



If There Really Is a God, Why Don't People Notice? - A Media Studies Approach

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It is an extraordinary thing. For the vast majority of the human race, the existence of the supernatural is something self-evident - even if they can't go quite as far as David's outburst, 'The heavens declare the glory of God'. But we are westerners, and we live in a freakish moment of human history where, for the first time, that fundamental intuition and consciousness has somehow been lost. Only, it must be said, in a small proportion of the human race, even today - mostly living in Europe and north America (and even in these areas, opinion polls repeatedly show that, when pressed, most people still sense the existence of some sort of deity). Practically, however, our society functions in a way that denies or ignores that awareness. And, because we control the bulk of the world's media and educational resources, we are rapidly exporting our own deafness to the rest of the race. But if (as Jesus taught) the most fundamental decision in any person's existence is how to respond to God's claims on them, then this is an exceedingly serious matter.

But how has the situation arisen? If there is a God, how have we lost the sense of His presence? How have we become deaf to an intuition that, for most of history and for most of the two-thirds world even today, has been so self-evident?

Sociologist Alan Gilbert, in his book The Making of Post-Christian Britain, makes the interesting observation that it is not intellectual objections to Christianity that have caused it to be neglected. In the last century, indeed, there were furious

intellectual assaults on the faith; and today there is still the occasional skirmish (often when a paperback writer is in need of notoriety). But these brief skirmishes seem to pass almost unnoticed by most people. Rather, as Gilbert says, the difficulty for Christianity today seems to lie 'not in challenges to the truth of its dogmas, but in the fact that... people in a secular culture have become increasingly "tone-deaf" to any orchestration of those dogmas.' And he cites the great German sociologist Max Weber: 'I am a-musical so far as religion is concerned.'

What has happened to us that we have become so deaf? How have we been trained neither to perceive nor to care about the eternal world? Is it possible we have somehow been brainwashed?

One thing that distinguishes our generation's consciousness, in the west, from that of those who went before, is its remarkable saturation by mass media. It is uniquely true of us that many of our most intense experiences come, not from direct sensory experience of our own surroundings, but mediated through the electronic universe - cinema, CDs, television, the digital world. It is possible now for regular viewers of TV soaps to find what they watch on the screen more compelling than the lives of their neighbours, or even of distant members of their own family. CDs outclass live musical performance; landscapes and exotic foreign scenes come to us mediated through mass communications rather more often than by direct sensory experience. Perhaps sex remains the most intense direct experience unchallenged by the media - though even there, aficionados of 'virtual reality' have declared their goal of challenging that preeminence. Alternative universes have taken over an increasing proportion of the peak experiences of our lives. And it is these intense experiences that in many ways shape our understanding of the world we must actually live in; of what is normal there, of what is most important.

So have we created an alternative electronic universe - or a vast array of universes - that are essentially god-less places - worlds from which He is entirely absent? Does our sustained immersion in these alternative worlds deafen and blind us to the hints of His presence in the real world? Is this a major reason why we're tone-deaf to God, unable to hear Him or believe in Him?

I

In exploring these issues, Christians have lagged a very long way behind the neo-marxists. Neo-marxists have had the same problem as God-believers do: no matter what they do, their views could not get a proper hearing. Like Christians, they found themselves treated as dangerous lunatics, lovable furry freaks, or even fascinating deviants - but what they could not do was achieve presentation as a serious alternative. And that was not entirely because of the genuine weaknesses of theoretical marxism; it was also because the media reinforce a certain way of looking at things, and make it very hard for an alternative to be taken seriously. So maybe people interested in the truth-claims of Christian faith need to listen to what neo-marxists have had to say about the media; their motives and solutions may be very different, but their diagnosis of the issues may help us because we are facing them too.

Their difficulty, like ours, is that contemporary western society has, in its fundamental values, become fundamental(istic)ly liberal-humanist. (To say this is not to deny that, deep down, the majority of people still believe in some way or other in God; rather, it is to say that the values that most often determine the way the culture actually functions tend to be liberal values reflecting a generalized humanism.) And in a highly sophisticated society, substructures develop that continually embody, and so reinforce, the dominant consensus way of looking at things, the dominant assumptions about what reality is and what matters in the world. The historical development of the last 300 years in the West has been marked by increasing agnosticism; therefore the contemporary mass media function in a manner that radically reinforces this tendency, where the presence and activity of God is something we can have no certainty about and therefore do best to omit from the world-pictures we create. But this tendency has helped to cause a shift away from the supernaturalised Christian consciousness in the last few decades of a kind never seen before, making it very difficult to think and live consistently by any worldview alternative to the dominant consensus around us.

A key characteristic of media is that they can initially appear to be neutral, objective; to reflect 'real' experience, or to bring us the most 'important' aspects of reality in a uniquely accessible and convenient form (eg newspapers, television news and documentaries, even advertisements). Or, alternatively, to bring us the most valuable and significant experiences currently available in the real world (eg in musical and cinematic media). But the media do not offer a simple mirror or window on the world; at the most they offer a distorting mirror, a stained-glass window. Insofar as they reflect the world, they reflect it selectively; things that the consensus view of reality tends to neglect become ignored altogether. But what the media select for presentation, they thereby emphasise as important and significant; in reflecting the world according to the selective priorities of the consensus view of reality, they thereby reinforce it. Or put it another, more accurate way: the media do not so much reflect the world as build for us a model of the world, constructed from those elements of reality that the dominant consensus regards as the most significant, and present it for our consumption; thereby they reinforce the selectivity and the prioritizations into which we have already fallen, and deafen us to anything else. (1)

Much New Left thinking about the media builds on the notion of 'hegemony' developed by the Italian thinker Gramsci. Raymond Williams offers a highly thought-provoking summary of 'hegemony' as 'a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant', something 'lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci puts it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway... It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move... Always the selectivity is the point; the way in which, from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded.'

What is in view here is not a system of complete mental control, says Williams, but rather 'the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure'.

Further, it is not a question of deliberate propaganda (as for example if we view the media as a sinister, consciously anti-Christian conspiracy); yet for that reason it is all the more powerful. If (as in the atheistic training imposed in the former USSR, now vanished without a trace) it were 'merely an imposed ideology... merely the result of specific manipulation, of a kind of overt training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then the society would be very much easier to move or to change than in practice it has ever been or is' - for the 'brainwashing' would be much easier to recognise, and so to resist. (At the same time, that means the pressure is 'not singular; indeed that its own internal structures... have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended; and by the same token, that they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified.')

All this may be useful to put alongside an idea we find in the new testament: that of 'the world'. 'The world' might be a way we would describe our planet, or else 'everything-that-is'. But in the new testament, Jesus and the apostles seem to use the concept to describe a generalised system of things that permeates and dominates human culture and is somehow in direct opposition to God. 'Do not love the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him', warns the apostle John: 'For everything in the world...comes not from the Father, but from the world.'

As followers of Jesus' teaching, therefore, we might expect to find ourselves in opposition to some kind of dominant consensus around us. What is striking in our era is the emergence of the ubiquitous mass media with a unique ability to create alternative worlds based on the perceptions of an agnostic consensus, and seduce us into consuming them until we can no longer remember how things are in the real universe. The dreamworld has taken over our perceptions, and we have gone deaf and blind. The world may be charged with the grandeur of God, as Hopkins says, but we can no longer see it. The concerns of the gospel become harder and harder even to understand, let alone to accept(3); and a life based on 'practising the presence of God' becomes increasingly deviant and difficult from the very beginning.

II

We can compare our culture to someone walking down a country road, wearing a noisy walkman. Outside, the birds are singing; but they can't hear them - their attention is totally taken up by the intense experience of an alternative, fabricated universe. Because of that, they are deafened to the real, external universe - whether it is birdsong or an oncoming truck. (We might add that they are also deafened to the real internal universe. One of the tragic consequences of the rise of contemporary media is that we are robbed of our silence. Indoors there is the stereo and the TV, outside the MP3; for not a few people this means they need never have a moment alone with their thoughts. Which is what some, in their emptiness, might even wish; yet we know it is at these moments that the voice of God often speaks; and to lose that possibility is a massive impoverishment.) Lost in the dreamworld, we are deaf to God's reality.

Now all this does not amount to a blanket condemnation of the media! Broadband, video, radio, television, high-quality music reproduction, cinema: to the Christian all of these are not neutral but inherently good, in that they are products of the ability God as Creator gave to the humans He made in His image to be creative technologically in harnessing the resources of nature to a productive end. And so countless products of these media serve either to create, record and disseminate beauty, or to record and disseminate truth, in a way that is deeply according to the will of God. The problem is when we view them in their totality at this historical and cultural moment; that, in general, the mass media tend to combine to reinforce a world-picture from which God is omitted. And thus they brainwash us into living by a lie.

It is not enough for things to be good gifts of God in themselves. The question is what foundation they are built upon, and what they are to be used for. The line of Cain, for example, in the book of Genesis, pioneered advances in agriculture, musical instruments and metal-working: gifts of God, all of them. But they were built on a foundation of Cain's deep alienation from God; and so, in the end, the overall development of that culture was in the direction of increasing violence and degradation, ending up with environmental

catastrophe (Genesis 4 and 6). A greater endowment of God's gifts may just make our situation worse, if they are built on the wrong foundation. It was far worse to live under the KGB, equipped with all the means of surveillance and control that God-given scientific abilities could create, than under a pre-technological security service. Thus the media represent gifts of God, produced through the exercise of God-given scientific and technological abilities; but what they have become is possibly the most far-reaching system of mind-control - and the most powerful narcotic - that the human race has ever inflicted on itself. The trend of that brainwashing is to construct 'alternative worlds' that reflect only a part of reality and so enforce its importance, while at the same time marginalizing, and so deafening us to, the most vital things of all: the presence of God and His Word, Christ and the message of His cross.

This happens in several ways. First, the media reshape our perception of what is important. One example would be the newspaper. For even the newspaper does not merely reflect the world in an objective manner; it constructs a vivid, substitute, 'alternative universe', as a model to us of what are supposedly the most significant or interesting things going on in reality. Within its own dreamworld, it highlights for us what is most important. (That, surely, is what we buy the front page to be.) So what things are most important in the world? The answers are plain: politics, economics, industry, sport and sex. But this vivid dreamworld is unrealistic in a crucial way: it ignores (usually almost altogether) the activity of God.

Secondly, the media reshape our perception of what is normal or acceptable. 'Should the movies become more like life?', someone once asked Groucho Marx. 'No', replied that arch-revolutionary, 'life should become more like the movies.' Because the experience mass media offer is so vivid and intense, they can easily dominate our thinking, becoming the 'paradigm events' by which we comprehend other, more ambiguous experience. I was a student when Spielberg's movie Close Encounters of the Third Kind, about flying saucers coming to earth, first hit town. Soon afterwards the local paper reported a flying saucer sighting. What had happened? Presumably someone had been to the movie, and

the intense, unambiguous experience they were immersed in provided them with categories through which to interpret the lights in the sky that they saw in the real world. Actually, this is how Bible reading should work: we read, say, an old testament narrative, we then encounter something similar in real life, and we apply the categories from the clarified narrative we have absorbed in our Bible study across to understand the real-life situation: 'Ah, this is a little bit like the story of Abraham... and in the biblical story this was right, that was important... and therefore this is what I should do.' The Bible supplies our norms. But in our society, immersion in the intensely-presented alternative (unreal) universes of media shapes our understanding of what is normal and appropriate, gives us categories to apply (consciously or subconsciously) to understanding our own experience. 'What's going on here in my life reminds me of what happened in the movie; and then what happened was...'

In youth culture, the (reported) lifestyles of music stars function as 'norms' in a comparable way (if we may treat them as a form of media and 'alternative universe' - which we probably may, since what a fan knows of a star's life is a product fabricated through the media publicity machine that may not actually match what occurs in reality): 'In my situation, what would Madonna do?' 'The Harold Robbins women', shouted the adverts for a bonkbuster novel some years back, 'What you dream, they do!' In fact this was an inversion: 'What they do, you can legitimately dream' would have been closer to the truth - what they do, you can accept, at the imaginative level at least, as acceptable or normal activity, and indeed you're appreciating it already, aren't you.... It's not without reason that Paul describes some things as 'shameful even to mention' (Eph 5:12); the repeated 'mentioning' begins to normalize them. Thinking about adultery? Everybody does it, look, it's quite normal in the movie, it goes without comment in the paper. (Indeed, in the 'alternative universe' of some media we may even be led to participate in an experience where adultery is not only normal but actually to be desired. A movie like The Great Gatsby (or Dr Zhivago) can only be entered into properly if you as viewer begin to hope that Daisy will leave her boorish husband for the idealistic Gatsby.)

Related to these is the way that the media defines

what is to be aimed at, or what is to be desired; life becomes more like the movies. (And all of this is the more powerful because we 'consume' much media at the moments when we are most uncritical, that is, in a state of relaxation.) Some years ago, this was probably part of the attraction of the long-running soaps Dallas and Dynasty; to be immersed, briefly at least, in a dreamworld that gave specific form to our vaguer fantasies of wealth and opulence. But more seriously, this is how the 'alternative worlds' of advertising function. 'Wouldn't you like a life like this? - and you could, if only you wore this deodorant/splashed out on this car/smoked this cigar...' The problem here is twofold; we most often pay attention to the improbable means to the dream, the unfulfillable promise seducing us to go out and buy; but we should also give attention to what we are being invited to accept being defined as the dream itself.

Sometimes the media may need to go a step further and actually define for us what is transcendent. Traditionally, TV comedy defines what it isn't: that is, the transcendent certainly isn't to be found in association with Christian ministers and preachers, who range from the mindless to the malign, though it might possibly be located associated with swamis or sadhus. Science fiction movies, however, are an example of a genre that often has to offer suggestions as to where the transcendent is to be found, since it is often part of the genre to attempt to portray the 'beyond', the more ultimate, and therefore to have to define what the ultimate might be.

A different set of issues have to do with how far immersion in the alternative worlds of mass media deadens our capacity for action, thought and relationship in the real world. One aspect of this has been a long-running area of discussion in the 'violent television' debate. 'Tonight you could watch three murders, eighteen car chases, and five illicit affairs. Or you could learn how to split the atom', ran an advertisement for TV Ontario. (It must have been an unusually non-violent night.) But is it not probable that lifelong training in the habit (even the enjoyment) of remaining inactive while watching three or more people maimed or killed each night deadens our response to violence out in the real world? We may well ask whether we want a culture that can watch the infliction of pain without flinching. What for

example the James Bond films have sought to do is to make violence comic; cinema audiences will likewise sometimes cheer the beatings or shootings in a Schwarzenegger film. Perhaps this is part of the wider issue that Neil Postman raised in his important book Amusing Ourselves to Death: that ultimately television turns everything into entertainment, emptying the seriousness from violence or religious challenge or political debate. Everything is 'fun'. 'And now for something completely different' was the catchphrase with which 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' used to splice one piece of absurd film with another, the point being, of course, that none of it was completely different: news of a bomb outrage, a situation comedy or an action movie, all are basically part of an ongoing evening's entertainment with its internal variations in mood and tempo. No action is needed.

What effect does the longterm immersion in the dreamworld have on our ability for action in the specific area of relationships? How far might relations with the undemanding community on the other side of the silver window - in Eastenders, Coronation Street, Neighbours - come to be a more appreciated because less inconvenient part of life than the awkward lover or relatives or neighbours in the real world, who cannot be dealt with at the switch of a button?

There is also a real question about whether extended exposure to the visual media may be detrimental to our capacity for active thought. Some researchers have speculated on the links between the declining highschool performance in America and (among other factors) the average television consumption among American children of seven hours a day. The case deserves consideration when we compare the act of watching television with the act of reading. The reader has to be participatory, both in the sense that she is actively moving her eyes along the lines rather than just absorbing, and can vary her pace or reread a passage in a way that is impossible with normal television (and uncommon even with a video replay facility); but also in the sense that she is creating her own images and concepts to match the words, not just receiving passively what pours out of the screen. And one aspect of this bears directly on our capacity for spiritual perception. As many media commentators from McLuhan onwards have

observed, the visual media's dominance of our culture has meant the displacement of the Word by the Image. But Christ revealed Himself not, primarily, as the Image (though this idea is also present in the new testament), but under the name of the Word. Christianity summons people to make a logical progression from the visible to the invisible, to respond by 'hearing the word' and grounding their lives precisely on that which cannot be seen. (Compare, quite explicitly, the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:18: 'So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.') The contemporary dominance of the Image makes us just that little bit less capable of perceiving or 'living by faith' in this way.

There are other issues too. We could profitably examine how the changing fashions of the media (most especially rock music) reflect (and so foster) the ongoing development of our culture in its quest for alternatives to God. Space does not permit; but it is worth noting how the media themselves, as forms, can directly offer a succession of alternatives to God: things worth living for, substitute 'gods' central as lynchpins to our existence. (I've attempted to explore this in more detail in terms of rock and contemporary culture in ch.6 of A Long Way East of Eden (Authentic, 2002).)

But finally, and most ultimately, the mass media build and immerse us in substitute universes which may or may not include God, and usually don't. This has always been the challenge and responsibility of the artist as 'sub-creator' (Tolkien's phrase). We may apply the kind of analysis we are using here to the history of the novel in Britain. For, although the novel originally arose (via Bunyan and Defoe) through impulses from the Puritan belief in the divinely-ordained significance of the events of ordinary life, it became very much an art-form shaped by the god-less worldview of the Enlightenment. Thus the novel became a form in which God never did anything; with very few exceptions (such as Charlotte Bronte), we do not find in the great English novelists a depiction of events in which God answers prayer, guides lives, orchestrates events for good.(4) Rather, we are trained by immersion in the worlds of the great novelists to think that, providing we are given the horizontal, psychological and sociological dimensions of

events, we have been told all we really need to know. Practically, that is an imaginative training in agnosticism, in presupposing the inactivity of God; He never does anything. And the same is true of nearly all movie or television fiction.(5) In the dreamworld of Eastenders, God never does anything - of course. (Dallas, a friend once commented, was an extreme case of this: it presented a world where there was evidently no intervening force to prevent a JR carrying his machinations through to the end.)

But the same question arises even with the 'substitute universes' built - with the intention of giving us a good, clear and enlightening model of the real one - by television documentaries; again, they either choose to include God, or they train us to look at the world in a way that leaves him out. It is true even of nature films (is nothing safe?!) - yet every time a documentary tells us how 'over the following million years this fish' (or, 'Nature') 'developed a remarkable way of dealing with this problem', it is putting it that way instead of 'God developed this fish's remarkable characteristic...'. And, in a different way, it is true of most newspapers: once we have been briefed on the psychological, sociological, economic and political dimensions of what has happened, we as readers are trained to assume, we have been given all we need for an adequate and correct understanding. God can safely be ignored.

In each of these cases, then, the mass media build a substitute world from which God is absent, and then present that vividly to us as being, or else very closely resembling, the real world. In so doing, they train us to believe that the things they tell us (which we have paid for) are the things that really matter; if we leave God out, it's still OK. The media are not neutral: we are being trained to look at the world in a way that leaves out what matters most of all. If the God of the Bible is real, there could be nothing more catastrophic than training people in the habit of systematically blotting out the central piece from the jigsaw of their lives.

III

Everything is cruel - the roofs, the walls,
and over the city, not for nothing,
the television antennae
like crucifixes without Christ...

- Yevtushenko

So what in the world are we to do? Cancel the newspaper, sell the television, electrocute the stereo?

If, as McLuhan repeatedly insisted, 'We become what we behold', then the media are building the loss of God ever more firmly into our consciousnesses.

What then is to be done? How are we to set about living in a way that is in the world and not of it?

The first step is straightforward: the determination to be free. The act of becoming a Christian is an act of repentant faith, of confessing Christ as Lord; and to confess Christ as Lord necessitates not being in servitude to anything else (cf 1 Cor 7:23). At the very least, then, it is our responsibility to ensure we are not bound under influences that dominate our thinking to a degree that would disrupt our perception of God. That would most definitely constitute an 'unequal yoke' of the kind Paul warns us against. Both the old and new testaments go to some lengths to help us grasp that holiness is an extremely serious issue (cf for example Paul's willingness if necessary to do something as consciously bizarre as never eating meat again if holiness demanded it (1 Cor 8:13)). It is Christ, our Lord, who warns us that if our hand is leading us into sin, we should cut it off, and that if our eye is leading us into sin, we should gouge it out.

That may well involve us in a determination to reestablish mastery over the media in our own lives. Some of this is an 'equal time' issue; we shall certainly not give adequate time to prayer and meeting with God if we have never gained control over the on/off switches on the television and CD-player. If we have fallen prone to the idolatry of listening more to the mass media than to God, we shall probably join the ranks of those complaining that 'God seems so far away', because we have been trained out of the sense of His presence. When the 'hegemonic' effects of the media are so subtle and so strong, we can only hope to retain an independent, biblical perspective if we are committed to ensuring at least an equal intake from God's Word as from the 'world's' images. We will need prayerful, Bible-soaked minds if we are to discern by the Spirit

what is going on; if scripture is right, spiritual warfare is scarcely likely to be irrelevant in an area so significant for our own thinking and so influential in 'the world'. It's a battleground, not a playground - which is a real nuisance in view of the fact that what many of us most need media for is as aids to relaxation.

Yet most certainly we would not want to abjure all use of the media. Quite apart from our human enjoyment of and need for truth and beauty for their own sake, if our discipleship is to have a cutting-edge we must keep up with what is going on around us, even in the 'dreamworlds' if these are as influential for our fellow-humans as we know them to be. And the media will often give us bridges for interaction on things that are far more important - social issues highlighted by news items or by plot developments in soap operas, personal dilemmas crystallized in rock lyrics.

We want, then, to use what we can, in our application of God's love and truth to the issues the media report or model, without paying the price of having our own perceptions controlled and deadened by them. Here perhaps is the most difficult issue doctrinally. What are the limits to being 'in the world and not of it'? Biblically, it seems clear there are moments or situations where one cannot be 'in the world' without being 'of it' too. One cannot, for example, be a Christian mafioso or a Christian prostitute; to be 'in' that particular system would be inseparable from sin. In Revelation 18 we see a climactic moment when God seems to declare that judgment over the centre of human culture at that time: 'Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues' - an apocalyptic situation where society has turned into the City of Babylon, the Great Prostitute whose 'sins are piled up to heaven', embodiment of the world-system in direct opposition to the City of God (New Jerusalem, the Bride which comes down 'out of heaven from God' in Revelation 21); and in that moment of clear black and white, to be involved in the Babylon-system at all is inevitably to partake of the sin, and therefore of the judgment. But then comes the problem: what is our situation today? As the exponents of 'structural sin' have reminded us, it is virtually impossible to partake in economic activity - or even in shopping, given the highly exploitative record of many leading manufacturers

of such products as coffee - without in some measure partaking in and rewarding economic practices that are evil elsewhere in the world.

So too with the media. I love media: yet so much reminds me of Jonathan Miller's remark 'I rarely read newspapers any more. It is like standing in a swimsuit under the Barking outflow.' Even the newspaper reader (yes, the Telegraph or the Independent too) will assuredly end up consuming images that do nothing but defile the imagination. Still more the regular cinema-goer, who may often feel (s)he is being asked to leave her conscience in the cloakroom. (Hudson Taylor apparently warned his sister even against novel-reading.) What is the permissible quantity of poison in our imaginative food-intake? How far is it possible to combine extensive consumption of, say, cinema with the maintenance of a 'holy imagination'? Genuine religion, says James (1:27), is to 'keep oneself from being polluted by the world.' 'Follow...holiness', says Hebrews, 'without which no man shall see the Lord': is it possible that immersion in too much poison - or spending too much time in god-emptied alternative dreamworlds - might even destroy the ability to sense God's mind that is necessary for living and speaking prophetically in His service today?(6) Either way there seems a price to pay. Surely, if there really is a God, and a God who wants lovingly to speak to us, then there could be few higher priorities imaginable than hearing His voice, 'seeing the Lord'; but Hebrews seems to be saying that only a certain type of organism will ever have the sensory equipment adequate for such realities. (Compare Jesus' words in Matthew 5:8: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God!') There is no easy answer to this dilemma. But one thing is obviously unacceptable, that is immersion in floods of god-lessness without being absolutely, prayerfully clear that we have God's blessing on consuming the material at all.

Some of us will be called by God to prayerfully take the challenge into the other camp. That will not be easy; there are, undeniably, some overtly hostile vested interests entrenched here, just as there were in the anti-slavery battles two hundred years ago (and in a sense this is an anti-slavery battle too). Yet, after all, the media are in the first place gifts of God to humanity. To begin with, it is well known how seriously media executives take

feedback by correspondence that they receive, particularly where it is intelligently done and contains affirmation as well as criticism. It has been said that some executives presuppose that, for every viewer writing in, there were a thousand feeling the same way who didn't trouble to write. Still, this is more relevant to the overt and symptomatic issues of exploitative sex or violence in media than to the more intangible issue of the loss of the consciousness of God.

That issue may more probably be impacted by believers who are called to be 'missionaries' in the media. For such people and their friends, the 'brainwashing' effect of the system must be a matter for serious prayer; having to work within the 'system' can make it even easier to lose the sense of confrontation between the assumptions of the dreamworlds and the facts and priorities of the real world where God is present. No amount of talk about the fact that the primary task of an employee in, say, broadcasting is professional excellence can alter the fact that they are in a system that in significant ways is functioning in a manner alien to the most vital realities there are. Inevitably, the believer's role is somewhat subversive, and it is vital not to lose that sense. Among the questions that arise will be simply how to 'open the skylight', to find ways of subtly creating the awareness that this could be a world with an upward dimension. In journalism, it is surprising how much the sense of the 'normality' of the faith-perspective can be reintroduced with a quite minor and casual metaphor. 'First, and again, Te Deum', began a Times editorial on the failure of a terrorist bombing campaign; an Independent editorial - commenting on some papal comments on world affairs - ended, unspectacularly but meaningfully, 'If the pope's appeal for peace did nothing else yesterday, it saved lives in countries like El Salvador... where warring factions agreed to a ceasefire. And since the efficacy of prayer can never be fully known except to the God to Whom it is addressed, more than that may have been achieved.' 'Opening the skylight' in this manner is somewhat easier in print journalism or radio, whose raw material is words, than in cinema or television, which are tied more to the visual and therefore visible universe; but that is simply a challenge to creativity.

For all of us, there is a challenge to decode the media; that is, to keep consciously in mind the

questions that will help us recognise some of the brainwashing with which we are threatened. We must always have two sets of standards in mind. It is significant, but in itself insufficient, to note that a particular production is technically good or innovative. It may be thoroughly well-made (and deserves genuine respect if it is), and yet be totally poisonous. (It is not enough, for example, to choose a film merely by how many Oscars it received.) Here are some questions we may wish to bear in mind in this decoding exercise - and the more developed the media, the more of them will become relevant. (For example we may not be able to apply these questions to a single song by a musician; but they may well become clear if we consider her whole output to date.(7)) So:

* What kind of universe does this product (CD, newspaper, movie) present and train its consumer to think in terms of? One in which there may be a God, something higher than man, or not? If so, is He (or It) good? Is He (or the Ultimate) personal? If not, what has taken His place as the 'fundamental reality', the 'really real'? Determinism? Natural forces? Chance and luck?

* Who, in this product's 'universe' (in this police movie, this rap CD, this advertisement, this soap, this newspaper interview), is presented as living the 'good life'? What kind of person emerges as a hero or heroine? - as the one who really understands what life is about? - as a real Man, or real Woman? The sharpest dancer? The character with the most devastating one-liners? The 'king of cool'? The macho man (Sylvester Stallone appeared in posters for the first Rambo movie as an aggressive male icon - stripped to the waist, highly muscular, sullenly rebellious, carrying obtrusive (and sexual) technology, and very destructive (the background was flooded with flame))? In a way this question is asking, what is sainthood according to the media - except that the answer is highly unlikely to be, holiness and living in the presence of God. Thus we are trained.

* Linked with this, we may ask: What is presented as the 'quality of life' to be aimed at, and how is it attained? - in this advertisement, this soap episode, this comedy, this rock CD? Success and status? An abundance of 'things to possess' (£1500 million was being spent annually by advertisers in the UK, Richard K Taylor write a few years ago, 'to convince us that Jesus was

wrong about the abundance of possessions')? Hedonism? The 'high' of excitement, of dance (dance movies)? A blonde by your side in a car? Abundant sexual fulfilment? Personal relationships? Knowing God? What, in short, is the 'point of life' in this alternative world that we're consuming? Is it just a game? Sometimes the opening sequence of a series will provide a collage that answers this question: the opening of Houston combined action (fast cars crashing, glass smashing), speed (things happening simultaneously on a divided screen, the hero shouting while running), righteous and effective violence, expensive gadgetry (helicopters), sexuality (the hero carrying a girl, sharing a laugh with her, stripped to the waist with her). Closely related may be a simpler question: What does this product - this song-album, for example - imply is worth celebrating, worth recording, worth writing or singing about?

* Again, What, according to this product's 'universe' (the opinions of key figures, the nature of key experiences that are presented, the conclusions made clear from events), does it mean to 'mature', to 'grow' as a person? (This may be relevant to numerous movies and TV dramas, and also to song-albums.) How does that compare with God's concept of maturity?

* What, in the 'alternative universe' of this product, is 'right' and 'wrong'? How, and by what standards, do we tell one from the other? Is it just by the natural instincts of an 'honest heart'? Or is all morality ultimately (and cynically?) seen as manmade - or ultimately your own personal choice? Equally important: What is wrong with the world, and how, in this 'universe', is it to be cured? By simple niceness (in some daytime soaps and some tabloid newspaper articles)? By violence? (Do the ends then justify the means? Are there any rules?) Or can the problem of evil and the lack of love in the world be dealt with by a new car, a better brand of whisky or a new deodorant? Or by the impulsive, unsystematised acts of a cynical loner (as in numerous detective movies and TV dramas - where also it may be worth considering why ultimately the wrong is worth troubling to cure)?

* And finally, related to the previous question: Is there hope? - if so, where does it come from? Is there a God at work in the world? If not, what are

the lessons we are being trained to learn?

The challenge, then, is to think, talk, and pray. To decode a lie can be to unmask it. And the more we think naturally as Christians about our world and what is going on in it, the more our faith will slip naturally, creatively, unforced, into the dialogues we have with others who do not share it. It is in such situations that we may be able to express our experience of what is so often absent from the media's dreamworlds - the presence of the God of hope, the God of love who is Lord in the ongoing progress of events. For ourselves, too, we may acquire a much deeper confidence in our faith as we realise how widely and relevantly it speaks to the most significant issues the mass media can raise, and more besides. There is absolutely no neutrality: the clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this 'world' extends across the whole of life; and the mass media are a key battleground.

It will not be easy. We live in a society increasingly brainwashed and blinded to the glory of God. Perhaps that is why, though it has suffered no really damaging intellectual assault, yet Christian faith now seems to have become so very difficult for contemporary people to 'grasp'. Yet, as Luther said, God is the ruler yet; and He can do 'more than we ask or think'. We are called to live as children of the God of truth in a world of cheap dreams and shoddy substitutes; to give ourselves to holiness, to the saving saturation in the Word of God, to prayer for the media and all who work in them, to decoding and to discussing and to telling truth-ful narratives with our not-yet-Christian acquaintances. In a world of dreams, we are called to dream some big - but truthful - dreams of our own; knowing that our God is a God who can do more than we can dream or imagine. And one day He will sweep all the dreamworlds away; and we will see finally that all we did in His service, holding determinedly by faith to the facts as He has revealed them, partook of an unseen, eternal, unshakeable reality, one that matters unimaginably more than anything else....

FOOTNOTES

(1) There is of course an interaction between the media producer's selection, and the limits established by what the consensus of their

consumers will accept. A radical producer - spiritually or politically - can sometimes get into a position where (s)he has sufficient leverage to introduce a perspective not normally found within the dominant consensus of her consumers. Usually, however, the media will follow the direction of most probable economic profit; which means fitting in with the producer's general perceptions of the audience's consensus - and thereby reinforcing them.

(2) In an important essay titled 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory'; reprinted for example in Debating Texts ed. Rick Rylance; cf. pp.208-99.

(3) C S Lewis once suggested that for some converts to Christianity the imagination has to be 'baptised' before the intellect or the conscience can be; and it would seem that he wrote his fictions partly to give his readers the imaginative experience of the Christian universe, so that they could 'grasp' what there was to accept or reject. Perhaps what the modern media does is to radically 'de-baptise' the contemporary imagination's ability to conceive of the world as a place where there is a God to respond to.

(4) With the Russian tradition - Dostoevsky, for example, and some of Tolstoy - it is different. And there are other exceptions in the English tradition too: Robinson Crusoe, Richardson's Pamela, Fielding's Amelia, George Eliot (bizarrely, since she was an agnostic), Graham Greene (eg in The End of the Affair), the fantasies of Tolkien and C.S.Lewis, or Jack Clemo's Wilding Graft. (This is developed further in two extended studies titled Fictional Absence and Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled, available free from peterlowman@lineone.net.)

(5) Except, of course, where the production sets out to indicate the possibility that the viewer does not have full possession of the facts. But that is unusual in a mass media production.

(6) Missiologist Charles Kraft, in Christianity and Power, suggests that a major reason why the western church sees so little of God's supernatural power is because of its captivity to the non-supernaturalistic, humanistic consensus worldview of the surrounding culture. If Kraft is right, then our brainwashing by the 'dreamworlds'

would be directly related to spiritual powerlessness.

(7) Cf Francis Schaeffer, Art and the Bible, p.59f.