 16.

6 Hopkins, from the poem 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', in *Gerard Manley Hopkins, poems and prose*, ed W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953), pp 12-24.

7 Tagore, Poem 38, *Gitanjali (Song offerings): a collection of prose translations made by the author from the original Bengali* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1971), p 52.

8 I have attempted a comprehensive summary of the action of the Trinity and the Holy Spirit in my book on aesthetical theology: John Foley SJ, *Creativity and the roots of liturgy* (Washington DC: Pastoral Press, 1993), chapter four.

9 Books referred to are: Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full catastrophe living: using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1990); John Main OSB, *Word into silence* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); Bede Griffiths OSB, *The new creation in Christ: Christian meditation and community* (Springfield IL: Templegate Publishers, 1992); Deepak Chopra, *Perfect health: the complete mind/body guide* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1990).