

## CHRIST AND THE MEDIA

Malcolm Muggeridge\*

I am, of course, greatly complimented that you should have asked an old superannuated journalist like myself to come and speak to you on "Christ and the Media," a subject that is by the nature of the case of transcendent importance to religious broadcasting. Let me say, straight away, that I have no qualification for holding forth on such a subject other than that of having come belatedly and reluctantly to see in Christ the only reality in a world increasingly given over to fantasy and of having worked in the media, man and boy, for something like half a century past—the whole gamut from sonorous editorials to scurvy little gossip paragraphs, from news stories from our special correspondents here, there and everywhere to book reviews, theater notices, feature articles and obituaries, and taking in the somber experience of being editor of the ostensibly humorous magazine, *Punch*, required in that capacity to essay the impossible task of making my fellow countrymen laugh.

Now otherwise, apart from these fifty misspent years, I am not at all versed in the sociological, psychological, ideological, metaphysical or any other aspect of the media. And if I have had occasion to review some work on a subject—as has happened—it has been, I regret to say, on the basis of a very cursory turning over of its pages, comforting myself all the while with a statement I once read by the great Dr. Johnson of the novels of Congreve, that he would sooner praise them than read them. The fact is that, in my experience, experts on communication can very rarely communicate with any degree of skill or clarity. This might seem surprising until one reflects that marriage counselors have usually been divorced, dietary experts are usually chronic dyspeptics, extollers of potency—like D. H. Lawrence—are usually impotent, and the roads to private and public bankruptcy are paved with economists.

Such essays in irony are part, for me at any rate, of God's glory and mercy. Besides the golden string that Blake writes of, leading to heaven's gate, there is another, making connection with the earth. As in radio and TV sets, both are needed—and in cathedrals too, that have their steeples climbing into the sky and their gargoyles grinning downwards. It is a fancy of mine, as a passionate lover of laughter and believer in laughter, as representing the earthic equivalent of men's most sublime mystical transports—it is a fancy of mine that when the gates of heaven swing open, besides the sound of celestial choirs there is the unmistakable sound of laughter. May I say to you, is not the fall of man itself a cosmic version of the banana-skin joke? So in talking to you about Christ and the media it is merely as an old practitioner, not as an expert, as understood by the statisticians and social scientists, whose studies, for the most part, seem to me on a par with the projects that so diverted Swift's Gulliver when his travels took him to the fly-

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ing island of Laputa—or, for that matter, with the projects of UNESCO today. I myself have always contended that the Romans, when they forecast the future by throwing on the ground the entrails of a chicken, were much more accurate and enlightened than our public-opinion polls. In my humble opinion, the perfect arrangement would be to use Dr. Gallup's entrails. Of course the disadvantage of that is that you could only use them once.

Now in my capacity as an old practitioner and looking back on a lifetime spent in and out of newspaper and magazine offices, in and out of television and radio studios, going like the devil to and fro in the world and up and down in it, questing for news, it seems to me increasingly clear that the media have become the great fantasy machine of all time. This applies just as much to their news and documentary offerings as to their diversionary ones, if not more so. The cameras are there, the eyes are bloodshot; the floor manager cries, "Action!" The autocue begins to turn. The studio lighting is at its highest. I am interviewing a bishop in a purple cassock that he specially asked to wear because it looks so well in living color (whatever that may mean). His face, as I glance sidelong at it, has an anxious, almost appealing expression. "Spare me," he seems to be saying. How tempting, then, to crash in with something really embarrassing, like "Bishop, is there an afterlife?" or "Bishop, do you expect to go to heaven?" Instead I hear myself asking him why he thinks church attendances have been falling off of late, or what are his views on ordaining women priests, or whether he is in favor of uniting with the Methodists—all matters that he takes comfortably in his stride.

Now the floor manager is holding up three fingers—three minutes to go, and time for one more question: "Bishop, are bishops really necessary?" He loves it. He loves it. A beatific smile spreads over his face. "Necessary or not," he points out, "they exist"—as, for that matter, does television. By this time the floor manager is going through the motions of cutting his throat, the inexorable word "Cut!" having sounded in his earphones. The bishop and I, as it were, extricate ourselves from our images and resume our workaday personas, wash off our makeup and adjourn to the hospitality room, where we exchange a few cheerful observations, having together provided the transcendental flavoring in a Sunday evening's singularly untranscendental viewing.

Despite the bishop's presence, it all seems very remote from the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth—very remote from the great drama of the incarnation as it is so splendidly put in Ecclesiasticus: "While all things were in quiet silence and that night was in the midst of her swift course, thine almighty Word leaped down from heaven out of thy royal throne." It is of course true that the media are an integral part of our disintegrating way of life; they both express and, in so doing, promote the disintegration. But they cannot be held responsible for it. At the same time they induce us to take for granted the ever-increasing violence and conflict in the world and to see as positively beneficial, as an enlargement of our freedom and an enhancement of the quality of contemporary living, the steady and ominous erosion of the moral values on which the Christian religion and our way of life have derived and have traditionally been based. For instance, we English have come to accept a condition of chronic violence and lawlessness in Northern Ireland, an integral part of the United Kingdom. Throughout the world similar areas of disorder are all the time arising. If they are capable of dramatic visual presentation, the media draw our attention to them. And then when the novelty is worn off they disappear from

the screen and the headlines, and we all forget about them.

As for the erosion of moral standards, is it not indubitably the case that for the media, as for the horrid sisters in *Macbeth* in their chant upon the blasted heath, "fair is foul and foul is fair"? The point is made very cogently by Simone Weil, whose luminous intelligence and insights are in my opinion among the most penetrating of our time. She was writing a decade or so before television had been developed to occupy the attention of huge audiences all over the world, in the case of western man for some 35 hours a week—in all (and it is an awesome thought) twelve years of the three score and ten of a normal lifespan, twelve years looking into a television screen. This is what Simone Weil wrote: "Nothing is so beautiful, nothing is so continually fresh and surprising, so full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy, as the good, and no desert so dreary and monotonous and boring as evil. But with fantasy it is the other way around. Fictional good is boring and flat, while fictional evil is varied, intriguing, attractive, and full of charm."

Now the media, as it seems to me, strikingly bear out Simone Weil's contention. In their offerings it is almost invariably *eros*, rather than *agape*, that provides all the excitement; success and celebrity rather than a broken and a contrite heart that are made to seem desirable; and Jesus Christ Superstar rather than Jesus Christ on the cross who gets a folk hero's billing. Good and evil, after all, constitute the essential theme of our mortal existence. In this sense they may be compared with the positive and negative points that generate an electric current. Transpose the points, and the current fails. The lights go out. Darkness falls and all is confusion. It seems to me clear, beyond any shadow of doubt, that the darkness that is falling on our civilization is due precisely to such a transposition of good and evil, and that the media in furthering the transposition are a powerful influence—perhaps the most powerful in furthering the consequences.

Let me remind you, too, that a voice far more powerful and authoritative than mine has made the same point. I refer, of course, to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who in his first diagnosis of the sickness of the West when he arrived among us as a compulsory exile said that we western people were still powerful and prosperous and influential in the world, but our power and our wealth and our influence would avail us not at all because we had lost our awareness as Christians of good and evil. In his second *Gulag Archipelago* volume he returned to the theme—needless to say, largely overlooked and ignored by the media. In shining words, among the most beautiful and memorable of our time, he writes, "It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart and through all human hearts." And he adds, to me infinitely moving, "So bless you, prison, for having been in my life."

What insight, what wisdom—acquired in, of all places, a Soviet prison camp after a rigidly Marxist upbringing! I must say to you that if someone had told me when I was a young journalist in Moscow in the early 1930s that in a regime such as the USSR—whose rulers have taken to themselves more power over the ruled than any previous government in human history, controlling absolutely and minutely every aspect of their lives and being from the beginning resolved to stamp out all traces of the Christian religion, to denigrate its Founder, its Scriptures, its mores, its cultural heritage and transcendental aspirations—that from

such a regime sixty years after its foundation there could emerge from within it a voice such as Solzhenitsyn's, speaking in the authentic accents of Christendom, of the gospels, of our Lord himself, I should have said it was inconceivable. Yet it has happened, a miracle fit to stand among the greatest God has ever vouchsafed us and deserving of the closest consideration, especially by those who exercise authority, those who legislate, those who teach, and above all by those who broadcast—in particular, religious broadcasters.

All who have ever engaged in religious broadcasting will have become aware of something called the consensus, a mysterious bias to which the media and especially television are susceptible, a kind of humanistic orthodoxy that is imposed upon the literate populations of the western world with a thoroughness and ruthlessness that Torquemada, with his old-fashioned racks and thumbscrews and autos-da-fé, might well envy. I frequently myself referred to it as a great liberal death wish, in the sense that it seems to me to be directed toward the destruction of the very values it purports to uphold, to seek to bring about the very authoritarianism it ostensibly finds most abhorrent, and generally to encompass the overthrow of any regime that might be expected to provide conditions in which it could continue to be upheld. Some future Gibbon, writing about the decline and fall of our western civilization, is likely to be greatly intrigued by this salvage operation that turns out to be a demolition squad, this death wish fulfilling itself in terms of utopianism whereby slavery comes to be enforced in the name of liberation, obscurantism flourishes in the groves of academe, a zero birthrate is acclaimed as a glorious achievement, and on the highest humanitarian principles babies are murdered before they are even born on a scale that might have made King Herod wince. I have seen a crazed Austrian announce the establishment of a German *Reich* that was to last for a thousand years, an Italian clown restart the calendar to begin with his assumption of power, a Georgian brigand in the Kremlin acclaimed by our intellectual elite as wiser than Solomon and more humane than Marcus Aurelius. As for your country, America, I have seen it wealthier than all the rest of the world put together and with a superiority of weaponry that would have enabled you Americans, had you so wished, to outdo an Alexander or a Julius Ceasar in the range of your conquests—all in one little lifetime. England is now part of a small island off the coast of Europe, threatened with further dismemberment and bankruptcy; Hitler and Mussolini are seen as buffoons; Stalin is a forbidden name in the country he helped to found and dominated totally for three decades; America is haunted by fears of running out of the precious fluid that keeps the motorways roaring and the smog settling, by memories of a disastrous campaign in Vietnam, whose decisive battles were fought and lost on fraudulent TV footage, and by the havoc made by the Don Quixotes of the media when they so valiantly charged the windmills of Watergate. Now can this really be, as the media so continuously insist, what life is about—this worldwide soap opera going on from century to century, from era to era, whose old discarded sets and props litter the world? Surely not. Was it to provide a location for so ribald and repetitive a production as this that the universe was created and man—or *homo sapiens*, as he likes to call himself, heaven knows why—came into existence? I cannot believe it.

If this were all, then the cynics, the hedonists, the suicides are right. The most we can hope for from life is amusement, gratification of our senses, and death. But of course it is not all. Thanks to the great mercy and marvel of the incarna-

tion, the cosmic scene is resolved into a human drama. God reaches down to become a man, and man reaches up to relate himself to God. Time looks into eternity and eternity into time, making now always and always now. If this Christian revelation was ever true, then it must be true for all time and in all circumstances. Whatever may happen, however seemingly inimical to it may be the way the world is going, its truth remains intact and inviolate. "Heaven and earth shall pass away," our Lord said, "but my words shall not pass away." Our western civilization, like all others before it, must some time or other decompose and disappear. The world's way of regarding intimations that this is happening is to engage equally in idiot hopes and idiot despair. On the one hand, some new policy or discovery is confidently expected to put everything to rights: a new fuel, a new drug, détente, world government, a common market, North Sea oil, revolution or counter-revolution. On the other hand, some disaster is as confidently expected to prove our undoing: Capitalism will break down, communism take over, or vice versa; fuel will run out, atomic wastes will kill us all, plutonium will lay us low, overpopulation will suffocate us.

In Christian terms, such hopes and fears are equally beside the point. As Christians we know that here we have no continuing city, that crowns roll in the dust, and that every earthly kingdom must some time founder. As Christians, too, we acknowledge a King men did not crown and cannot destroy, just as we are citizens of a city men did not build and cannot destroy. It was in these terms that the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome and in Corinth, living as they did in a society as depraved and dissolute as ours—under a ruler, the emperor Nero, who makes even some of our rulers seem positively enlightened—with the games, which, like television, specialized in spectacles of violence and eroticism: "Be steadfast, unmoveable," he exhorted them, "always abounding in God's work and concerning yourselves with the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are temporal, and the things that are not seen are eternal." It was in the breakdown of Rome that Christendom was born, and now in the breakdown of Christendom there are the same requirements and the same possibilities to eschew the fantasy of a disintegrating world and seek the reality of what is not seen and is eternal—the reality of Christ. In this reality we see our only hope, our only prospect in a darkening world.

After all, no more terrible disaster could befall us than that one or other of the twentieth century's nightmare utopias should come to pass: that men should veritably prove capable of constructing one or other of their kingdoms of heaven on earth, with abundance ever broadening down from gross national product to gross national product; with motorways reaching from pole to pole; with *eros* released to beget a regulation two offspring, like a well-behaved child at a party eating just two cakes; with all our genes counted and arranged to produce only beauty queens and Mensa IQs, the divergents thrown away with the hospital waste; with the media providing Muzak and Newzak around the clock to delight and inform us; with the appropriate drugs and medicaments available to cure all actual and potential ills.

Let us then, as Christians, look beyond the intimations of decay in the institutions and instruments of power, beyond the collapsing regimes, money in total disarray, the dictators and parliamentarians alike nonplussed by the confusion and conflict that encompass them. Let us remember that it is precisely when every earthly hope has been explored and found wanting, when every possibility

of help from earthly sources has been sought and is not forthcoming, when every recourse this world offers—moral as well as material—has been expended to no effect, when in the shivering cold the last faggot has been thrown on the fire and in the deepening darkness every glimmer of light has finally flickered out, that it is then that Christ's hand reaches out sure and firm, that his light shines brightest, abolishing the darkness. So, finding in everything only deception and nothingness, the soul is constrained to have recourse to guard itself and to rest content with him. This, as I see it, is the message of Christian broadcasting—this alone.

Let me conclude by saying this. My life is moving to its end, a prospect that gives me a great feeling of joy. And I conclude by adapting Solzhenitsyn's noble words and saying, "Bless you, life, for having brought me nearer to God and for having made me aware of belonging to his human family."