

## Mediating devotion

*Tim Noble*

DEVOTION AND THE MASS MEDIA MAY SEEM a somewhat oxymoronic pairing. After all, in Britain there is very little devotional programming, and what there is becomes increasingly threatened. Moreover, the widespread impression is that the media are largely concerned with sex and violence and, nowadays, themselves. None of these are exactly classical devotional aids. The mass media are also held to have the same pacifying (and intellectual) effect as a baby's dummy, inducing lethargy and apathy. They rather reduce the possibility of any sort of religious faith. If such a view is at least not uncommon, is it true?

Before going any further, a few definitions will be useful. First, in terms of media, I shall be concentrating almost exclusively on television and the new media, specifically the Internet. Second, I wish to offer the following working definition of devotion. I shall take it to be 'the (partly) ritualized disposition and praxis of the creature towards the Creator'. That is to say, devotion entails an attitude but also a particular way of living out that attitude. Further, the main point of this definition is to suggest that devotion is necessarily both individual – the creature, the human being, in relationship to God – but also situated within particular traditions, and thus at least partly ritualized, both from outside, and from inside, since the individual will often follow a particular format in terms of devotion.

Given that definition, and I hope it is one which allows for a broadly accurate representation of what devotion is understood to be, several questions arise in connection with the media. One of them touches on what might almost be termed the very nature or possibility of broadcasting – can mass media have a socializing role? Can they create a shared experience? This has to do with the ritual element of devotion. Another question has to do with what exactly the media mediate. Can they mediate anything, or is there a sense in which Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian communications scholar and guru, is right, that the medium is the message? Ultimately this is asking whether it is even theoretically possible for television, say, to mediate a devotional disposition or an atmosphere which will induce such a disposition.

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*Understanding the media galaxy – a tour of McLuhan*

To help us in our attempts to point towards some answers to these questions, I will draw on some of the ideas of Marshall McLuhan. There are problems with his writings, many of which relate to the way in which he wrote. His works are full of what are no more than unproven assertions, and therefore extremely susceptible to counter-arguments. Nevertheless, and even if some of his dreams have shown themselves wide of the mark, he still remains one of the more attractive of writers on communication and some of his ideas are undoubtedly helpful in trying to understand the role and nature of media in relation to religion.

McLuhan defines media in his book *Understanding media* as 'extensions of man'. Thus it was that McLuhan (and here to a large extent he was following another great Canadian scholar, Harold Innis) could see all sorts of things as 'media' – money, for example. This is because his definition means that media extend the possibilities open to humankind. If I have money, I do not have to take a huge wagonload of produce to the market to exchange it for something else, but can simply go with my wallet. The time saved in not having to produce and gather the goods, I can then spend on doing other things. Thus I am extended.

Alongside this, McLuhan points out that media are 'make happen' agents rather than 'make aware' agents. That is to say, the fact of having money, for example, allows things to happen, but it does not in itself make me aware of needs. This may explain why those who already have a devotional practice find that television programmes can help them in that practice, while those who do not are unlikely to be moved to devotion simply through watching a devotional programme. It also may explain why those in the churches are always so keen to have more time on television, since they appreciate that media are both extensions of the individual, but also extensions of the institution, and help make the institution happen.

There is one further point made by McLuhan that may be apposite. He famously made a distinction between 'hot' and 'cool' media, which has always seemed to me somewhat counter-intuitive. A 'hot' medium he defines as 'one that extends one single sense in high definition', whereas a cool medium is one that provides low definition. As an example of high definition, he suggests a photograph, where the detail is already there. Thus, he says, it demands low participation by the viewer, who does not need to complete the image by filling in the gaps. Cool media, on the other hand, require a high degree of participation. He defines television as a cool medium, whereas radio is defined as a

hot medium. This is because a radio programme gives you the information you need to understand it, using one particular medium, namely sound.

Now, just how accurate McLuhan is in his division of media between hot and cold seems highly debatable, but, on the other hand, the basic distinction does have some validity. Indeed, one might feel that it is an intra-medium distinction rather than inter-media. For example, some television programmes require a great deal of participation, of completing the information that is given – one might suggest that to watch a news programme properly requires a great deal of filling in the gaps, questioning the assumptions, and so on. On the other hand, there are television programmes which are so packaged that they amount to little more than moving wallpaper – just think about the use of canned laughter in ‘comedy’ programmes. However, the underlying point remains that there are some programmes we have to put more effort into decoding than others.

### *Absent presence – watching devotional programmes*

It is now time to apply all this more specifically to some devotional programming. This might include something like *Songs of praise*, or the normally short segments in the ITV *Sunday morning* programme. I also think of the Catholic television station in Brazil, *Rede viva*. What is happening when people watch these programmes? To the extent, of course, that they are genuinely devotional, it is hard to say, since what that means will vary according to the individual. So, what follows must be somewhat generalized.

One of the difficulties is that, by and large, Christian congregations are not well schooled in ways of talking about their devotional practice, so that even if television does afford the opportunity to enter into a closer relationship with God, it is often hard for people to articulate this. But inarticulacy does not of itself mean that there is nothing to articulate. Moreover, if people use a different language from that of professionals, it is up to those professionals to be alive to that language. What seems to be inarticulacy is perhaps simply another language. All this is to say that perhaps when someone says that such and such a programme was ‘lovely’ or ‘really moving’ or ‘beautiful singing’, they are actually commenting on the devotional atmosphere it induced.

Let us assume that is the case. Why might it happen? Bearing in mind what was said earlier about McLuhan’s ideas, we can also consider very briefly another author, Louis-Marie Chauvet, and his book *Sacrament and symbol*. It is impossible to do justice to this book in a short space of

time, so I will not try. I shall merely take from the book one of its central themes, that sacraments are symbolic (and therefore, true realizations) of the absence of the present God. Symbol is not what hides meaning, but what most truly contains meaning, what most truly is. Now, in defining devotion, it will be remembered that I suggested that it involves some ritual form. This ritual itself involves the use of symbols – language, art, tangible objects, etc. Furthermore, it is a disposition and praxis which is performed by the creature in honour of the Creator. The Creator is truly present, and yet also absent – it is the eschatological tension and truth at the heart of Christianity.

It seems to me that one reason why television may be actually more successful at conveying a devotional mood than might initially be thought is closely linked to this fact and to McLuhan's famous adage that the medium is the message. For television is precisely about the symbolic (and undoubtedly real) presence of the absent. The medium mediates. It allows me in my living room to watch what is happening on the other side of the world. In all sorts of ways it does not make it present as it is, but then – and this is another of Chauvet's points – there is no sense in which there is something there which can be directly present. Even if I am at an event, I interpret what I see, so that what I understand myself as seeing is always a second-level activity. I make sense of the light waves which touch my retina, and it is only then that I can be said to be seeing.

To watch a congregation singing in *Songs of praise*, having listened to some more or less uplifting story, is, or at least if I so choose, can be, a way of entering into contact with the God who is always at our side, and yet whom we journey towards. That is in part so because the medium itself allows me, even if I cannot express the fact, to be aware of the reality of this experience, since it is a symbol of it.

### *The ritual watching of soaps*

That this might be the case, and that television is therefore in that sense a truly devotional medium, may become clearer if we consider attitudes to television programmes in general. Why is it that soap operas seem to be almost universally the most popular form of television programme, be it *Eastenders* or *Coronation Street* in Britain, or the *telenovelas* which dominate Latin American television stations, or the various Australian soaps which are presumably as popular back home as they are in Britain, or the American versions such as the much (well, not that much) lamented *Dallas*? There is undoubtedly an element of 'Little Nell left on her deathbed', the dramatic closing

incident whose resolution we are keen to see, so we will turn on the television the next day to find out. But perhaps there is a more elemental explanation.

Soap operas are, if not directly about you and me, then at least dealing with the problems which we face or which we can understand. People fall in and out of love, relationships grow, sometimes stutter, sometimes fall disastrously apart, people gain and lose employment, people have their dreams which sometimes they fulfil but which are mostly just dreams, children are born, people die. To misquote, it all sounds suspiciously like the home life of our own dear queen, but also, though probably in a less concentrated and dramatic way, like the home lives of most of us, as indeed the spate of docu-soaps over the past few years has shown.

Not only do soaps reflect our own lives, or at least reflect recognizable lives, they are also highly ritualized. It takes very little time to work out who has what role in a soap, and you know that that person will say certain things and act in a particular way. Of course, characters can and do change, but there is a ritual to soaps which is dependent on the time at which each programme is transmitted, on certain accepted principles, and so on.

Finally, in reflecting the joys and sorrows of daily life, soaps suggest ways of dealing with them. This is hardly to claim that the producers or scriptwriters of soap operas have special insights into how to cope with the pitfalls and the high points of life. Rather, we are enabled to see the consequences of different reactions without having to run the risk of trying them out in real time ourselves; it is similar to what Rowan Williams describes as the role of childhood games in his book *Lost icons*. We can engage in the play before having to engage in the reality.

### *Television as a devotional medium*

Thus, watching television can reflect back to us something we recognize, it does so in a ritualized fashion, and it has a role which might be described as partly ludic, partly educational (without wishing necessarily to draw too fine a line between those two dimensions). To watch a devotional programme, then, one which seeks to portray some form of devotion, is to see something we recognize reflected back to us. That is why people who have some form of devotional practice seem more likely to watch such programmes. Learning soap operas means learning something about the culture which produces them, and if that is not done, they remain at some level unintelligible. Similarly,

devotional programmes for those who do not have any sort of devotional practice are likely to be obscure.

Furthermore, to watch such a programme is to be made aware of its ritual nature – the programme has its own particular format, so that one does not have to spend a lot of time working out the ‘rules’ of the game, visually or in terms of content. That sort of ritual is a kick-start, as it were, to devotion. It is not the devotion itself, but it constructs the parameters within which the devotional practice can be carried out. Finally, it can suggest certain forms of devotional practice that we may not have come across previously, and allows us to see them being performed before trying them out for ourselves.

That is to say, the fact that television is, or can be, a cool medium, means that it allows for a good deal of completion on the part of its viewers. Because it is a medium, it also extends those viewers. It opens up possibilities which were not previously there. Finally, it makes happen things which would not happen otherwise. In some sense, then, it can be said that devotion is also a medium, totally cool, as it were, since it only happens if the ‘devotee’ acts, yet a medium because it mediates what I termed the disposition and praxis of the creature towards the Creator. It is an extension of the person and indeed of the Church, since at the profoundest level it opens up the possibility to the person and to the Church of being created and all that implies, and of consequent attention to and worship of the Creator. It is also primarily a make-happen agent. Devotion makes us more aware of the loving presence of God, it is true, but if we have no knowledge of God, that awareness will not occur. If you wish, one could say that devotion makes awareness happen.

### *‘World Wide Webs’ of prayer*

So far, we have looked almost exclusively at the televisual medium. It may be useful to give some consideration now to the Internet. Although I do not have any figures to confirm it, I suspect that one of the most successful English-language websites has been that operated by the Irish Jesuits, known as Sacred Space (<http://www.sacred-space.ie>). In the roughly eighteen months following its launch on Ash Wednesday 1999 it had already had close on 900,000 visits. Each day the site offers a brief reading and a guided prayer. It offers ten minutes or so of quiet for people who are on-line, a space to stop and pray during a busy day. The number of visits demonstrates that it has clearly met a need, and that is more accurately reflected in the feedback which comes in from every corner of the world. Moreover, the fact that this

prayer is guided, with a specific way of praying suggested which can be repeated daily, supports our seeing it as a form of devotion.

To consider this phenomenon, it might be worth recalling another of McLuhan's famous soundbites, that we were moving towards a global village. It is, admittedly, a nice thought, but the reality would seem to be much more that we are moving towards a sort of global apartment block. We are vaguely aware that others (people, countries, continents) exist, because when something dramatic happens we hear of them, or, on our holidays, pass them on the stairs, so to speak. Yet we have no close relationship with anyone but friends and family, and we live our lives largely untouched by our fellow residents. E-mails and the Internet seem to me the perfect mode of communication for this global apartment block. And that is not entirely without foundation – stories abound of people who live in the same house, or work in the same office, e-mailing each other rather than getting up to talk.

All of which is to say that at first blush the Internet would seem to be a highly unlikely medium for devotion, since it appears to exclude any form of social interaction. It allows me to remain totally anonymous, and totally in control. And yet, the facts – as exemplified by Sacred Space and other prayer sites – suggest that it has been a great success. A cynical explanation might be that people spend so much time with their computers that perhaps it is not surprising that they should wish their computer to become their prayer partner. There may be some truth in that in some cases, but I prefer a less cynical response.

First of all, many people do indeed spend a lot of their working life with computers, and moreover on-line. That they use some of this time to pray could be viewed as an extremely healthy union of work and prayer. Through the Internet, people are enabled to begin a process of integration, or at least to see that work and prayer are not entirely mutually exclusive, since the medium through which both happen is identical. Second, the site itself makes it clear that this prayer is something which other people are engaged in, and so its clicker is not simply there for curiosity but as a reminder that behind each number is a human face, like mine – someone with hopes, fears, desires, regrets, joys.

Moreover, the opportunity for feedback gives voice to some of those faces, some of those joys and sorrows. In other words, a bit like a newsgroup, one is not alone. It is, indeed, in this sense very Catholic, since it creates a universal, inclusive communion of saints. Just as we cannot see the members of the Church around the world, and yet can

feel in close communion with them, so on the Internet it is possible to be hidden and yet part of the larger community which prays together.

### *Conclusions*

After reading this far, it may be felt that the picture is somewhat too rosy. Is it all that good? Do the media, does television, really mediate devotion like that? Is the message of the television medium actually devotion? Does the Internet create this wonderful family of people bound together in common devotion? This takes us back to the question which I raised at the beginning about the socializing potentiality of the media. In any model of communication, there are at least three factors or agents – the sender, the channel and the receiver. Now, as I have already intimated, we do not have to receive the messages which are sent, and even if we do, and especially if television truly is the cool medium McLuhan suggests, then we have to interpret (complete) them. In other words, television cannot socialize unless we want it to. Moreover, the sender is also part of that society and hence television must always both reflect and help create society.

At best, then, perhaps we should say that television and the Internet create, or contribute to the creation of what we might call a socialized individualism. I watch television, I surf the web, aware that other people are doing the same, and glad of that, but ultimately distanced psychologically and physically from them. The religious and spiritual repercussions of this are clear. Devotional practice becomes increasingly eclectic and the rituals increasingly privatized. The sense of solidarity which lay behind many of the older forms of devotion disappears, or at least is transformed. There are no demands, only the chance to do what I want when I want.

As is often the case, I suspect the truth lies somewhere in between. If we are prepared to see television as a potentially devotional medium, then we can use it, use all sorts of television programmes and prayers as ways of introducing the idea of devotion to people for whom it is a foreign land. It may mean that we have to subvert some of what television producers think they are doing, but that will be no bad thing. And we may have to see the Internet as a way of reinforcing the communion of saints, of uniting in prayer and praise of God people from all over the world, from all walks of life, all nations and languages. To come before God in praise and thanksgiving, in our rituals and devotional practices, is so important to us that we should not worry too much about being as wise as serpents, even while we strive to remain as innocent as doves.

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