THE MASS MEDIA AS THE NEW CATHEDRAL?

By WESLEY CARR

The modern mass media in Britain now perform many of the integrative functions of the Church in the middle ages.[1]

AMONG THESE FUNCTIONS Curran adduced the linking of different groups and the provision of shared experience; an emphasis on solidarity through collective values; disproportionate attention to 'outsiders', which sometimes led to witch hunts.

> The mass media have now assumed the role of the Church, in a more secular age, of interpreting and making sense of the world to the mass public.

This comparison is instructive and invites exploration of the extent to which the mass media may be to this age what the medieval cathedral was to its.

But before considering the resemblance we need to be especially circumspect. There is no analogy, since we are correlating two unknowns. The buildings and organizations of many cathedrals are expressions of medieval aspiration. Yet they continue as lively contemporary institutions. They are not relics. Over the centuries people have visited them and worshipped in them, as they still do. Because of this continuity, myths develop around cathedrals. One of the most common is that what we today experience is similar to, or even identical with, what the medieval people felt. Not only, however, is this unlikely, given the importance of context for all human experience; it is also impossible to determine. Secondly, despite extensive studies of the media and their impact, we are if anything even more aware than we were in 1982 of how little we know for certain about people's experience of the media. That people's behaviour is affected is not in doubt; but precisely who are affected and in what ways remain controversial topics.

In England about thirty years ago cathedrals were reckoned to be dinosaurs. It was argued that their time was over, chiefly

because they apparently offered no potential point of growth for the Church. They belonged to the first and even second waves of history—the stable world of medieval Europe and the organizationally preoccupied era of the Renaissance. The third wave, with its 'ad hocery' (Donald Schon) would be more chaotic and less amenable to solid institutions like cathedrals.[2] 'Real' spiritual life, ministry and mission were to be the work of units of the local church, free from the implicit triumphalism of these great buildings and their liturgies. Yet the cathedrals survived and are now among the most lively of contemporary religious institutions. They are visited by millions each year, used for a variety of purposes—religious, social and cultural, and able to take risks around the fringes of religious life since every activity is set in the context of the unfailing round of daily public worship. They also enshrine the concept of interactive activity—between God and the worshippers, the clergy and people, the congregation and its environment and so on. When comparing the media with the medieval cathedral, therefore, we are not matching present to past but a dimension of present-day life with another.

Cathedrals, whether medieval or contemporary, operate in three discernible fields of communication: pilgrimage—journeying to a place that is believed to be sacred; art—the dramatic and unusual conveying of the hope that there may be meaning to life; and teaching—interpretation of human experience from a specific perspective. Each of these is a characteristic of the media, which in this sense can be regarded as cathedral-like.

Pilgrimage

The medieval cathedral was a place of pilgrimage, a site which was less locally significant than believed in from a distance. A person might, if lucky, expect to visit one once in a lifetime. Tourism draws people to cathedrals in greater numbers than ever before. It would be optimistic to designate these tourists as 'pilgrims', although their day out is not so unlike that enjoyed by Chaucer's band. But cathedrals are places *to* which people move not *at* which they remain.

It is difficult to know why 'longen folk to goon on pilgrimages'. The historic and architectural aspects of the building are of obvious interest. But observation suggests that these are not the chief reasons. Some people, for example, hardly see the building: they visit the shop and buy souvenirs. Others will sit and seem to absorb

the atmosphere. Some will kneel and be quiet—who knows what they are doing?

This seems always to have been true of cathedrals. Although the visitors with their guide books may sometimes view the cathedral as a collection of interesting artefacts, 'in our secular and technological society, such images should be understood not as art, but as sacramental objects'.[3] Cathedrals offer people a chance to locate their general, not specific, religious sense. They stand in time and space for that which is felt, though not understood, to be beyond confinement in the present. In today's world general religiosity is rarely given public acknowledgement. This may be because religion is less respectable or because the Churches wish to adopt a sectarian stance which demands greater commitment than most can manage. People face for themselves the problematic, but genuinely felt, spiritual dimension of life somewhere between unexpressed individual beliefs and the large communal aspects of living, which appear to be unmanageable.[4]

David Winter has noted that religious broadcasting is one of the few religious activities which is increasing in popularity.[5] We may be entering a period when religion is splitting, so that those Churches which demand public commitment have little contact with the mass of pervasive religiosity. People may wish to believe without belonging and so not submit themselves to the scrutiny of others. This is a stance for which broadcasting is ideally suited.[6] If this is the case, the modern media indeed function in one way like a medieval cathedral. For they provide a significant locus where the individual's sense of the self and a shared awareness (though not agreed understanding) of communal life coincide in an unresolved tension. The image of the world which people share through the media oscillates between the vast and incomprehensible and the personal and intimate. These two poles are usually held together less by images than by personalities. For instance, the safety of the universe is not actually guaranteed by those who anchor the news. But the fact that they each have a recognizable personality somehow allows the awesomeness of the reports to be for the moment bearable.

The danger for the media, however, is similar to that which faces cathedrals, namely that they slide towards the individual end of this spectrum. The personalizing of the presentation may become dominant and distort people's capacity to receive information. At this point the media become not a means which may contribute to

people's capacity to locate themselves in their world, but sources of deception. This is also a religious criticism of cathedrals. Cathedrals were erected before the Enlightenment. Their implicit spiritual message was that God interacts with his world. Within that structure the individual was assumed to have his or her place. But generally cathedrals were not used to affirm. Indeed, because they set people physically *sub specie aeternitatis*, they assigned people space, that is opportunity, in a tight hierarchical society. Individual autonomy was not a characteristic of life, but in the spiritual setting represented by the cathedrals the seeds of autonomy could be nurtured. It is noticeable that many of the Reformers, although they eventually inveighed against formal religion, were familiar with cathedrals through being monks, bishops or scholars.

Today the democratization of choice, which is encouraged by the plethora of media, creates a distorting emphasis on autonomy. The spirituality of such narcissism—even when dignified as believing without belonging—would seem to have few prospects of being ultimately significant. The medieval cathedral's capacity to represent affirmation of the individual while transcending belief in autonomy alone seems absent from the media, both in the content of what is offered and in the process of offering it.

Art, colour and meaning

The invention of street lighting has profoundly changed the meaning of 'light' and 'dark', two of the most primitive images, in the Western world.[7] Similarly it is today difficult to grasp the connection between colour and wonder, the contrast between everyday drabness and special glory. Like the television screen, medieval cathedrals were a riot of colour. But today they are expected to be starkly majestic rather than vulgarly gaudy. Spirituality on the grand scale is now more aligned with the austere ideal of form than popular notions of sumptuousness. A cathedral is also expected to be a place of quiet and stillness. But this, too, is a modern idea. Medieval cathedrals were marvels of colour, changing patterns of light through the stained glass, flickering pools of candlelight around the sacred places, and alive with movement. They were places of the common life. When people today complain about the noise in a cathedral, they are nearer the medieval experience than they realize. Here everyday life and faith continually interact and in so doing some interpretation of meaning is offered.

The media have inherited this tradition of a kaleidoscope of colour and variety of experience and in that sense they compare with the medieval cathedral. The discussions about art and its meaning continue, but for many the colouring of life, both actually through the colour of television and metaphorically through the glamorizing of existence, is a prime function of the media. Thus what was a once-in-a-lifetime experience is now the normative feature of daily life. The medieval cathedral reminded people of the glory of the transcendent God. The media by contrast draw attention to the multi-faceted nature of the world which we know (or believe that we know) and so illuminate the implicit glory of the immanent.

The problem, however, is that it is doubtful whether immanence can bear this weight. This is not solely a theological weakness: there is a serious psychological difficulty. While the idea of God's immanence can be intellectually sustained, it is the idea of the transcendent which calls forth and speaks to the emotions.[8]

> Until institutional religion can excite the serious play of the soul and evoke the fullness of human passion, television will nurture our illusions of heroism and self-transcendence.[9]

Colour provides a better lead into this discussion than art. The question of the degree to which any of the modern media is an art form remains debatable, although the discussion is, rather like those about liturgy, less bedevilled with snobbishness than it once was. Colour relieves drabness and brings life to that which seems dead. It is interesting to note today's pressure to abandon artistic criteria and paint old films in order to attract a generation of people who have never known black and white pictures and will not watch them.

The media, through techniques of colour, are like the medieval cathedral in this sense: they convey an idea of difference, if only between that which is drab and that which is glorious. In so doing they sustain for people some notion of that which transcends, that takes them beyond the normal limitations of life. Often this is considered in terms of the range and quantity of data presented through the media. We might, however, reflect on the impact of the process itself.

Like the welter of images in the modern media, the medieval stained glass windows of cathedrals told tales. Those at Chartres, for instance, portray bible stories, but at so great a height and in

such depth of colour that they are difficult to distinguish. It is doubtful whether these windows conveyed much more to the medieval peasant than to the modern tourist, even if the former was more attuned to symbols. Can these windows transmit the story without interpretation, that is without trivializing their impact by explaining it? The media seem to lose their way when they consciously set out with a message to explain. When, however, they present aspirations (whether noble or ignoble), heroes and heroines in everyday life, and through their use of colour raise the consciousness of people to the richness of life, they are comparable to the medieval cathedrals. And the implicit spirituality that they offer suffers from the same weakness. The experience of the cathedral was rare and memorable. It was probably so overwhelming that it could not sustain common life for long. Similarly the experience of the media, while it is unremarkable for most, nevertheless may be so underwhelming that it cannot sustain the opulence of the transcendent for long. Whether a society can survive without symbolic means of sustaining other-transcendence, as opposed to self-transcendence, is possibly the most significant unanswered (and unanswerable) question of the age. It is noticeable that religious trends outside the institutional Churches seem to be towards the search for self-transcending experiences through human potential. How ephemeral a phenomenon this will prove is an open question.

Religion and art intertwine. Donald Winnicott has suggested that they are held together by the importance of illusion in infant life and its continued unacknowledged importance for mature adulthood:

> I am, therefore, studying the substance of *illusion*, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion.[10]

He stresses the importance of this domain in the growth of the individual. We might also suggest that some sort of management of it is needed for social cohesion. This is the psychological basis of 'the sacred canopy', which does not sustain itself but has to be given attention.[11] Whereas, however, a cathedral could be believed to be contributing to that task, it is difficult to see how something as ephemeral as television could assume this responsibility. Yet for the time being it is possible that many people find their enlarging

vision held for them and represented to them by the media. We can only conclude that the world is at present in process on this issue and we cannot be sure of the outcome. The spiritual need nevertheless remains: the question is how it is to be addressed and, if possible, met.[12] The institutional Churches for the moment seem incompetent at this. But this deficiency does not imply that the mere existence of the media will mean that they will necessarily occupy the vacuum.

Teaching and learning

Cathedrals house the bishop's *cathedra*, his teaching chair. The abbeys, from which some cathedrals emerged, and cathedrals stood for learning. The monks and canons were expected to be learned. This aspect of their role was emphasized more heavily after the Reformation when the authority of teaching was acknowledged by a new stress upon the significance of the word, both scripture read and the gospel preached. Cathedrals in this regard were, and are, different from parish churches. Their independence allowed them to be locations for tradition and experiment. Because, too, their varied life was based upon the *opus Dei*, they were places where people did not so much belong as find opportunities for exploring faith and the Christian gospel.

The modern mass media systematically operate in a similar way and so again parallel the cathedral. For most people they are now the chief purveyors of information and of what is believed to be knowledge. The way, for example, in which the medieval mind might turn to Aristotle or Aquinas for certitude is matched by the way in which today television is assumed to perform the same function. 'It was on television' can be used as uncritically as 'Aristotle said'. We do not (and cannot) know to what extent the medieval man or woman in the street believed what they were told. But there seems to be a parallel with the way in which television is used: its messages become the talking point for people, who usually reserve their sceptical judgements to themselves. Yet maybe something like those reformations which occurred to end the medieval world is again on the way. For we live in a time when doubts are being voiced so that the implicit authority of the media might be so questioned that it becomes, like that of the medieval cathedral, ambiguous.

Yet amid this intellectual questioning, there remained a sort of sacramental iconography in the cathedrals. Even as the authority

of the teaching in them was at last being questioned, they themselves remained symbolically significant. Like the media, therefore, the medieval cathedral represented the interaction of process and content. This may be the aspect of the media that will become most interesting in the next decade. It is noticeable, for instance, that along with the capacity to give information and teach goes an increasing capability to drive people to scepticism. This is not a stance which people consciously develop against the influence of the media. It derives from the context of their activity and is inbuilt. The teaching offers an ambiguous message: on the one hand information, interpretation and a cultural norm are presented and accepted by most; on the other hand, as part of that teaching there is a process which stirs a basic unbelief within those being informed.

The style of the consequential spirituality possesses three characteristics. First, there is a regression to what is familiar, which shows itself in the conservatism which is today dominating liturgy of every sort. The issue here is process—what happens to me. Second, there is the reservation of what is believed to a private area. Even the most devout Christians are wary of claiming to believe what the Churches teach. They may acknowledge it in, for instance, the saying of the creed, but the mental reservations are numerous.[13] The topic here is content. Thirdly, consolidation of these two is sought in special activity, such as going on retreat or away to conventions and meetings. This is a new form of pilgrimage, as people seek reassuring havens for periods in their lives. The concern here is for integration.

The media can be seen to be offering a similar process. They provide ample opportunity for regression to what is familiar, both in the present and in their consistent tendency towards nostalgia. The content is so various that individual selection is the norm of response, since it is the only one that would keep the consumer sane. And they offer enough escapes from reality for people to integrate themselves. They possess, therefore, a generalized religious function which is analogous to the teaching role of the cathedral.

Conclusion

Underlying this discussion, however, is the question of whether the changes which are associated with the modern media are profound or merely adaptive. Are we being offered at the end of

the century a new way of being, which involves a new emphasis on believed rather than tested connections to the overarching framework of the world? And is this framework to be found less in religion than in the iconography of the media? The answer is a matter of conjecture, but one thing associated with the context of the medieval cathedral and the context of the media suggests that it is unlikely.

As we have noted, the cathedral was one means of making the connection between the self (even if life was brutish and short) and the larger context of the universe. Out of that struggle emerged the Enlightenment, which asserted the implicit authority of the individual and his or her experience. We cannot go back on that, since the modern world has been created on its basis. To suggest otherwise, as in some of today's religious and social sentiment, is a form of unexamined and unthinking conservatism arising from fear. The modern media, however, have been products of this period, representing a view of the world which seems to be individual (the authority of the viewer, the producer, etc.) and which seems to see the world as a collection of individuals. The authority of the personal story or the attributable quote is well-known. But as the media create their own environment, that individualism also decays. Who am I when I discover that I am one of that half of the world's population who were reported to have watched the 1990 World Cup? The very means of my individuality being affirmed could be also the cause of destruction of my belief in it.

So why is it that as the media become more pervasive and apparently dominant, at the same time within the religious world cathedrals are becoming more active and lively? There may be a connection between these two apparently separate pieces of data. At the end of the twentieth century we may be seeing the decay of systems built upon an uncritical belief in individual autonomy. We cannot go back behind the effect of the Enlightenment. This is why so much simplistic talk of community in the Church is sadly misplaced. But we shall have to seek and find means whereby the individual can be affirmed in relation to other individuals and within the larger setting of social institutions. This is an adaptive process which is affecting all aspects of western life.

The consequences of this for human spirituality still have to be discovered. If we think in terms of opportunity, it might be that the range of opportunity for mental and psychic space will be

upheld by the media. They have taken that role and have no real challengers for it. Yet there is also a need for an opportunity, when taken, to be used and transformed. This looks as though it cannot be achieved without genuine, as opposed to mediated, human interaction. For that, in the necessary setting of transcendence, there still seems a role for religion and for the Church, and a specific one for the cathedrals. The key to contemporary spirituality, however, which both media and Churches will have to acknowledge, is choice. If opportunities for journeying to a sacred space, of popular assertion of the sacred through colour, and the interpret-ation of human experience, remain essential for human existence, then those bodies which seek to provide opportunities for each of these will have to concede that the extent to which people avail themselves of them depends wholly on their choice.

The spirituality—or better, spiritualities—which will result will be as varied as the kaleidoscope, whether this be a cathedral or a media-based pattern. But in that pattern we may believe that we are given a glimpse of the design of God himself, his 'manifold (*polupoikilos*) wisdom' (Eph 3,10), which sustains all life, wherever it is focused.

NOTES

[1] James Curran: 'Communications, power and social order', in Michael Gurgevitch *et al.* (eds): *Culture. Society and the media* (London, Methuen, 1982).

[2] Alvin Toffler: *The third wave* (London, Pan, 1981). The argument is applied to the Church by John Robinson: 'Religion in the third wave: the difference in being a Christian tomorrow', in *Where three ways meet* (London, SCM, 1987), pp 114ff.

[3] Gregor Goethals: *The electronic golden calf: images, religion and the making of meaning* (Cambridge, Mass., Cowley, 1990), p 47.

[4] On this behaviour as a characteristic of contemporary life see E. R. Shapiro and A. W. Carr: *Lost in familiar places* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1991 forthcoming).

[5] D. Winter: *Battered bride. The body of faith in an age of doubt* (Eastbourne, Monarch, 1988).

[6] G. Ahern and G. Davie: *Inner city God. The nature of belief in the inner city* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1987).

[7] Peter Berger: *A rumour of angels: modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural* (Harmond-sworth, Penguin, 1971), p 95.

[8] Wesley Carr: *Ministry and the media* (London, SPCK, 1990), pp 84f.

[9] Gregor Goethals: *The TV ritual: worship at the video altar* (Boston, Beacon, 1981), p 143.

[10] D. W. Winnicott: *The maturational process and the facilitating environment* (London, Hogarth, 1965), p 230.

[11] Peter Berger: *The sacred canopy: elements of a sociological theory of religion* (Garden City NY, Doubleday, 1967).

[12] David Hay: *Exploring inner space* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982).

[13] See Hugh Dawes: 'Liberal theology in the parish', *Theology* vol XCIII (March/April 1990), pp 117ff.