

Heard and Seen: *Television, medium of Reform?* by Huw Ballard Thomas

If all the energy and ingenuity expended on criticizing television were diverted into creating for it, the face of the medium might well be transformed. At the highest level, television is a twentieth-century art form. At all levels, it is an artefact – but an artefact peculiarly subject to the limitations of time and money. Every producer and script-writer – cameraman and film editor too – knows the frustration of having to compromise because conditions (physical or economic) make it impossible to do otherwise. Three days of rain during filming and a whole plan must be re-thought. And they know, too, the second wave of frustration when critics, professional and lay, suggest the very things which would have been done if only television were the all-miraculous, all-endowed medium which those who have little or no practical experience of it suppose it to be.

It is a mistake to say, as many do, that 'television is primarily a form of entertainment'. Television is primarily a medium of communication. That is its alpha and its omega. But entertainment is the use to which it is generally put and it would be naive in the extreme to presume that people buy, or rent, their television sets for any other purpose. If, therefore, one wishes to present a social or religious theme on television – using the medium, in fact, to communicate on fundamental questions – how far is one under an obligation to be 'entertaining' as well? How far is it anyway in one's own interest to be entertaining? What have I the right to presume of the audience? And what have they the right to presume of me?

Television is one of the most striking paradoxes in an age of paradox. Many of our problems result from strange shifts in the balance between the 'masses' on the one hand and the 'individual' on the other. We can now conceive of exterminating the whole race in a single instant whilst we proceed to prolong individual human life to extraordinary lengths. We have the means of communicating to the whole world in a variety of ways whilst people grow anguished and die in the loneliness that comes from their failure to communicate even with those closest to them. So we have created this medium of television which must speak to countless millions of people and hold their attention as a mass audience whilst creating the illusion that it is talking to each individual personally.

Because of this illusion of individual intimacy which surrounds the medium, a great deal of confusion arises from the analogies which are drawn from conventional social relationships. People talk about the performer 'invading' the privacy of the home. Yet the paradox remains: that through the most remote and impersonal of ways we can enter into the most intimate and personal of contacts with the viewer. And if we are to succeed, then we must capture and hold his attention. Otherwise, however laudable its motives or large its budget, the programme will fail as television.

One of the basic clues to successful television is the fact that people are more

interested in people (or animals!) than they are in problems. When I first came to write for television it struck me as strange that very often it was people concerned with presenting religious, Christian themes who had failed to understand that. The Word did not come among us a theological concept or treatise: it was made flesh. God came among men as a person. And having done that he chose, for preference, to teach us his wisdom by parables rather than by philosophical discourses. Truth in action; revelation working itself out in human terms; faith made manifest in works. These things are basic to Christianity. Yet when Christians approach a medium like television they often use it like a theological seminar or a debating ground. But the intellectual discussion of 'religion' is not only boring to the average viewer (even to the majority of committed Christian viewers), it is a sterile occupation bearing little relationship to everyday living.

The same goes for social as for religious themes. Programmes, like problems, only make effective meaning if they are rooted in and related to the human situation. This is the level at which the appeal to the mass audience and the interest of the individual viewer not only tend to coincide but become identified. Though the technique of the medium is based on optical and physical illusions, its atmosphere is very much that of reality. It is an attempt to pin-point that quality which has led people to speak of the way in which television 'unmasks' the phoney and the insincere. It can do. It is a medium which responds warmly to enthusiasm, to powerful and genuine individuality and character. Every television programme (and not just *Panorama*) is a 'window on the world'. And when people look out of their windows it is invariably because they are interested in what other people are doing – and whether other people are like them. And when they have looked out, they will look inwards again and look about their everyday, familiar situation – and if what they have seen through their window is stimulating enough they will change their world, not in sensational, revolutionary ways but in quiet, imperceptible ways. The advertisers all realize that. Not all programme planners do.

How does one set about presenting social and religious themes to a mass audience then, the majority of whom do not want (at least consciously) to be educated, far less edified? First of all it might be well to say a word about the facilities available. Studio programmes require far less time and money to prepare and present than programmes done, either entirely or in part, on film. The discussion programme – a series of 'talking heads' in the studio – often reaches the screen not because anyone thinks it is an effective, or even a valid, form of television, but simply because it is cheap.

Studio discussions are inevitably dependent on 'experts', men or women who can talk fluently and competently about their own subject. The people with whom they are concerned, to illustrate or clarify their ideas and theories, cannot always be relied

on to 'show up' well in studio conditions. Removed from their usual environment, and unaccustomed as they are to this singularly public form of private speaking, they can dry up, or become stilted, or ramble and miss the point. But the experts can be at the same disadvantage. They often have to be jogged along by 'needling' interviewers or chairmen who are conscious of the flagging interest of the viewers. What is the justification then for such programmes? Should they not be relegated to the place where they belong, namely, sound radio? The answer is two-fold. They provide a cheap, if unsatisfactory, way of filling space in the programme schedules. They also do reach – even when only a 'minority' view – a far greater audience than they would ever do on sound radio. (In fact, bedevilled by the misleading bogey of TAM ratings, programme planners often get unduly neurotic about 'small' audiences, forgetting that these still number millions.)

In the field of religious or social problems, studio discussions – livened up only by a gesture to the visual nature of the medium in the form of a few graphs or loosely related stills – can be little more than a kind of extra-mural activity for the committed. But if we wish to use television as a means of effecting changes in people (either individually or in a group) then we must frame our programmes basically for those who are 'uncommitted'. The people who will watch with us if we interest them and who will stay with us even when we try to 'enlighten' them. All programmes of this kind, therefore, whether in the studio or on film, must begin with experience which is known to the viewer. Ideally, the subject must strike him from the start either as one which concerns him directly or which he could conceive of as concerning him in different circumstances.

To give two examples: one in the field of studio production, the other on film. A contribution I made to the 'Seeing and Believing' series was on the subject of 'No Waiting'. It might more accurately have been called 'abandonment to divine providence'. The programme was to be done in the studio and on a low budget. My idea was to present the idea, central to our Christian conduct, that every minute is of importance in our relationship to God. Life can only become full of meaning if we can charge even the most trivial apparently wasted moments with something which gives them purpose. It was necessary, then, to begin from familiar human situations. We all of us hate 'wasting time'. Where do we waste time? In plenty of situations. I chose four common ones: waiting for a bus, waiting for a hospital appointment, waiting for someone to turn up for a 'date', waiting in a traffic jam. It was possible – though second best perhaps – to mock up in the studio enough 'sets' for these situations to give them visual interest. Then, using actors and actresses, to put over just the kind of thing which ordinary people feel and express in such situations. So far, at least, any viewer is 'with you'. The commentary was helped along at this point

by an 'expert' who could talk simply and practically about this kind of problem. This led on to a re-take of these situations, showing how they can be used to some purpose. No reference was made in the programme to the terms or principles of spiritual teaching. The lesson had to speak for itself. Didacticism, a studied attempt at preaching, is disastrous on television. Basically I wanted to show that these 'wasted' moments are often the ones in which we can deepen our spiritual life – by prayer and simple meditation. But you can laugh in the presence of God. You can even have a little grumble now and again. The script tried to do that.

I have quoted this example, not because I thought the programme was a success, but because I believe that it is only in this way that we can begin to communicate to the average 'indifferent' viewer the fact that Christianity has direct relevance to his everyday life. He turns on his television set to be entertained and is, secretly, grateful if he can find something of 'help' to him in the process. But he must see its relevancy to himself and his situation, not because it is spelled out to him, but because he identifies himself with what he sees. And the emphasis must be as much on what he sees – if not indeed more than – on what he hears.

The second example concerns a series in which I have been involved for B.B.C. Wales. The producer, Aled Vaughan, and myself wanted to do a series on social problems. Film effort was available, so that each programme could be done without any studio work at all. The first subject we tackled was debt. Here is one of the major social problems of our time. Hire purchase of one kind or another – or secured overdrafts for some – mean that we are all of us in debt of some description, name it as we will. This was a subject which fitted our aim in the series in presenting not extreme problems, or conditions which have clinical or highly specialized causes, but a situation in which any ordinary person could find himself given slightly extraordinary circumstances. Here then was a problem which television could 'expose' and about which it could sound, we hoped, a salutary warning.

We attempted in this instance to solve it by telling the story of one individual case. Mrs Jones was a very ordinary working-class housewife with a husband and three children. She had incurred countless county court orders because of excessive hire purchase commitments she had incurred in the attempt to give her family a 'lovely home'. She had been duped by plausible salesmen. Her family had been threatened with break-up as a result of eviction from a council house. She had twice made a 'pathetic' attempt at suicide and received what medical attention was possible in what was essentially a social problem. In telling Mrs Jones's story – or rather in allowing her to tell it – we could also introduce the 'experts' and the authorities: the lawyer who has to battle for these people against the all-powerful hire purchase companies; the honest salesmen who deplore the immoral methods used by some of their

colleagues; the welfare officers who can only do their best with limited resources; the psychiatrist who can understand the effects but scarcely remedy the cause. It would be, we felt, difficult for anyone to watch Mrs Jones's story without feeling 'there but for the grace of God . . .'. But, in any event, her story was interesting in itself – even if for some viewers it meant peeping from behind metaphorical lace curtains into a bewildering, squalid world.

Such a programme immediately presents even more problems, many of them charged with the question of moral responsibility. Having made careful research and found an 'ideal' subject, certain safeguards must be imposed. Although the subject herself is willing to talk freely and openly about her life, we must feel sure that the rest of the family will not be harmed by it. It is essential to explain the implications of the programme to those taking part in it, and to reassure them that the process of filming will not cause them any distress or harm. Unless such principles are applied in the making of television programmes, we have no right to contemplate the use of television as a medium of reform.

The making of such a film also calls for a maximum of team work between all those involved: research man, script writer, producer, cameramen, film editors. The whole team need to know the basic idea and to be in sympathy with it and the way in which it will be presented. By free and frank discussion of this kind at every stage of the programme any danger of indelicacy or exaggeration can be avoided. 'Aren't you going too far?' someone might ask. The expert, whose idea the programme is, might have become hardened to clinical facts and theories – and to cases. The producer might have become glib within his medium. The cameraman and the technicians often live in a world much closer in reality to the one in which you are working. Throw all this into a close unit, and your programme is far more likely to succeed.

By using film it is more possible to get the results you need. This is not to imply doctoring or falsifying the facts in the slightest degree. But the subject, like our Mrs Jones for example, has to become accustomed to the camera and the lights and the whole ethos of production before she will talk naturally. When she has lost her nervousness, she might talk as she thinks you want her to talk – and so give a 'performance'. But out of two hours of filming and after two days, you suddenly get a minute or two of film which comes as close as anything you can hope to achieve with theories of *ciné vérité* – and far more honestly than if you were using such devices as a hidden camera.

It is better to stick to one story, one individual case. The viewer will stay with the programme, maybe because he wants to know the end of the story. The script writer can indicate the exceptions to this tale, underline the significant points, sound the warnings. But ideally, the narration in such programmes is kept to a minimum.

Visual images will suggest their own links. The sight of this woman walking home to face her family after yet another visit to the court needs no 'pointing'. A pair of haunted eyes staring into a dying fire says more than any sociologist moralizing about deprivation or stress neuroses. But the vital impact of such things come – as they did in that programme – from knowing that these were not contrived symbols of despair, but the *real* situation of a *real* person.

If this suggests some of the methods of tackling the presentation of social (and religious) problems and issues, it also raises several other questions. Television can present issues which are far removed from our own experience. It is good sometimes that it does so. It can awaken our consciences to the needs of others such as ex-prisoners, the physically or emotionally deformed and a host of others. But it has an equal task – and perhaps a more urgent one – to deal with the problems which already exist, at least potentially, in the lives of the majority of viewers. In this way I believe that television can make its greatest social contribution, in what, to put it clumsily, I might term the field of preventive rather than curative sociology. It can help to create a healthy climate of opinion and conduct which will foresee problems before they arise, rather than make emotional capital (and financial profits) by sensationalizing them after they have arisen. It is the case of what I have called the 'ordinary' person in extraordinary circumstances which best does this. We do not need to risk boring the viewer by telling him, so it would seem, about himself. But we can tell him about the people next door or in the next street; and they are sufficiently like him in one way as to make him realize, gradually perhaps, that it could be him too. If it begins at the level of curiosity I think it can be made to end on the level of self-examination.

'Actuality' is a cliché word now amongst producers and critics but it is none the less valid for that. News and outside broadcasts (sporting events especially) have often been hailed as the most successful form of television. The greatest force to interest and move the viewer is the real event.

Presenting reality, however, still requires the process of selection which is involved in any creative medium. How far do we have an obligation to be impartial? In the question of religious programmes, a certain 'bias' is inevitable. We are committed before we start. What we must do is show what our commitment involves. We need to demonstrate our faith rather than to debate it. But if our object is to cater not just for those who share our views but to influence those who are indifferent or hostile, or simply plain bewildered, then we must begin from the experience – or at least within the experience – of the uncommitted. It is no use Christians bewailing the amount of 'paganism' or 'false morality' which goes out in what are very often superb pieces of television technique unless they are prepared to make the effort to

produce programmes as good or even better. And if the most exciting faith in the world cannot do that, then we would do well to examine our consciences to see where the fault lies.

In presenting social problems and issues the question is perhaps more delicate still. Whether or not we feel an obligation to 'reform' people, television will not respond to open moralizing. It must ferret out the problems which concern people and present them well. It can suggest and indicate the solutions – very often simply by stating the problem vividly. There is no harm in trying to stimulate, to irritate, sometimes even to shock – so long as what we present is the truth. Truth is not only stranger than fiction – it is vastly more disturbing: and when this highly personal medium reveals it in the privacy of people's homes, it can be a profound and intense experience.

About Religion

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

MICHAEL REDINGTON

A.T.V.'s *'About Religion'* was the first regular weekly television programme about Christianity and its origins. In its six years of existence the programme was never afraid to be controversial in the methods it adopted to bring home eternal truths to people, many of whom were unfamiliar with their historical and theological setting.

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