

Religious Education through the Curriculum and the Media: Consensus or Controversy?

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Introduction

"Mind the gap!" is a call frequently heard and heeded for those travelling on the London Underground to warn them of a potentially hazardous precipice. Those of us involved professionally in the world of Religious Education (RE from this point on) need to be aware of another chasm.

The aim of this project is to explore the chasm and the gap, in this case, is the difference between two worlds, two activities, two types of education. The first type of education is formal RE taught in schools; established through the 1988 Education Act, and shaped by local agreed syllabi, exam board specifications and, now, the *Non-Statutory Framework for Religious Education*. The second type of education is less formal, impromptu, sporadic but nevertheless influential, pervasive and relentless; Religious Education through the media.

The average 16 year old will have spent about 5360 hours in formal education in secondary school. Of that time about 195 hours will probably have been spent in R.E. During the same time they may well have spent about 4562 hours watching the television and over 2190 hours surfing the web. Together, that makes a total 6752 hours. If only 3% of their viewing and surfing leads them to explicit religious content then that would be a total of over 202 hours; an amount of time in excess of their formal R.E.

Quantity is only one issue, however. Perhaps, far more significant is the relative influence of the media over formal education. For many children education is imposed, whereas personal television viewing and internet use is the result of personal choice. It might be suggested, then, that what pupils learn about religion and religious believers through the media presents a substantial challenge, or at least acts to modify, what they learn in R.E. because they are choosing to expose themselves to the influence of the media.

The types of media output that speak to religious concerns are varied. Explicitly religious programmes are in a minority in programming schedules but, at times, soap operas, films, news stories, documentaries and comedies touch on religious issues or portray religious believers. What are the agendas of such programmes when they address religious themes? Do the communications of the media on religious themes meet a

receptive audience or do they fall on deaf ears as far as children are concerned?

In UK society, which many claim is secular, 75% of the population saw themselves as affiliated to a religion in the 2001 census. Worldwide estimates suggest that 83% are religious in some form. Probably more still might see themselves as "spiritual" or having a spiritual interest so the likelihood is that the media's comments on religion are, in many cases, influential.

But if the media is responsible for partially forming the religious outlook of young people what should the response be of the R.E. community? Disdain, indifference, ignorance, antipathy, and intolerance are all attitudes that the media are accused of in relation to religion but is the real picture as bleak as this?

Religious Education through the Media

For the purposes of this paper the term media is used to refer to television, films, newspapers and, to a limited extent, the internet.

In one sense R.E. and the media are inextricably linked. Arthur (1993) has suggested:

"...every expression of human religiousness is, inevitably, a *mediated* expression, which comes to us through a variety of means of communication...Much of the activity of the world's great faiths is, after all, precisely concerned with the communication of values and ideas using a variety of media. Indeed religions themselves could be seen as powerful systems of mass media..." (C. Arthur, 1993, p.1)

According to this view no transfer or passing on of religious ideas can take place apart from the use of media in some form or other. The quotation serves to remind us that there is a clear historical context when looking at the communication of religion and religious ideas that must be considered. The individual religious believer or religious leader has always been crucial in the communication of religious ideas throughout communities and societies. Ninian Smart comments:

"Ultimately the most important symbols communicating the essence of religion are the people involved - the shaved monk, the village priest, the hermit..." (Smart, 1988, p.443)

Some might suggest that religion in a media-based society is no different from religion in any previous society; religion has always been communicated and transmitted by means of communication between people and now that happens on a large scale because of the technology involved but little else has changed. Other authors, however, feel that a profound shift has taken place:

"...the change from a writing and print to a televisual epistemology has also had profound consequences on the way we think. Many view these consequences as being of sufficient importance to warrant the introduction of elements of media studies or media awareness training into traditional programmes of religious and theological education." (Arthur, 1993, p.21)

Arthur argues that the media have transformed the intellectual environment as the focus on the written text has given way to a focus on visual images. Kuhns, and others, would argue that the spiritual environment has been changed too:

"The Entertainment milieu has transformed the ways in which we believe and are capable of believing." (Kuhns, 1969, p.165)

It is not possible within the context of this paper to fully explore this theme but in terms of the religious education of young people what they learn from the media about religion comes to them primarily in the format of entertainment and this, perhaps inevitably, subverts any kind of religious message.

"As Akbar Ahmed says, the threat to Islam today is not so much Jesus as Madonna." (Lyon, 2000, p.65)

Islam could be replaced with any other world religion and any number of entertainment icons and phenomena could substitute for Madonna; the messages of world religions are travelling the narrow way, against the flow of the great torrent of media output.

The Prevalent Worldviews of the Media

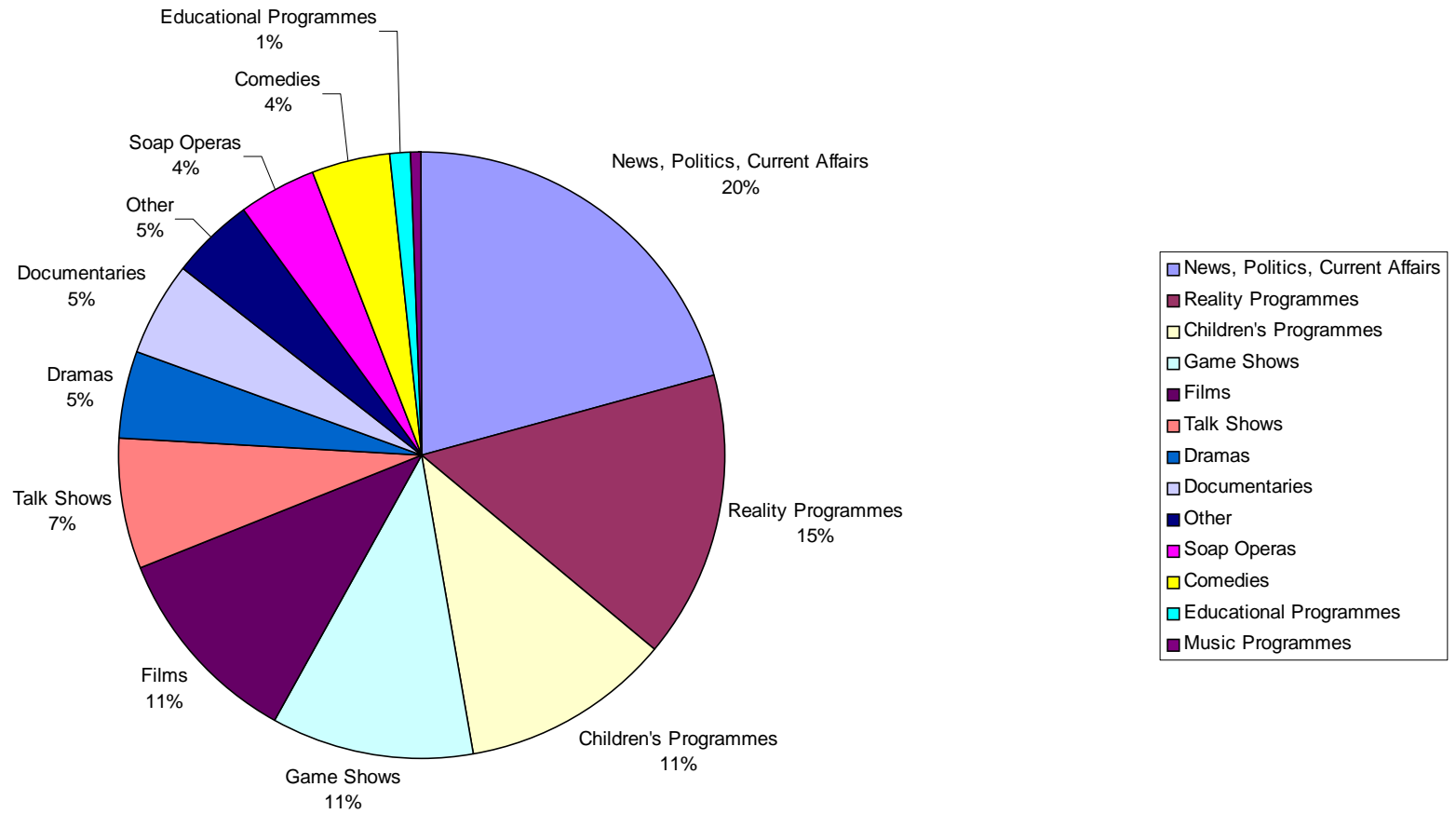
Although the media may offer a dazzling array of worldviews, one after another, with no regard to contradictions or conflicts some writers have suggested that it is possible to identify an overall worldview that is communicated, often implicitly, by the media. Fore is one such writer who talks about media myths. Essentially this is the same as identifying an overall pervasive worldview of the media. He identifies four myths that television tells us about the media and a further five about society. The most important are:

"That the media tell us the way life really is, that 'seeing is believing'... That the issues of life are simple, and TV helps us identify who and what is 'good' and 'bad'...The fittest survive, and the fittest are young, white males...Happiness consists of limitless material consumption. Thus consumption is inherently good, and property, wealth, and power are more important than people." (Fore, 1993, p59)

Various programmes communicate different facets of this worldview. For example the myth that the fittest, youngest, and most attractive survive and win because they deserve to is communicated by game shows, knockout competitions and quizzes. In the most extreme examples the one all-conquering winner gets everything and the losers are sent home with nothing except a sense of (very public) failure.

The myth that human happiness is achieved through entertainment is communicated through programmes of the following genres: sport, films, music, drama, and comedy. The extensive media output of news coverage, current affairs analysis and undercover documentaries communicates the idea that the media are guardians and arbiters of truth and determine who are seen as good and bad. In addition the participatory nature of the media and the sense of a united audience communicated by many television and radio programmes communicates the myth that we are all involved and we all agree about what is being viewed.

Programme Output of Main Four Terrestrial Channels on a Selected Weekday May 2006



In the chart above the television output for a single weekday (selected at random) in May 2006 was analysed by genre. Although the focus of television itself is entertainment those genres which might be said to have no other aim than entertainment per se (in other words all categories except news, documentaries, other and educational) comprised 69% of the output. Virtual community and the myth of a moral consensus are created strongly by news programmes, reality programmes and talk shows and these genres accounted for 42% of the programmes. Competition is the main element of game shows and it can also be a key element of reality shows. These two types of programmes contributed 26% of the programmes for the day considered and reinforced the media myth of the survival of the fittest.

On the day considered there were several genres which might have been considered under-represented if an analysis had been undertaken over a longer period. Sporting, musical and religious programmes all fluctuate according to the day or month.

After reviewing what he considers to be the key media myths, Fore summarizes:

"Thus television tells us that we are basically good, that happiness is the chief end of life, and that happiness consists in obtaining material goods." (Fore, 1993, p.60)

The worldview of the media in general, and television specifically, is in direct contradiction, therefore, to the overall worldview of the principal religions in the UK. Religions tell us that something is wrong, that the chief end of life is in a relationship with a transcendent being or an inner journey. They tell us that happiness consists in serving God or gods and others and, finally, that material goods are relatively unimportant.

In a very real sense, then, the media are anti-religious to the extent that they are dominated by a materialistic, consumerist and entertainment focussed ideology. Gorringe notes:

"In the new world order...the many watch the few. Media organizations like the BBC and CNN have a huge global reach and what is broadcast, whether it is news or *Dallas*, conveys the message of a total way of life, that of the consumer culture with its emphasis on youth, fitness, beauty, romance and freedom. Programmes like *Dallas* are, for Serge Latouche, a

sign of the West's worldwide domination of the imagination." (Gorringer, 2004, p.85)

The media can only survive if people "consume" what they produce and an audience or a readership can only be obtained if people are offered what they want. Neil Postman points out how this conflicts with an essentially religious worldview:

"You will note, I am sure, that this is an unusual religious credo. There is no great religious leader...who offered people what they want. Only what they need. But television is not well suited to offering people what they need. It is 'user friendly.' It is too easy to turn off." (Postman, 1985, p.121)

In other words, the elements of intellectual and spiritual challenge at the core of many religious belief systems don't sit easily with a media system focussed on entertainment, satisfaction, amusement, possessions and personal choice.

It is against this antagonistic and essentially hostile backdrop that individual treatments of religion in the media should be considered.

Implicit and Explicit Religious Education

A distinction needs to be made at this point between explicit and implicit religious education. This is not the same thing as explicit and implicit religion. Rather, explicit religious education takes place when religious education is itself intended in some form. By contrast, implicit religious education takes place when something contains religion as a topic but it is not the main focus; a religious concern is present but it is a side-order to the main meal.

This distinction applies to formal education and all forms of media output. For instance, R.E. lessons in schools are explicit religious education whereas pupils studying a novel in English that explored the religious beliefs of characters would be implicit religious education. In terms of television or newspaper output explicit religious education takes place when a programme or article has a main focus on religion e.g. "The Heaven and Earth Show" on BBC1. Implicit religious education takes place when Ned Flanders communicates something to viewers about American evangelical Christianity through his words and actions, religious believers

are shown in a news item protesting about homosexuality in the Church or people go to watch the film "The Da Vinci Code".

Religious Education through Television

Arthur (1993) refers to television as "the dominant medium in contemporary society" (C. Arthur, 1993, p.2) and its prime place is probably still intact although the speed of change in communication technology has been breathtaking. Young people, on average, watch between 2 and 2½ hours of television a day and the questionnaire that was undertaken suggests that television viewing outweighs internet usage and radio listening combined. Television itself has metamorphosed with the development of digital, freeview, cable, satellite and the streaming of video content over a broadband connection. A 2005 Ofcom survey found that 66% of adults had a PC at home. Recently the first show to only be available via mobile subscription service was announced (featuring the Sugarbabes). Overall, although other technology is developing fast the conventional television seems to take pride of place in the lives of most.

Some commentators on the ascendancy of the media in our culture have suggested that television has taken on quasi-religious functions. Gregor Goethals (1993) states that television has assumed an "iconic role" in providing myths, values, heroes and access to sacred sites; things previously provided by religion. In addition, he suggests, in a pluralistic culture it is the media who provide an over-arching order, holding together many competing religious ideologies.

The statement that television itself is quasi-religious is interesting. The extent to which it provides the focal point for the lives of many, provides virtual community, informs and reflects moral values and provides one key communal focal point all suggest that this may well be true. For many it is the arbiter of meaning and that which makes order out of the chaos of disparate and dissonant lives.

The key question to be considered though is not in what ways might television be considered to be religious or quasi-religious but, rather, what kinds of religious messages does television communicate and how does television itself change the religious messages it communicates? Change might mean enhance, amplify, clarify or it might mean subvert, warp, trivialise.

Neil Postman notes, "every technology has an inherent bias...a predisposition toward being used in certain ways and not others." (Postman, 1985, p.84). He gives the example of printing presses which could, in theory, have been used just to reproduce and disseminate pictures but which have been used primarily for writing instead. Similarly, television has an inherent bias to the visual equivalents of soundbites; a constant cascade of pictures and sound, limitless in variety, offering entertainment on tap that makes minimal demands of the viewer.

If this is the nature of television can it really handle religious content in a convincing and sincere manner and in a way that maintains the integrity of the subject matter?

Explicitly Religious Programmes

"Having to compete with soap operas and melodrama newscasts on TV, and chat-lines and niche-market commercials on the Internet, electronically mediated religious activity alters its character. Soundbites affect attention spans and the exaggerated polarization of positions may constrain the capacity to deal with complex issues of faith and life. [Each type of religious broadcast] may each be successful in this context, but only at a price." (Lyon, 2000, p.58)

The view of David Lyon, then, is that religious broadcasts may be deemed "successful" but success comes at a price. In this case success is dependent upon religious material adopting a guise that is both entertainment and conflict focused. Religion has to be fun, contentious and brief; ideally it should be all three if it is to attract its share of the viewing "market".

This point was clearly illustrated by the recent BBC 2 series, *The Convent*. The series was broadcast in June and early July 2006. In the fourth and last programme (broadcast on 5th July) the four guests, who have been living at the convent for forty days, have something of a showdown with their gracious ecclesiastical hosts. In *The Knowledge* (the TV and radio information magazine distributed with the *Times*) of July 1st 2006 the writer made the following comment:

"Television requires open conflict, so the only way to sell a popular programme about the contemplative religious life is to bring in people who threaten it. After all, a four-part series with nothing but nuns praying

peacefully alongside their grateful visitors would lack a certain narrative urgency. Nevertheless, the rudeness displayed by the visitors in this series is astonishing. Even the kindly nuns...end up calling it a form of abuse. "Is this the level of courtesy in the world today?" asks one...No it's not the world. It's television."

The observations made here are apposite; four hours of film exploring in depth the religious vocation, thought and life of this community would not attract viewers. Bringing together two disparate communities with dissonant worldviews and attitudes in an intensive hothouse environment with the cameras constantly trained on the participants did.

Specifically religious programmes are not exempt from the entertainment ethos and focus of television. As an educational tool the question is what do these types of programmes communicate about religion to those who might reasonably expect them to address religious topics in a coherent way with integrity and accuracy?

Worship Programmes

Worship programmes are provided regularly on the terrestrial channels. *Songs of Praise* is the best-known example of this genre. Most Sundays an edition of the programme is broadcast from various churches having been pre-recorded and the theme is taken from various sources. Sometimes the focus is an event in the church calendar, sometimes a cultural event and sometimes there is a musical focus. Recent programmes have focussed on the school choirs competition, Pentecost, Manchester, climate chaos and the arts in Cardiff.

On Sunday 14th May 2006 the programme was filmed in Cardiff. The presenter, Aled Jones, interviewed Gwyneth Lewis (a poet), Abigail Rogers (the Chief Executive of the Gate Arts Centre in Cardiff), Kelvin Thomas (a musician) and Professor Glyn Jones (a painter). The hymns were sung by a full choir accompanied by an orchestra. The focus of the programme was to find out how "art touches faith and life", specifically in Cardiff.

This edition of *Songs of Praise*, like many, did not focus exclusively on committed Christians but also included agnostics and those who might describe themselves as having a spiritual interest. "I'm not a churchy person" confessed Gwyneth Lewis, the national poet for Wales who talked

about the importance of language on behaviour. The orchestra and choir wore smart and in formal dress throughout. One of the hymns was performed as a solo. The former Head of Cardiff School of Art, Professor Glyn Davies, talked eloquently and passionately about how his art was inspired by his Christian faith; "I'm trying to reflect a responsibility to my Creator to be creative. I think God is the source of all creation." The format followed the usual format of presenter introductions, interviews, worship segments and the programme finished with a prayer, on this occasion spoken by Glyn Davies.

On Sunday 4th June 2006 the programme was presented from the annual evangelical Christian festival, Spring Harvest (which had taken place two months earlier). The presenter was Diane Louise Jordan and the worship segments of the programme featured 4000 people attending the conference. Tim Hughes and his band led the worship and interviews were conducted with Steve Chalke (a church leader), Tim Hughes (Christian musician and songwriter), Christine Hillman (who works for the Christian charity World Vision), Rob Barron (a member of the Spring Harvest prayer team) and Chris Pawson (a member of the sign language communication team).

The section of the programme that focussed on Rob Barron included a narrative of his life and conversion experience but also some footage of him praying for someone and also him praying in tongues. The worship segments of the programme featured close-ups of the worship band and also of groups and individual worshippers.

The question raised by *Songs of Praise* and other worship programmes is to what extent does worship remain authentic when broadcast on television? If an act of worship has as a focus a transcendent being to what extent is that focus lost when a second focus is added; the television cameras and, through them, the implied audience. It cannot be denied that the presence of television cameras alters the nature of worship. In relation to the first *Songs of Praise* programme discussed above it is not usual for worship to be accompanied by a full orchestra and a professional choir. Still less is it usual for those people to wear full formal dress.

The second *Songs of Praise* programme discussed reflects a different tradition within the church, evangelicalism, but the same comments could be made. Although the form and nature of worship would have largely been the same if the cameras had not been there it might be pertinent to

ask if the behaviour of all participants would have been identical. In particular, the interview of Rob Barron deserves comment.

The filming of prayer ministry is highly unusual. Within the evangelical tradition those seeking personal prayer are likely to be prayed with in a discrete place with one or more members of a prayer team not in front of several million viewers! Theologically speaking the gift of speaking in tongues (as all the other spiritual gifts) are described in the New Testament as gifts of the Holy Spirit for the edification of the Church, not party tricks to be broadcast for the atheist, agnostic, sceptic or believer.

Without impugning the piety or faith of any of those involved in the making of these and other programmes the statement needs to be made that worship has been subverted by being accommodated to television. The emphasis is placed on those with a message, rather than those with a faith. The worship segments themselves are in danger of becoming a performance, rather than an act of worship. Finally, the focus of a transcendent being has been substituted for the focus of the cameras.

This point is reinforced by contrasting Christian and Islamic worship on television. Islamic worship is mostly shown on television as part of a documentary or when there is a news story that relates to Muslims. In the vast majority of cases Muslims are filmed performing salat from the back or from the side and rarely, if ever, from the front. The point is made clearly that the cameras are there incidentally and the focus of Muslims is elsewhere. Regrettably, this is not the case with most Christian worship shown on television. It could be argued theologically that this is because Christianity is incarnational and emphasises the image of God in every human; the real motive, however, is likely to be much less noble.

During the filming of *Songs of Praise* there must be many retakes and repeats of words and hymns for the benefit of the camera. It is doubtful whether there has ever been a retake because the genuine sincerity of the worshippers was in doubt. And if there are retakes what is there to separate this genre of programme from any other that is entertainment focussed on television? The *Songs of Praise* website has a section where eager worshippers can request tickets. Tickets are normally bought for shows, not worship services.

Neil Postman summarises that television preachers:

"...have assumed that what had formerly been done in a church or a tent, and face-to-face, can be done on television without loss of meaning, without changing the quality of the religious experience." (Postman, 1985, p.118)

Postman sees the nature of television itself as being to blame for the subversion of worship programmes. He continues:

"...there is no way to consecrate the space in which a television show is experienced. It is an essential condition of any traditional religious service that the space in which it is conducted must be invested with some measure of sacrality...If an audience is not immersed in an aura of mystery and symbolic otherworldliness, then it is unlikely that it can call forth the state of mind required for a nontrivial religious experience. Moreover, the television screen itself has a strong bias toward a psychology of secularism. The screen is so saturated with our memories of profane events, so deeply associated with the commercial and entertainment worlds that it is difficult for it to be recreated as a frame for sacred events. Among other things, the viewer is at all times aware that a flick of the switch will produce a different and secular event on the screen - a hockey game, a commercial, a cartoon...the main message of the screen itself is a continual promise of entertainment." (Postman, 1985, pp.118-119)

Postman's argument, then, is that it is the situation of the viewer that makes a worship experience unlikely; the attitude, demeanour, commitment and degree of expectation of someone who sees worship as something of a spectator sport, to be enjoyed from the comfort of an armchair, is likely to be significantly different from someone who is present at worship. In addition, though, Postman draws our attention to the fact that the television screen emphasises the secular world of commercial interest and entertainment.

To summarise, then, there appear to be two main factors that prevent worship programmes from being genuine worship. First, worship has to be recast into an entertainment framework in order to "work" on television; the primary focus inevitably becomes the audience, via the camera, not the unseen God. Secondly, worship is broadcast as one of many

programmes in a secular media. Viewers choose to opt-in or to opt-out of worship programmes like everything else in a consumer culture.

Magazine Programmes and Documentaries

Postman suggests that we should judge television on how it deals with deep and important issues:

"...we do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant. Therein is our problem, for television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations." (Postman, 1985, p.16)

Magazine programmes and documentaries are the serious and substantial religious programmes. Magazine programmes, such as *The Heaven and Earth Show* shown on the BBC, are the *Newsnight* of the religious world; topical stories are considered via the discussions of an invited panel, or through viewer interaction by means of telephone, email or text. In addition, high profile figures are interviewed about their life stories, moral views and religious beliefs. Mini-documentaries within the programme focus on themes from the news or world religions e.g. Taize as a place of spiritual retreat, the euthanasia debate, and church buildings under threat.

Documentaries are much more straightforward. The focus of a documentary is to explore one particular issue in depth. In terms of religion documentaries may discuss religion as the key focus or some religious aspect may relate to the main topic. Channel 4's *The Muslim Reformation* focussed explicitly on shades of opinion within the Islamic community, and *The Passion: Films, Faith and Fury* (also broadcast on Channel 4) explored the portrayal of Biblical stories through film and the relationship between the Church and film industry.

In terms of religious education documentaries popularise religious themes and present a persuasive and coherent account. For instance, a few years ago the BBC broadcast three programmes on the life of Jesus entitled *Son of God*. Although a substantial series the amount of content covered in the programmes will always be small in comparison to the output of books and articles on the subject of Christian origins and the life of Jesus.

Documentaries inevitably have an agenda and present a personal view. For example, the documentaries presented by Robert Beckford seem to suggest that he is unsympathetic to the evangelical tradition within the Church. Jeremy Bowen's views on Jesus' resurrection in the final programme of *Son of God* were at odds with the views of many Christians. Tariq Ramadan's discussion partners in *The Muslim Reformation* indicated that many disagree with him in his interpretation of Islam. The forthcoming series from the BBC on *The Miracles of Jesus* will prompt agreement from some and dismay from others.

Although this cannot be avoided documentaries often wield an influence far beyond what they warrant and like other religious output their shortcomings are often not acknowledged. Magazine programmes often include a more diverse range of opinion but tend to over simplify and trivialise their subject matter. The focus remains on entertainment (regular pleas are made for viewers to get involved and to come back next week) and on personal choice rather than ultimate truth as practically every programme includes a whirlwind tour of different religions and perspectives.

Implicit Religious Education

As outlined above implicit religious education takes place when largely non-religious programmes address religious themes. Possible programmes include soap operas, comedies and news programmes. Such programmes are an important focus for study because, although the material that might be relevant within them is a small percentage, they can be much more influential in forming religious ideas in viewers. The reasons for their greater influence are not hard to discern; non-religious programmes generally attract a higher audience (*Songs of Praise* has sometimes attracted 3.5 million viewers but *Eastenders* has sometimes attracted 16 million) and there are many who will watch them who would not choose to watch an explicitly religious programme or attend a place of worship.

Soaps

The religious content of soap operas is generally small but from time to time explicitly religious themes and story lines make an appearance. For instance, Harold Bishop had to resolve the tensions between his faith and his family dying tragically in *Neighbours*. In *Coronation Street* Emily

Bishop, a committed Christian, struggled to forgive her husband's killer. Dot Branning (previously Cotton) continues to embody Christian character and conviction for many in *Eastenders*.

A recent storyline in *Eastenders* was the (almost) wedding in church of Billy and Honey. Honey is expecting their first child and desperately wants to get married in a church before the child is born. One day a Church of England Priest comes into their DVD rental shop to pick up a special order; a pornographic DVD entitled *Seven Nights With Judith and Jane*. It emerges that the Priest can offer them a date to get married in church but Honey is reluctant: "I do not want to get married by some Vicar who watches dirty films." Billy explains that Reverend Walsh only wanted the film because he had been asked to write a sermon about pornography and Honey is persuaded.

Reverend Walsh visits the couple's home to discuss the wedding arrangements. Honey has prepared outfits for herself and Billy by buying copious amounts of knitwear from the local charity shop and after helping him to put on his cardigan she helps Billy with his script:

"Remember what you agreed? You believe in God, you believe in Jesus and Mary and all that. And even though you haven't been to church recently, you still pray every day."

While Honey prepares tea Reverend Walsh and Billy discuss the blight of pornography:

Reverend Walsh: Well clearly pornography is an appalling thing. It devalues women, it undermines human relationships, it commodifies sexuality.

Billy: And, let's face it, some of it is just downright filth isn't it?

Reverend Walsh: But one only has to glance around to see what a widespread phenomenon it is. And so one has to ask oneself what is missing? What is the hole that needs to be filled?

Billy: Indeed, yeah.

Reverend Walsh: Well I think it's a God-shaped hole myself. When we lack meaning we seek distraction and, let's face it, what greater distraction is there than sex?

Billy: It certainly distracts me, from time to time. That is, you know, when I'm not praying for it not to, that is.

However, all goes wrong when Billy announces that he does not need to discuss the meaning and purpose of the vows because he has been through it all before. Reverend Walsh leaves announcing that he will not conduct the wedding but he would be happy to give them a blessing after a registry office wedding.

A little later Honey is with Peggy in the square when Reverend Walsh suddenly appears and Honey hides: "That's the Reverend that refused to marry us...well thanks to him my baby's going to be born illiterate!"

Peggy races off to confront the Priest who has entered the DVD shop. She sermonises: "Divorce isn't a crime you know and I thought you lot believed in second chances." She notices the pornographic film in his hand and questions: "Does your parish know you are into this filth?" The Reverend parries: "It was for research purposes."

Peggy replies, "We believe you, don't we Billy? But then, you see, we're a very open-minded family but will the rest of your community see it that way? I mean you know what people are like. No smoke without fire. June 2nd was it? Lovely time of year for a church wedding, don't you think?"

The portrayal of a Christian minister in this storyline is damning; not only does he fail to stick to his principles in the midst of Peggy's hints at blackmail but when he does express his Christian outlook to Billy his Christian clichés makes him both pompous and totally incomprehensible.

Honey's coaching of Billy before Reverend Walsh arrives suggests not only the manipulative use of the Church by agnostics but also of religious gullibility; the Church would have been easily duped by the scheming couple if it were not for Billy's indiscretion.

Such presentation of religion and religious believers in soap operas can be persuasive and widely influential.

Comedies

Terence Copley questions:

"Are comedy programmes harmless fun, or might they have a deleterious effect on perceptions of religion? *The Vicar of Dibley* starred Dawn French in several series depicting the trials of a young woman vicar

arriving in a traditional parish, facing strong opposition from a middle-aged, right-wing, male churchwarden who is gradually won over. This may have been forward-looking in its day and supportive of the then recent change in the Church of England to allow women priests. Unfortunately for the media image of Christianity, the Dibley church council comprised dimwits, buffoons and at least one character in whom a strong hint of perversion lurked under the surface. *Father Ted*, screened in the UK, the USA and Ireland, is a Roman Catholic priest banished by his bishop for 'financial irregularities' and associated with Father Jack, a thinly disguised alcoholic, all in the best laughable taste." (T.D. Copley, 2005, p.36)

Popular comedies certainly present an always at least mixed, and sometimes negative, portrayal of religion. *The Simpsons* has its fair share of religious figures: Marge, Lisa, Reverend Lovejoy, and the Flanders family. The most well known figure out of all of these and the one who probably represents a religious tradition most explicitly is Ned Flanders.

"For all his admirable qualities, Flanders occasionally exhibits the zealous proselytizing that for many represents the unpleasant side of evangelical Christianity: an unwillingness to take no for an answer. After a typical misadventure, Homer and Marge lose custody of their children—Bart, Lisa, and Maggie. The state moves the Simpson children next door into the temporary care of the Flanders family. A family parlor game, Bible Bombardment, first reveals that Bart and Lisa have no grasp of the scriptural arcana that is common knowledge to the Flanders boys. The Simpson offspring then let slip that they have never been baptized. Rather than consulting Homer and Marge, who are taking court-ordered parenting classes, Ned dresses the Simpson children—who have voiced neither interest nor acquiescence—in white robes for baptism. At the Springfield River, he prepares to immerse them and asks if they reject Satan. Homer interrupts the involuntary rite before any water lands on Bart's head, saving Bart from being saved." (Pinsky, 2001, p.28)

Although, in this example, Ned exhibits something of a sinister side he is more often annoying and irritating. His greetings include "Well, cockily-doodily-doo, little buddies" and "Hi-dilly-ho-dilly, neighboreenos!". In the episode *Homer the Heretic* Ned responds to the news that Homer has given up church by arriving at his door, with his family, to sing Christian choruses at Homer in the hope that this will bring him to repentance. He is constantly optimistic and cheerful to the annoyance and frustration of

Homer who sometimes refers to him as "Charlie Church". Ned's wholesomeness regularly strays over the boundary into corny Christianity. In one episode Ned decides to build a "Praise Park"; an amusement park based on Christian themes.

However, despite these negative characteristics many have highlighted Ned's positive qualities. For instance, Gerry Bowler, Professor of Philosophy at Canadian Nazarene College in Calgary and chairman of the Center for the Study of Christianity and Contemporary Values, calls Flanders "television's most effective exponent of a Christian life well-lived." (Quoted by Pinsky, 2001, p.28)

Flanders is sincere, joyful, mostly consistent and committed. On one occasion he risks his life twice to save Homer from a house fire despite Homer's constant abuse of him. Ned tells Homer that he has done it because Homer would do the same for him. Homer then imagines Ned trapped in a building whilst he lies on a hammock in his garden sipping iced drinks! Ned's religion, while ostentatious and accompanied by a whole Christian subculture, is sincere, sacrificial and heartfelt. Pinsky continues:

"Religion informs nearly every aspect of Ned's life, from the doorbell that chimes "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" to his air horn that blares the Hallelujah chorus. Together with his family, he prays at meals and before bed. He attends church three times a week and tithes, contributing to seven other congregations, just to be on the safe side. He belongs to a Bible-study group and keeps notes stuck on his refrigerator with a sign of the fish magnet. Like many believers, he thanks God often for his blessings, for things as small as a beautiful day.

Ned believes in salvation through grace, and he expects Jesus' return to Earth at any moment. Yet Ned is also deeply immersed in the good works of the social gospel, beginning with the random (and typically improbable) donation of one kidney and one lung. His elderly grandmother lived with the family for a time. Ned volunteers at a foster home, hospitals, soup kitchens, and a homeless shelter." (Pinsky, 2001, p.28)

The significance of this portrayal of Christianity is not merely that Ned has many positive characteristics but that, in religious education terms, *The Simpsons* reaches a huge audience that spans the age range and includes those in secondary school as a key group.

Religious Education through Film

Religious education can also take place through film and there are a number of films that include religion in their subject matter. In general religious themes (for instance sacrifice or redemption) feature more than religious characters but the latter are still present at times, albeit in relatively small numbers.

The religious characters in films seem to be more negative than their counterparts in soaps or comedies and the reason for this may be the longer narrative flow of a soap or a comedy series which allows time to explore more fully the nuances of each character. In contrast, religious characters in films seem to be introduced with a clear agenda; they are introduced to make a point and then often disappear.

In a large number of cases the explicitly religious characters are not the most virtuous and, in addition, the religious characters often appear paralysed, distant and of no earthly use at a moment of crisis. In the film *Kingdom of Heaven* the hero, Balian, is contrasted effectively with the Bishop of Jerusalem when, towards the end of the film, they find themselves under siege. First the Bishop advocates the leaders deserting Jerusalem on the fastest horses and leaving the masses at the mercy of the Islamic forces amassed at the gates. Balian questions, "What about the people?" The Bishop then says it is unfortunate about the people but it is God's will. As the enemy forces come close to breaking down the gates of Jerusalem the Bishop advises: "Convert to Islam, repent later." Balian's sarcastic reply is: "You've taught me a lot about religion, Your Eminence." Dogmatic yet cowardly is the overall impression that the Bishop gives.

The Clint Eastwood directed film *Million Dollar Baby* focusses on the relationship that develops between a boxing trainer, Frankie (Clint Eastwood) and Maggie (Hilary Swank), an aspiring female boxer. The plot develops as Frankie first refuses to train her, then agrees to take her on, she then becomes increasingly successful, and, finally, she is tragically injured and paralysed at the height of her career. Maggie asks Frankie to end her life.

The religious element of the film arises from Frankie's interaction with his priest, Father Horvak. Frankie is shown to be a committed Roman Catholic; we see him attend public worship and private prayer is hinted at

too. The relationship between the two men is fairly close and discussions between them focus on two subjects. First, Frankie enjoys winding up the religiously orthodox priest by claiming doubts and confusion over the immaculate conception and the trinity. In one scene he presses the increasingly irate, priest to explain the trinity. Frankie summarises: "Is it sort of like snap crackle and pop all rolled up into one big box?" Secondly, Father Horvak, challenges Frankie to re-establish the relationship with his estranged daughter. The cause of the breach in the relationship is not revealed but is clearly serious.

The most substantial conversation between the two men comes towards the end of the film as Maggie lies paralysed and despondent. She has asked Frankie to end her life and Frankie wrestles with his own conscience and the priest in a darkened church:

Priest: You can't do it. You know that.

Frankie: I do, Father. Now she wants to die, and I just want to keep her with me. And I swear to God, Father. It's committing a sin by doing it. By keeping her alive I'm killing her. I mean how do I get around that?

Priest: You don't. You step aside Frankie. You leave her with God.

Frankie: She's not asking for God's help. She's asking for mine (through clenched teeth and tears).

Priest: Frankie I've seen you at mass almost every day for 23 years. The only person who comes to church that much is the kind that can't forgive themselves for something. Whatever sins you carry, they're nothing compared to this. Forget about God or heaven and hell. If you do this thing you'll be lost somewhere so deep you'll never find yourself again.

Priest gets up and walks away leaving him alone in a darkened church.

Totally orthodox and yet deserting the soul in his pastoral care at his moment of need the Priest gives the impression of cold dogmatism. Frankie leaves the church, helps Maggie die and searches for his peace apart from the Church that has been his spiritual focus.

Some films are frankly merciless in their approach to religion. The brilliant *East is East* explores religious and racial tensions in 1970s Salford. Muslims are treated with what might be considered harsh realism. A major theme of the film is outward religious observance versus inner desire and this is explored in many areas. For instance, arranged marriage forms a major focal point for the film and this is resented by

several of the characters. At the local madrassah the children look bored. One girl is told to wear her hijab, which she does until the Imam passes her and she removes it again. At home the children cook up a distinctly haram cooked breakfast and try to get rid of the smell from the house before their father arrives.

Dogma is a profane and irreligious theological comedy and although it attempts to develop a religious plot the incessant foul language and innuendo do nothing to engender respect or serious thought about the issues that it could explore. In addition to mocking the Catholic Church and the heavenly hierarchy it includes a traditional and customary dose of relativism. A character called Serendipity says:

"When are you people going to learn? It's not about who's right or wrong. No denomination's nailed it yet, and they never will because they're all too self-righteous to realize that it doesn't matter what you have faith in, just that you have faith. Your hearts are in the right place, but your brains need to wake up."

Some films are thought provoking and engaging in terms of religious content. *Bruce Almighty* explores the providence and omnipotence of God, both called into question by Bruce Nolan. Bruce is bequeathed God's powers temporarily and is challenged to make good use of them. *Carnage* follows and key theological issues are explored. Bruce feels the tension of wanting to use his omnipotence to cause his estranged girlfriend to love him again yet he knows that he cannot affect free will.

Overall, then, films explore religious themes in a wide variety of ways and from time to time they include religious characters. Some treatments of religion and religious believers are thought provoking. Others are banal, biased and partisan. The religious messages that come through film are diverse.

Religious Education through the Curriculum and Media: Pupil Perceptions

Introduction

A questionnaire was composed and administered to explore pupil perceptions of what they learn about religion and religious believers through formal R.E. and through the media. The full questionnaire and an analysis are given in the appendix. Key findings are given below.

Key Findings

R.E. Through The Media

Television remains the dominant media influence for many young people. On average, those questioned spent more time watching television than they spent on the internet. The majority of those questioned spent more time watching television than they did on the internet and listening to the radio combined.

More able pupils are more likely to be able to identify religious content when they come across it through the media than less able pupils. Having recognised it as such they are then more likely to evaluate it critically.

Lower ability pupils are much less likely to watch a specifically religious programme than their more able peers. This means that, religiously speaking, the influence of different genres of programme is dependent upon the ability of the young people concerned. *Songs of Praise* and religious documentaries were the most frequently mentioned programmes that had been watched.

The vast majority of those questioned could identify a religious character in a non-religious programme. Comedies, soap operas and news programmes were the most frequent sources. Specifically, *The Simpsons*, *Eastenders*, *The Vicar of Dibley* and news programmes were where these characters were seen. Characters from *The Simpsons* were the most regularly mentioned by each group questioned.

Religious characters in non-religious programmes seem to communicate a reasonably positive impression of religion and religious groups to pupils. Many respondents were able to be specific about characteristics displayed by religious characters in non-religious programmes which they felt portrayed religion and religious believers in a favourable and positive light. More able pupils were more likely to identify both positive and negative elements in the portrayals and this would suggest that they are able to construct a more nuanced and analytical picture of how the media is presenting religion.

Films appear to be less influential than non-religious programmes on television in religious terms and there were significantly more negative

comments for ideas about religious believers and religions derived from films than for ideas derived from non-religious programmes.

R.E. Through The Curriculum and the Media

When asked about their R.E. lessons pupils highlighted that lessons had communicated to them that religion is diverse, that RE encourages and models certain values, that religion could lead to an ethical lifestyle and enhance personal morality. Some also mentioned that religion was about choice, demanded personal commitment and was potentially life changing.

Pupils were asked to identify the messages of the media about religion and religious believers. Less than a quarter suggested that the media presented religion in a positive way. The sources of negative images about religion seem to be mostly religious programmes, films and news items.

A minority of pupils recognise that they rely on the media for their ideas, information and beliefs about religion and religious believers, either partially or fully. Higher and middle ability children were much more likely to suggest a discerning use of RE lessons and the media together in forming their own ideas, or advocate a rejection of both in favour of their own research.

Pupils were often perceptive and savvy in being able to articulate their reasons for suspecting that the media was sometimes less than reliable in its treatment of religion. The most popular reasons given were that the media is entertainment focussed, selective and financially driven.

Almost two-thirds stated that they believed RE was more trustworthy than the media on the topics of religion and religious believers. Reasons given for this trust included the factual nature of RE, the training and trustworthiness of the RE teacher, the balanced perspectives given, and the willingness to explore different points of view.

Conclusion: Religious Education in the Media World of the 21st Century

"To be honest, most of the time the media/news seems a more reliable source of religion occurrences in the present day because it shows the reality about what is going on. The text book view you get in a RE lesson seems less realistic." (Questionnaire Respondent)

"...the way in which religion is presented by the media raises all sorts of issues about accuracy, bias and omission, which programmes of education in this area ignore at their peril. If they do not want to let the instantly accessible curriculum provided by the media to set the agenda of religious information, educators are duty bound to make some response to it." (Arthur, 1993, p.7)

In the case of the questionnaire respondent quote above the media has set the agenda of religious information and this is a constant possibility. The necessary response to this phenomenon is to ensure that RE is as cognisant as possible of the media agendas and actively engages with them. RE that engages with the media needs to tackle a number of areas.

RE And Consumerism

"For many young people...the question of who they think they are, or how they would like to live, is as likely to be answered in terms of the kind of consumer life-style they aim for as the kind of occupation they seek." (Bocock, 1993, p.109)

The consumerist and materialistic orientation of the media has already been addressed. In terms of RE, consumerism has for too long been allowed to be the unstated backdrop of much RE teaching when it should be brought into the spotlight, examined, questioned and tested. RE professionals have perhaps been guilty of allowing themselves to equate faith in the merely physical order of things with agnosticism or atheism when instead we should be recognising that a large number of people have a living and vibrant faith that they live to shop and that increasing amounts of money will bring increasing happiness. When shopping malls look like cathedrals and the opening of a new Ikea store prompts something akin to hysteria it is time to explore and be open about the religion that a vast number live by.

"...such collusion of Christianity with consumer culture diminishes the deity, downplays the divine, or denies that the non-consumer is our neighbour...deep believers may well deplore the shallowness of the saccharine sacred." (Lyon, 2000, p.15)

David Lyon highlights the fact that materialism is not a neutral phenomenon as far as religious worldviews are concerned but the very tenets of materialism conflict with belief in an unseen deity and many of the ethical demands that might flow from that.

RE And The Entertainment Culture

"Religion, or rather, spirituality has undoubtedly become a consumer item. New sources of meaning are sought that include prominently the figure or at least the name of Jesus. In Canada...Jesus has become an icon of choice on T-shirts...appears in rap music lyrics and in bestselling books. But this is equally and undoubtedly a postmodern Jesus. As theologian Henry Maier comments, while a personal relationship with God is sought, people want 'an easier, faster, no-fuss, microwaveable God.'" (Lyon, 2000, p.136)

RE needs to be realistic about the extent to which religion on television has become entertainment. When it becomes so more often than not it becomes worthless as genuine insight and information. That is not to say that it has become useless to the RE professional; he or she may use it to stimulate discussion or make a series of points very different from those originally intended. What is being urged, then, is an essentially critical use of media resources.

"The average length of a shot on network television is only 3.5 seconds, so that the eye never rests, always has something new to see. Moreover, television offers viewers a variety of subject matter, requires minimal skills to comprehend it, and is largely aimed at emotional gratification...But what I am claiming here is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience...Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television." (Postman, 1985, p.86)

As a society we are impatient for gratification. We have Ipods so that we can access thousands of music tracks on the move. We have the internet so we can access a huge library of resources, documents, advice and

games when and where we want them. We have DVD recorders so that we can watch what we want when we want. Postman points out that TV has pandered to our whim for instant emotional gratification and visual satiation. In that context what hope does the RE teacher have of communicating that some have found that pursuing a religion may be the all-consuming task of a life time but also the most rewarding and fulfilling goal and end of life?

Somehow the RE teacher has to offer pupils something more than religious froth and this can happen through a variety of means. Written texts, discussions, visual or auditory resources and especially encounters with religious believers and communities are all valuable. Media clips can provide a way in to explore and a point of connection with the world of the pupil. The themes of films, in particular, may provide ways to explore religious ideas. Whatever is used the overall aim is to attractively and incessantly suggest that there can be other goals in life than to merely keep myself entertained.

The Role of RE in Decoding the Media

"For on television, discourse is conducted largely through visual imagery, which is to say that television gives us a conversation in images, not words...television demands a different kind of content from other media. You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content." (Postman, 1985, p.7)

RE needs to include elements of media education and part of that education will be to open up with the pupils the inherent bias of the media to which they are exposed. In addition to the worldviews of the media RE needs to address the way that certain formats or genres of media are given to presenting topics in certain ways.

For example, Postman's comment above could also be applied to religious thinking, worship or the consideration of moral, philosophical and ethical issues. In other words, television, which relies on the audible and even more on the visual will always struggle to engage with the abstract, invisible and theological. Postman summarises:

"Thinking does not play well on television...There is not much to see in it." (Postman, 1985, p.90)

There is not much to see in praying, reflecting, or meditating either. Elsewhere he writes:

"...on television, God is a vague and subordinate character. Though His name is invoked repeatedly, the concreteness and persistence of the image of the preacher carries the clear message that it is he, not He, who must be worshipped. I do not mean to imply that the preacher wishes it to be so; only that the power of a close-up televised face, in colour, makes idolatry a continual hazard...Television's strongest point is that it brings personalities into our hearts, not abstractions into our heads." (Postman, 1985, pp.122-123)

The key point here, then, is that regardless of the intent of the director, producer, or those involved in the making and production of a certain religious programme the nature of television itself makes it hard for the viewer to see beyond the seen to the unseen.

News coverage has its own inherent bias too. In this case the bias is to the dramatic, the sensational, the shocking, the famous, the high profile, the instantaneous and the exceptional. For instance, a religious fanatic who plants a bomb is instantly newsworthy, whereas a religious project which works long-term to effect reconciliation between rival groups is not. A politician's fall from grace is immediate and public. Should that person then discover a religious faith which assists them through the slow process of personal healing, restoration and the long journey back to establishing personal integrity then it is unlikely that this part of their story will be told in the newspapers. Wars between rival religious groups receive airtime. Rarely are there features on societies where different religious groups coexist with mutual respect and at peace. The RE teacher has a role in decoding the media and making pupils aware of the inherent bias of different media types.

The Role of RE in Providing Alternative Worldviews

"...there is no way effectively to critique the media without bringing to bear a perspective that transcends secular culture, that is, a religious perspective." (Fore, 1993, p.57)

Not only should RE be courageous about tackling materialism and consumerism but also it should recognise that it is the only subject in a position to truly do so. In order to confront a worldview another

worldview needs to be used and RE is in the business of exploring the worldviews of individuals, communities, and whole religions.

Fore (1993) states that all religious world-views are in opposition to our culture e.g. Christianity is about freedom, redemption, the exclusivity of God, and the fact that God is with his creation. The RE teacher therefore has an incredibly powerful range of tools within his or her grasp with which to engage with media myths; a vast array of wisdom, teaching, practices, lifestyles and insights which point to different ways of living.

Martyrdom, self-sacrifice, generosity, unconditional love are alien themes in our "comfort culture" yet they still maintain the appeal of a far off country described in a travel brochure; we'd like to go there but we're not quite sure if we have the resources to go there, or what the journey might be like. The media might persuade some that the journey is too long, dangerous and costly but good RE, like a well-written travel guide, will encourage some to take a risk and maybe discover the adventure of a lifetime.

Appendix - Questionnaire and Analysis

Introduction

79 pupils completed the questionnaire. Group 1 were a group of high ability Year 10 pupils at an urban mixed independent school. Group 2 were mid ability Year 9 pupils at a rural comprehensive school and Group 3 were from the same comprehensive but were mid to low ability.

Questionnaire

Religion and the Media Questionnaire

School:

Male/Female:

Class:

1. How many hours of TV do you watch a day?

2. How many hours do you surf the internet a day?

3. How much time do you spend listening to radio in an average day?.....

4. Have you ever come across religious ideas, beliefs or issues on the internet or on the radio? If so where?

.....
.....

5. Have you ever watched a religious programme? (*A religious programme is one where religion is the main focus of the programme e.g. Songs of Praise, The Heaven and Earth Show, documentaries about religion or religious issues.*)

6. If you answered "Yes" to the previous question please tell me what was the name of the programme and what impression did it give you of religion and religious people. (**There is a list of words in the word bank below. You can use those words or choose your own if you would prefer**)

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.....
.....

7. If you have not seen a religious programme why not?

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.....
8. Have you ever seen a religious character in a non-religious programme (e.g. Ned Flanders in *The Simpsons*, Dot in *Eastenders*, or religious believers in news items)?

Who have you seen and what impression of religion and religious believers did they give you? Please give up to three examples if you can.

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9. Have you seen a film in the last year that included a religious character (e.g. Frankie and the Priest in *Million Dollar Baby*)?

What was the film? Who was the character? What ideas about religion and religious believers did the film give you?

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10. What impression of religions and religious believers have you developed from your RE lessons?

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11. Do you think the media gives you different ideas about religion from your RE lessons? In what ways?

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12. If you think the media and RE lessons give you different ideas of religion and religious believers why do you think this is? Which set of ideas do you trust more? Why?

.....
.....
.....

Word Bank

fascinating, boring, challenging, old fashioned, exciting, irrelevant, life changing, corrupt, committed, hypocritical, good, fanatical, genuine, extremist, honest, ancient, valuable, isolated, deluded, wise

Thank you very much for your help. If you might be happy for me to interview you at school about things you have written here then please write your name below. This is **completely optional**. Name:
John Goody, Head of RE, Uffculme School.

Analysis

Television Viewing

Group	Average Daily Hours of Television Watched
1	1.14
2	2.7
3	2.4
Average for all pupils	2.08

Groups 2 and 3 watch significantly more television than group 1. Because of the narrow scope of the sample it is difficult to know which is the significant variable: do lower ability children watch more television than higher ability? Do rural children watch more television than urban children? Do younger children watch more television than older children? I think ability and rural or urban are the significant variables.

Several results in Group 3 had to be discounted. One pupil stated that they watched 12 hours of television a day and two others said that they watched 7 hours a day. It may be that all three have given their weekly viewing figures. However if the two 7 hour responses are included then the Group 3 average becomes 2.7 hours (the same as Group 2).

Internet Usage

Group	Average Daily Hours of Internet Usage
1	1.12
2	1.31
3	1.19
Average for all pupils	1.22

Internet usage does not vary significantly between the three groups. However, the significance lies in the dominance of the television in comparison with other media. For example Group 1 only watch 1 minute more television on average than using the internet. Groups 2 and 3, however, spend 1 hour 23 minutes and 1 hour 13 minutes more respectively watching television than using the internet. This is likely to relate to their rural setting. For some groups of children in our society television remains a dominant influence.

When it is considered that nationally more children are in the mid to low ability than high ability bracket and more are in comprehensives than independent schools then it may be a reasonable conclusion to say that television remains the dominant influence for most pupils.

Radio Listening

Group	Average Daily Hours of Radio Listening
1	0.68
2	1.14
3	0.75
Average for all pupils	0.88

Radio is less used than both the internet and the television. Some responses also made clear that listening does not always entail active listening. For some, the radio is on whilst pursuing a range of other activities.

Internet & Radio

Group	Average Daily Radio Listening and Internet Usage Combined
1	1.8
2	2.45
3	1.94
Average for all pupils	2.06

For Group 1 the radio and internet, if taken together, absorb more time than the television but, again, for Groups 2 and 3, the television remains dominant. Here the results reveal a trend: Group 1 watches 0.66 hours less television than listening to the radio and surfing the net combined, Group 2 0.25 hours more and Group 3 0.46 hours more.

Rural or urban setting and the relative ability of children are believed to account for the relative influence of television when compared to other media.

Religious Content on the Internet and Radio

Group	4. Have you ever come across religious ideas, beliefs or issues on the internet or on the radio? If so where?				
	Yes	No	Total	Yes %	No %
1	20	1	21	95	5
2	16	14	30	53	47
3	9	19	28	32	68
Total	45	34	79	57	43

The results here are very interesting. Group 1 had a much higher incidence of coming across religious content on the internet or radio despite spending less time using these mediums than other groups. There appears to be a correlation between ability and the likelihood of identifying religious content on the radio or internet.

Two factors may help to explain this. First, programme selection may be significant. The responses of Group 1 suggested that they had actually sought religious content on occasions. Secondly, the ability of pupils may affect their potential to identify content as religious or relevant to

religions in some way. In other words, more pupils may have been exposed to religious content (because they have been watching as much) but have not recognised it as such.

Source of Religious Content on the Internet and Radio

Of the 45 pupils who had come across religious content on the internet or radio 17 identified news bulletins as being the source. This was by far the largest group.

The significance of this relates to the number and type of stories about religion and religious believers that are communicated through the media.

Watching of Religious Programmes

Group	5. Have you ever watched a religious programme? <i>(A religious programme is one where religion is the main focus of the programme e.g. Songs of Praise, The Heaven and Earth Show, documentaries about religion or religious issues.)</i>				
	Yes	No	Total	Yes %	No %
1	14	7	21	67	33
2	16	14	30	53	47
3	3	25	28	11	89
Total	33	46	79	42	58

There is a clear trend here, which suggests that lower ability pupils are less likely to watch any kind of religious programme. For increasingly lower ability pupils, then, it would seem to be reasonable to suggest that their ideas about religion and religious believers, formed through the media, are generally not coming from programmes designed to address these topics.

6. What was the name of the religious programme that you watched?		
Programme Name	Number of Pupils	Percentage Share
Songs of Praise	18	53
Documentary	9	26
Heaven & Earth Show	3	9
Monastery	1	3
Children's	1	3
Other	2	6
Total	34	100

Note: Although 33 pupils stated they had watched a religious programme one respondent listed two programmes.

The relative influence of *Songs of Praise* came as a surprise. This may partly be explained by its viewing time. Documentaries were also a significant group.

Reasons for Not Watching Religious Programmes

If you have not seen a religious programme why not?		
Reason Given	Number of Pupils	Percentage Share
Boring or not interested	28	50
Don't watch much TV	6	11
Other programmes are more interesting	6	11
Don't like them	3	5
They're not on when I'm watching TV	2	4
Old fashioned	2	4
Irrelevant	2	4
I'm an atheist	2	4
They're not aimed at the young	1	2
I don't watch this type of programme	1	2
Too dogmatic	1	2
They're not challenging	1	2
I have no control over what is watched on the TV	1	2

Total reasons given	56	100
Note: 46 pupils said they had not watched a religious programme. 10 gave more than one reason for not watching one.		

Half of the pupils who completed the questionnaire cited the boring nature of religious programmes or their lack of interest in them as the main reason for not watching religious programmes. When it is considered that religious programmes have been influenced by the entertainment ethos of television it would appear, that for a large proportion of young people, using religion to entertain has been to no avail!

Religious Characters in Non-Religious Programmes

8. Have you ever seen a religious character in a non-religious programme?					
Group	Yes	No	Total	Yes %	No %
1	21	0	21	100	0
2	27	3	30	90	10
3	25	3	28	89	11
Total	73	6	79	92	8

Most pupils in all three groups were able to identify a religious character in a non-religious programme.

Which Religious Characters in Non-Religious Programmes?

Have you ever seen a religious character in a non-religious programme? Who have you seen?						
Characters	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3	
	Number	% of Group	Number	% of Group	Number	% of Group
Ned Flanders (or occasionally another Simpson)	19	90	22	73	17	61
Dot Cotton (or another Eastenders character)	3	14	15	50	9	32
A real person featured in the News	4	19	2	7	4	14
Vicar of Dibley	4	19	2	7	0	0

Ashley (or another Emmerdale character)	0	0	2	7	1	4
Harold (or another Neighbours character)	2	10	0	0	0	0
Father Ted	1	5	1	3	0	0
Muslim in Spooks	1	5	0	0	0	0
Other	4	19	0	0	0	0

Characters in comedies and soap operas were the most frequently identified. Characters from *The Simpsons* were the most frequently mentioned by each group. The *Vicar of Dibley* and the news programmes were the next most regularly cited example for Group 1 whereas *Eastenders* characters were the next most regularly cited for Groups 2 and 3.

What do Religious Characters in Non-Religious Programmes Communicate about Religion and Religious Believers?

Nature of comments on religious characters in non-religious programmes.				
Comment	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Total
Number of positive comments	15	15	16	46
Number of positive comments as a percentage of the group	71	50	57	58
Number of negative comments	17	15	11	43
Number of negative comments as a percentage of the group	81	50	39	54
Number of neutral comments	2	4	2	8
Number of neutral comments as a percentage of the group	10	13	7	10
Respondents just making positive comments	4	11	11	26
Respondents just making positive comments as a percentage of the group	19	37	39	33
Respondents just making negative comments	4	11	6	21
Respondents just making negative comments as a percentage of the group	19	37	21	27

Respondents just making neutral comments	0	1	1	2
Respondents just making neutral comments as a percentage of the group	0	3	4	3

The overall number of positive comments came as something of a surprise. Many respondents were able to be specific about characteristics displayed by religious characters in non-religious programmes which they felt portrayed religion and religious believers in a favourable and positive light.

As ability decreased pupils were less likely to identify negative elements in the portrayal of religious characters in non-religious programmes. Negative comments outweighed positive comments in Group 1 but not in Group 3. Although numbers of positive and negative comments both declined as a percentage of the group (from Group 1 to Group 3) negative comments declined more sharply than positive comments.

Overall, positive comments outweighed overall negative comments and the number of pupils just making positive comments outweighed the number of pupils just making negative comments. It would seem that religious characters in non-religious programmes communicate a reasonably positive impression of religion and religious groups to pupils.

The fact that a greater percentage of respondents in Group 1 identified both negative and positive aspects in the media's portrayal of religion suggests that higher ability means that pupils are able to construct a more nuanced and analytical picture of how the media is presenting religion, perceiving both positive and negative elements in portrayals.

Religious Characters in Films

9. Have you seen a film in the last year that included a religious character?					
Group	Yes	No	Total	Yes %	No %
1	14	7	21	67	33
2	10	20	30	33	67
3	9	19	28	32	68
Total	33	46	79	42	58

Here there is a clear difference between Group 1 and Groups 2 and 3. The difference may partly be explained in terms of age but is more likely to be explained by the difference in setting of the school i.e. urban rather than rural. Those in Group 1 living in an urban area are more likely to have easy access to a cinema.

On the other hand, films are easily accessible on the television and, as with religious content on the internet and radio, it may be more of a case of pupils not necessarily identifying religious characters as being religious when they see them.

There are also films where religious allegory and metaphor is present and these probably have been seen but not identified as being religious by respondents e.g. *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

9. Have you seen a film in the last year that included a religious character? What was the film?		
Film Name	Number of Pupils	Percentage Share
Da Vinci Code	12	36
Horror (various titles)	3	9
Sister Act	2	6
Bruce Almighty	2	6
Wallace and Grommet and the Curse of the Wererabbit	2	6
Kingdom of Heaven	1	3
Sound of Music	1	3
Molokai	1	3
Keeping the Faith	1	3
Four Weddings and a Funeral	1	3
Van Helsing	1	3
Ali	1	3
Corpse Bride	1	3
Robin Hood	1	3
Little Nicky	1	3
Million Dollar Baby	1	3
Blues Brothers	1	3
Total	33	100

The influence of the Da Vinci Code may be explained by the fact that it has recently been released. No other film seemed to have a wide audience

although comedies as a group seemed to have been quite widely watched. By their very nature it could be argued that comedies are more likely to stereotype or ridicule religion or religious believers.

What do Religious Characters in Films Communicate about Religion and Religious Believers?

9. Have you seen a film in the last year that included a religious character (e.g. Frankie and the Priest in *Million Dollar Baby*)?

What was the film? Who was the character? What ideas about religion and religious believers did the film give you?

Positive Comments			Negative Comments		
Comment	Number of Respondents	Proportion Making Comment (out of Overall Comments)	Comment	Number of Respondents	Proportion Making Comment (out of Overall Comments)
Wise	3	10	Extreme	5	17
Dedicated	2	7	Strict	2	7
Life giving / affirming	2	7	Corrupt	2	7
Relevant	1	3	Boring	2	7
Sacred	1	3	Stereotype	2	7
Normal	1	3	Obsessed	1	3
Good	1	3	Scared	1	3
Enlightening	1	3	Scarey	1	3
			Old Fashioned	1	3
			Weak	1	3
Overall Number of Positive / Negative Comments	12			18	
Relative % of Positive / Negative Comments	40			60	

Although films appear to be less influential than non-religious programmes on television in religious terms (92% of respondents identified a religious character in a non-religious programme, whereas only 42% could do the same for a film) there was a significantly higher level of negative comments for ideas about religious believers and religions derived from films than for ideas derived from non-religious programmes.

Impression of Religions and Religious Believers Developed From RE Lessons

10. What impression of religions and religious believers have you developed from your RE lessons?

A large number of pupils made points about RE communicating diversity about religion; both in terms of belief, worship, responses to moral issues and other aspects of practice. Diversity was also noted in that religions were portrayed as having both positive and negative aspects (one pupil noted that believers could be "kind or evil"). One respondent said they had learned that extremists are a minority.

Some common elements were highlighted e.g. "All believe in God". Although this comment is not strictly accurate this person's RE had given them the impression that there are important common elements shared by religion.

Some pupils commented on the values modelled and elicited in RE e.g. equality and respect. RE was also identified as fostering respect for individual's opinions and encouraging people to believe what they wanted.

Another theme highlighted frequently was the ethical lifestyle of many believers and the role of religion in enhancing morality. Their honesty, commitment and desire to help those who were suffering were commented on.

Religion was commented on as being pervasive and about personal choice. Some pupils commented that religion can be hard to understand and that religions demand commitment in order to follow them. Several pupils commented on the potentially life-changing nature of religion. Another pupil commented that religion could change a society and not just the

lives of individuals. A number of respondents felt that good RE helped them to understand the world.

Some pupils responded negatively that they had learned that religion and religious believers were, for instance, "not my type, boring and not outgoing". One pupil commented that they would always see certain religions as "foreign". Another commented, "In order to have a sinless life you can't do much." One suggested religions "are a bit weird" and another "People join religions because they are weak."

One pupil had learned that disputes between religious believers could seem to be about insignificant issues to those outside.

The Differences in Messages About Religion Between RE and the Media

11. Do you think the media gives you different ideas about religion from your RE lessons? In what ways?

The Media Presents Religion in a Way That...		
Comment	No of Pupils Making Comment	Proportion Making this Comment as a % of Comments Overall
Emphasises extremism / scandals	22	28
Makes religion comic or ridicules	10	13
Emphasises the role of religion in conflict	7	9
Stereotypes religion	5	6
Is biased	3	4
Shows the effect of religion on life	3	4
Enhances religion	3	4
Is selective about religion	3	4
Exaggerates religion	3	4
Presents religion as insignificant or isolated	3	4
Presents religion as diverse	3	4
Makes religion shallow	2	3
Attempts to make religion entertaining	2	3
Attacks religion	2	3
Glamorises	1	1

Develops and explores religion	1	1
Shows different religious perspectives	1	1
Makes religion / religious believers seem stupid	1	1
Advertises religion	1	1
Shows religion is current	1	1
Shows religion is evil	1	1
Is accurate	1	1
Shows religion is hard to follow	1	1
Total Number of Comments	80	100

Interestingly only 17 out of 80 comments were positive in the way that pupils perceived that the media presented religion and religious believers. This contrasts with the responses noted earlier that pupils perceived that religious characters in non-religious programmes were often portrayed in a positive light. The question is then raised as to where are the negative ideas coming from.

The questionnaire responses suggest that more negative messages about religion are being derived from films (noted above) but also from news coverage (both on the television and from newspapers). This can only be conjecture because explicit questions were not asked about news coverage and newspapers. However, the fact that two of the top three responses given above are most relevant to current affairs reporting (that the media emphasises extremism and scandals and the role of religion in conflict) suggests that this conjecture is fair.

The Validity of Religious Education in the Curriculum and Through the Media

12. If you think the media and RE lessons give you different ideas of religion and religious believers which set of ideas do you trust more?						
Group	RE	Media	Both	None	No Choice	Total
1	8	1	8	2	2	21
2	23	0	3	3	1	30
3	19	3	0	1	5	28
Total	50	4	11	6	8	79
% of All Questioned	63	5	14	8	10	100

Attitudes to Media Presentation of Religious Believers and Religions

12. If you think the media and RE lessons give you different ideas of religion and religious believers why do you think this is? Which set of ideas do you trust more? Why?

Only 19% relied on the media for their ideas, information and beliefs about religion and religious believers, either partially or fully, and this came as something of a surprise. Higher and middle ability children were much more likely to suggest a discerning use of both sources of information or, indeed, a rejection of both in favour of their own research.

In terms of reasons given for being sceptical about media output respondents noted (in order of importance with the most important noted first) the entertainment focus of the media (7), that the media was selective when addressing religious topics (4), that it was financially driven and so was therefore likely to distort the subject matter (3), that it presented stereotypical ideas and figures (3), it was manipulative in its presentation (3), cavalier with the truth (2) and biased (2). Other individuals suggested that the media gave opinion without evidence, that it purposefully avoided religion out of fear of turning viewers off, that it was celebrity focussed, misleading, subjective, and prone to exaggerate.

Several pupils suggested that the media was realistic in its presentation because it was based on "real life" and the subject matter was incontestable because "I see it on the TV". Another respondent added:

"To be honest, most of the time the media/news seems a more reliable source of religion occurrences in the present day because it shows the reality about what is going on. The text book view you get in a RE lesson seems less realistic."

Attitudes to Curriculum Presentation of Religious Believers and Religions

In terms of reasons given for being positive about the RE presentation of religion and religious believers respondents noted (in order of importance with the most important noted first) the factual nature of RE (10), the training and trustworthiness of the RE teacher (7), the balanced perspectives given (5), the willingness to explore different points of view

(3), and good resources (3). In addition, pupils also mentioned that the focus in RE on beliefs (rather than on superfluous aspects), that it explored diversity and that it covered topics in more depth than the media all served to make it trustworthy. When commenting on the media, one pupil noted that the media "cannot be interrogated" and this was a factor in regarding curriculum RE as more valid.

Several pupils noted that although the presentation of religion in RE was more realistic the media presentation could be more relevant to life. Another suggested that the media presentation was needed as a corrective to curriculum RE. One pupil suggested that both the media and RE have their own agendas:

"I think that in RE lessons they try to show religion in a more positive light though in the media they show things to get the public's attention. I think that they are both fairly trustworthy but some parts are not."

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