

# CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT IN A MASS-MEDIATED CULTURE

By JAMES McDONNELL

*With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: 'You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.' But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears, for they hear (Mt 13, 14-16).*

**A**S CHRISTIANS we are called to recognize and celebrate the presence and saving power of Christ and his Spirit in our lives and in the lives of others. That call means that we have to scrutinize not only our individual lives but also our collective life as members of local, national and global cultures. The meanings, attitudes and values, symbols and myths which form the public background to our private lives have to be identified, examined and judged. If they are found wanting we should be prepared to challenge them and, as far as possible, change them. Today that means scrutinizing, challenging, and trying to change public culture that is expressed and mediated by the mass communication media.

Christian discernment means looking at and listening to our mass-media culture with the eyes and ears of Christ. We are asked to see truly and hear clearly the sights and sounds of the media so that we may know what values and meanings are informing our culture; but it is difficult to see and hear in a world filled with noise, noise that we take for granted. We tend to become conscious of the media only occasionally.

Once in a while the content of a film or television programme assaults our sensibilities or moral sense; stylized aggression in a

children's cartoon programme makes us fearful that children may imitate and act out what they see on screen. Sometimes the media make us angry when they bring the news of human stupidity, or they frighten us with the news of human or natural disaster, and sometimes they stir us to compassion by the report of human misery. On rare occasions we may think about what kind of comedy makes us laugh or what makes a drama gripping. Yet more rarely we may see a film or listen to music that awakens us to feelings of awe and wonderment. For the most part, however, the media are simply there, providing an unremitting stream of news and views, images and sounds, information and entertainment. The media are, for most of the time, nearly invisible to us; technologies of which we are most aware when they are absent, when the television breaks down or the newspaper fails to appear.

*The media is the 'massage'*

We are creatures of habit and our uses of the media are mostly habitual, unreflecting and routine. From the time the alarm clock and the radio announce that the day has begun until we fall asleep in front of the television screen at night, our senses are bombarded by media images and sounds. Throughout the day, at home, office or factory, in the car or on the train, we turn to radio, newspaper, magazine, television, paperback or stereo 'walkman' to pass the time, provide topics of conversation, or keep us 'up-to-date'. At night, television provides the essential accompaniment to our family or community life as we plan our evening around the programme schedules.

Marshal McLuhan referred to this state of affairs when he coined the phrases 'the medium is the *message*' and 'the medium is the *massage*'. McLuhan was pointing out that the influence of a mass-medium like television may lie more in its ability to convey the same message instantaneously in sound and vision to millions of people at the same time, than in the particular messages conveyed by specific programmes. We may criticize this or that television programme for its content, but we never question the fact that we spend so much of our leisure time with the television or that we use the radio simply for background music. As McLuhan intimates, we have allowed the media to 'massage' us into an unreflective and indiscriminating cultural consumption.

*The skills of discernment*

Following Christ in a media culture demands that we become aware of how we use the media and how much we depend upon the media to shape the routine of our lives. It also demands that we should examine critically the 'messages' purveyed by the media. This *critical awareness* has in turn to be complemented by *communicative action*,<sup>1</sup> and both awareness and action have to be informed by a *contemplative spirit*. Communicative action is a way of communicating that implicitly challenges the one-way flow of information which is the mass media. Communicative action tries to live out the idea that authentic communication is a *sharing* of meaning and values. Finally, the contemplative spirit ensures that both awareness and action are placed at the service of Christ and his purposes.

*Critical awareness: escaping the media massage*

Critical awareness has to begin not with the content of the mass media, but with the presence of the media in daily life. Unless we are prepared to liberate ourselves from the compulsion to view, listen or read simply to 'pass the time', critical awareness will be no more than a commentary on our own dependence. We have to choose times when we switch off the radio, ignore the television and put the newspaper aside. Discernment, like prayer, requires a measure of silence and solitude in our life. All of us need to find time and places which enable us to 'pass the time' with God in 'peace and quiet' amid the endless routines of daily life. Disengaging every now and then from the noise of the media provides precious moments in which to listen to God and to examine how far we are creative and free in our media use.

We might begin our examination by reflecting upon our daily routine and habitual actions. Why is it that we switch on the radio in the morning or the television at night? Is it because we wish to listen to or watch some particular programme, or is it to fill up the silence? Do we use the newspaper and the television as devices for the avoidance of conversation with those with whom we live? Why do we buy the same newspaper every day? Is it for information or for entertainment? The questions could be multiplied, but the point is clear. Our habitual media uses are part of the whole fabric of our lives and a true critical awareness will not affect our media use alone. Choosing not to turn on the radio and television unless we have decided to do so for a specific purpose will leave us with

time to spend in other ways. We will have other choices to make. Turning away from the media towards our friends or family may strengthen the bonds of love but may also confront us with personal conflicts hitherto unexpressed. Broadening our reading habits may enrich our understanding but, by the same token, may disturb and question our deepest values.

### *Examining media content*

Having examined our own habitual uses of the media, we need also to consider the content of the programmes we watch, the newspapers we read and the songs we sing. Among other things, a culture is a shared view of the world and a collaboration in the establishment of shared meanings and values. We make sense of the world in terms of our culture and we find a mutuality of understanding in our acceptance and use of common symbols and myths. Every day writers, musicians, producers, journalists and other media professionals make and remake songs, stories, dramas and news items that selectively embody and frame the myths, issues, conflicts and ideals of our culture. Most of us accept this selective interpretation of reality without much questioning, since the mass media tend to reinforce and reflect our culture's dominant social, political and cultural assumptions.

Once we become aware of how much our perception of the world is filtered through the media screen we can begin to entertain alternative ways of seeing. Once we discard the illusion that the mass media offer us an objective, transparent view of reality, we can begin to have confidence in our own perceptions and judgments. Christians are called to be 'in' but not 'of' the world;<sup>2</sup> today the world is more and more a media world, and we have to be able to stand apart from it in order to ask how consonant are its values and actions with the gospel.

There are numerous questions to ask irrespective of what the particular media arrangements are in our culture. Questions about the ideological or political bias of news and documentaries; questions about the media portrayal of social, cultural and racial groups; questions about the values and attitudes presented through popular dramas, films and comedy shows; questions about the control and organization of broadcasting or the press; and questions about the possibilities for minority points of view to be expressed. Such questions are by no means exhaustive, but they illustrate the

complexity of the informational and entertainment culture we take for granted.

*Appreciation as well as criticism*

Critical analysis is useful and necessary, but inadequate if it only develops scepticism in viewers, listeners and readers. Even sceptics need to recognize that enjoyment, enlightenment, insight and delight may come to us through the media. The eyes of millions were opened to the reality of African hunger by the television news reports from Ethiopia. Films and plays, even the despised soap opera, have provided millions of people with hours of simple pleasure. Educational and documentary television programmes have shown countless people the wonders of the world about them. Though 'objectivity' may be elusive, news reports reveal scandals and problems that need to be corrected and punished. Comedies give people the opportunity to laugh and relax, and millions have shared the dramatic excitements of great sporting events. Many young people find in rock music, for all its commercialism, an authentic expression of their own felt hopes, desires and anxieties.

Critical awareness should be also critical appreciation. Once we have become aware that media content needs critical scrutiny we can begin to look out for that content which enriches our lives and culture. That does not mean that we should look only for the 'serious' and so-called 'quality' content. Mass popular culture need not be judged by the same standards applied to traditional 'high' culture, and critical appreciation should not be code for cultural snobbery. The essential point is that we should *choose* rather than accept passively the content we receive. We should become active and discriminating users who are conscious of how the media are integrated into our lives.

Appreciation should be communicated. How many of us, so quick to condemn a sexually explicit or violent television programme, have ever written to a broadcasting organization to praise an illuminating documentary or a well-made, well-acted play? The campaigners against media 'vices' have affected the ways the media are censored and regulated, but they have not helped to raise and extend artistic or journalistic standards. Christians are the 'leaven', and the 'salt'<sup>3</sup> of the world, which means they should encourage rather than dissuade, build up rather than cast down. The mass media need leavening and salt, if they are to realize their potential

for enriching our lives, and in a small way every Christian who praises and speaks about a well-told story, a truthful news report, or an entertaining film is contributing to the general improvement of media content.

*The 'postal' model of communication*

Developing a critical awareness of the mass-media environment and of mass-media content deepens our perception of media culture and may also help us to become better communicators in our daily lives. It can do this by encouraging us to reflect about the communication process itself.

If we ever think about communication, we tend to think that it is rather like sending letters through the post. One human being or group of human beings sends a package of information to another individual or group. In a complex communication process this basic sequence is repeated time and again as sender becomes receiver in turn. The most important element in this process is the message (the package of information) and second in importance is the sender (the transmitter of the message). The one who is being communicated with tends to be regarded only as a destination. This 'postal' or transmission model of communication is the one which characterizes the mass media.

Critical awareness tends to highlight the deficiencies of this 'postal' form of communication. It alerts us to the extent to which we have been cast in the role of objects of communication, rather than as communicating subjects. We become ever more conscious of how advertisers and programme-makers bombard us with *their* messages while never giving us the chance to answer back. Our constant complaint becomes one that media-makers are always speaking and never listening.

*Communicative action: a new way of communicating*

Christian discernment demands that we go one step further than the recognition of the faults and flaws of the media. Not only must we criticize the media, we must also criticize ourselves. If we are honest we will admit that our everyday communication practice is characterized by a minimum of listening and a maximum of talking. Even when we say little out loud we can be so busy preparing our message that we fail to hear what is being said to us. We, just as often as the media communicators, cajole, harangue or manipulate instead of speaking openly and truthfully. We too have to learn a new way of communicating.

Authentic, full communication is the building up of a common world of understanding, or a 'community of interpretation' in which meanings and values are shared. In John Macquarrie's words 'communication takes place when some aspect of the shared world is lit up and made accessible to both parties in the discourse'.<sup>4</sup> Shared discourse does not, of course, imply that we always agree with those with whom we communicate. It does imply that our disagreements are contained within a framework of mutual respect and a desire to come to a common understanding. This kind of *communicative action* presupposes that communication is not simply a means to an end, whether that end be persuasion, education or information, but a good in itself. To communicate in this manner is to affirm and celebrate human dignity, equality and solidarity.

At the heart of this communicative action is the ability and the willingness to listen. Listening requires that we focus on the person communicating as well as on the message being communicated. It requires that we attend to what is not being said, to the implicit and latent meanings that underpin all human communication. As we learn the art of 'imaginative listening' we may begin to communicate in a less one-sided and self-centred way.<sup>5</sup> We shall become alert to the complexities and nuances of communication and be more circumspect in the expression of our own opinions. We might even begin to entertain the possibility that we could learn from others and perhaps, occasionally, change our minds.

In the effort of hearing what it is others are saying or trying to say (as opposed to what they seem to say), we make ourselves vulnerable. We may find ourselves touched more deeply by our encounters with people through the media as well as by direct personal encounter. The stories of war and famine we hear on the news may become more real to us; we may feel more deeply about people and events we know only through the television, radio or newspaper. We may discover that programmes and music that once were so much background now have the power to engage our attention and move our hearts. In short, we may discover that 'imaginative listening' is not far removed from the contemplative spirit.

#### *Media culture and the contemplative spirit*

The contemplative spirit can hardly be analyzed or defined, though one can give examples of it:

Socrates eagerly learning a new tune on his flute the night before he was to die; Luther deciding to plant an apple tree in the morning of the day on which the world would come to an end; St Louis Gonzaga continuing to play during recreation time even if he knew his death would come that very night; the delight of the zen master in watching the struggle of an ant in spite of the fact that he is hanging over an abyss, tied by a rope that is soon to be cut.<sup>6</sup>

What all these examples have in common is the ability of the contemplative to concentrate upon doing one act well for the sake of the act itself. The contemplative celebrates the world in the spirit of Christ's exhortation to leave aside anxiety and 'take no thought for the morrow'.<sup>7</sup> While we so often rush from one action to another, busy with many things and attending to none, the contemplative is absorbed and attentive to one thing at a time.<sup>8</sup>

We shall have to learn this contemplative spirit if we are to integrate critical awareness and communicative action into daily christian living. The contemplative spirit opens our life to the power of prayer because it leads us to take seriously what is communicated to us and what we communicate to others. Critical awareness and communicative action can then become prayerful reflection on and prayerful witness to the action of God in our lives and in our culture.

If we try to open ourselves to the contemplative spirit we shall begin to find ourselves seeing with Christ's eyes and hearing with Christ's ears. More often than not we will find that Christ's eyes see what we would rather not look at, and Christ's ears hear the sounds we would prefer to ignore: sights and sounds of the poor, the hungry, the infirm, the sick, the handicapped, the lonely and the oppressed. Sights and sounds too which celebrate the worldly values of power and wealth, and which demean and trivialize human hopes and aspirations. We shall weep for and rage at the world brought to us in the media, and we shall pray for justice and peace, for mercy and forgiveness.

Yet Christ's eyes and Christ's ears also see and hear the sights and sounds we tend to take for granted. The media will delight us, console us, inform us, educate us and entertain us. Amidst the commercial pressures and demands to consume we shall find images and sounds that speak of the dignity and beauty of the

natural world and of human beings. The news will bring us stories of courage and of encouragement, films will deepen our understanding of the human heart, and the television will show us ordinary people enjoying the Olympics or watching royal weddings! Our prayer will be praise and wonder, filled with thanksgiving for the graces God dispenses through his creation. Our media experiences will, as Damian Lundy observes of Sheila Cassidy, enrich and feed into our life and our prayer:

Sheila Cassidy, headline news after her experience of imprisonment and torture in Chile, has shown how I can pray through newspaper headlines or through the television news, as I watch it reflectively, making the appropriate response to God in these situations—  
anxiety, concern, gratitude, intercession.<sup>9</sup>

What Damian Lundy and Sheila Cassidy do not say is that we might pray also for the people who report and edit the news. We could pray that journalists and editors be strengthened in their dedication to truth and fearless in their quest for it. We might pray too that we might be more sensitive and discriminating hearers of the news, and more dedicated witnesses of the 'good news' of Christ. The news is more than a record of far-off events, it springs also out of our daily world of home and work and we are makers of news as well as hearers. The news we bear, of God's love for us and all people, may not reach the headlines but it can enter and change the lives of the men and women we encounter each day.

In these ways christian discernment in a mass-mediated culture will bring together a critical awareness, communicative action and a contemplative spirit. The mass media will not make us gloomy and pessimistic, world-weary and cynical, because we shall be able to discern what is valuable and life-giving in what they communicate. We shall strive to be realistic, but always remain hopeful of our culture. The contemplative spirit will fill us with that clear seeing love and reverence for our culture and for other people that will inform our communication and so help us bring another part of our individual and corporate lives under the standard of Christ.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'communicative action' is borrowed from the work of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Jn 17, 14-18.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 13, 33; Mt 5, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Macquarrie, John: *God-talk: an examination of the language and logic of theology* (London, SCM Press, 1978), p 74.

<sup>5</sup> The idea of 'imaginative listening' is taken from Andrew Louth. See his *Discerning the mystery: an essay on the nature of theology* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983), p 29.

<sup>6</sup> The examples are given by Raimundo Panikkar in his article 'The contemplative mood: a challenge to modernity', *Cross Currents*, Vol XXXI, no 3, 1981, p 261.

<sup>7</sup> Mt 7, 26-34.

<sup>8</sup> Cf Lk 10, 38-42.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Lundy, Damian: 'The beginnings of prayer', *The Way*, Vol 23, No 4 (October, 1983), p 282. Sheila Cassidy's comments come from her *Prayer for pilgrims* (London, 1976).