

University of Pennsylvania Libraries

NOTICE WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

This notice is posted in compliance with Title 37 C.F.R., Chapter II, Part 201.14

# THE ELECTRONIC CHURCH IN AMERICAN CULTURE

*George Gerbner*

The "fundamentalist" upheavals that have shaken large parts of the world seem to have found an echo in the rise of the "electronic church" on American television. With our legacy of puritanism, populism, and evangelicism, and our distinction as the world's heaviest users of television (7½ hours a day in the average home and still rising), we may indeed be considered fertile ground for some sort of electronic revival.

My colleagues Larry Gross, Stewart Hoover, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorielli and I conducted a study in cooperation with the Gallup Organization, Inc., and funded by a committee on Electronic Church Research formed by the National Council of Churches, to address some basic questions about the electronic church in American culture. What is its audience? What effect does it have on the local churches? Is it more religion or more television? What is its general content? And what are the lessons—religious, social, and political—that its viewers seem to derive from the exposure?

The audience for religious programs on television is not an essentially new, or young, or varied audience. Viewers of religious pro-

grams are by and large also the believers, the churchgoers, the contributors. Their viewing of religious programs correlates with all important measures of religiosity. It appears to be an expression, confirmation, and cultivation of a set of religious beliefs and not a substitute for them.

The profile of the audience for religious programs tends to be fairly coherent and well-defined. It is what religious audiences have always been: somewhat older, lower in education and income, more conservative, more "fundamentalist," and more likely to live in rural areas and in the South and Midwest than those who do not watch religious programs. The size of the audience is more stable and compact than has often been supposed. Our calculations indicate that the regular viewers of religious programs of all denominations number about 13.3 million, or 6.2 percent of the estimated total number of persons in television households.

Local religious programs do not extend the viewing audience. Those who watch local programs also watch the syndicated television ministries (defined as programs by denominations existing primarily through broadcasting). Cable viewing does not seem to extend the viewing audience; on the whole, viewers of religious programs are no more likely than non-viewers to have cable television in their homes.

The television ministries, therefore, serve a stable and coherent national constituency. They appear to reach a broader group mostly on Sundays when the most diverse viewing public is available for all television programs.

Viewers of religious programs are drawn by content they cannot find elsewhere on television. In fact, their dissatisfaction with the "prevailing moral climate" (much of which, of course, comes to them through and from tele-



*Dr. George Gerbner is professor of Communications and Dean of The Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania and editor of the Journal of Communication. He has written extensively on mass communication research.*

vision) may be one of the most distinctive bonds between religious programs and their viewers. The sermons, the preaching, the music, the experience of "having your spirits lifted" and "feeling close to God" are frequently expressed satisfactions that viewers derive from religious programs.

Those who do not watch religious programs on television—the majority of the younger and more "upscale" television viewers—are more likely to be disinterested than hostile. Only one in four express any objections (mostly to the emphasis on solicitation of funds), but three in four switch channels rather than watch religious programs.

The key distinctions between viewers and non-viewers of religious programs, besides the demographic, are religious and philosophical. Non-viewers are less likely to hold conservative, evangelical or "fundamentalist" beliefs. Only a third (as opposed to half of the viewers of religious programs) express dissatisfaction with the prevailing moral climate. The same relative proportions consider evangelicalism and missionary work the main goal of the church. Conversely, only one-fifth of the viewers of religious programs, but one-third of the non-viewers, believe that the church should be "working for social justice."

The television ministries have been suspected of causing or at least contributing to the erosion of mainline church membership, financial contributions, and general participation. Our study has found no support for that charge. Viewers of religious programs, including the prominent television ministries, are no less likely than non-viewers to attend, contribute to, and participate in local church activities. Frequent churchgoers see little or no conflict between their participation and viewing. A personal "closeness to members" of one's local church is one of the few if not the only reason advanced for local church attendance that television ministries could not serve.

### *The messages of religious television*

In their essential features, the contents of evangelical and mainline religious programs do not present as much of a contrast as has been supposed. Discussion of political issues occurs in over half of both television ministry and mainline programs (but only one-third of general prime-time drama television programs). The television ministries are more likely than mainline church programs to ask

for money, with the prominent television ministries making the most numerous requests and asking for greater amounts.

Social and moral issues are discussed on both television ministries and mainline church programs. The most prominent of the television ministries are, however, more likely than the other groups to focus on these issues. Religious and theological issues are not discussed with any great frequency. When mentioned at all, they are most likely to be discussed on the prominent television ministries.

With regard to the participants in these programs, there are several important findings. First, men outnumber women by a considerable margin in all religious programs. In this and several other respects, the people who inhabit religious television are similar to the characters who populate the fictional world of prime-time drama. Women are generally younger than the men. Minorities, especially minority women and all Hispanics, are underrepresented in these programs relative to their numbers in the general population.

---

*"Women in religious programs have little authority or power, much like women in prime-time drama."*

---

About half of the women in major roles and one-fifth of all women participants are professionals. However, they are rarely, if ever, in the role of clergy and rarely quote the Bible. They are more likely than men to suffer from personal problems or physical ailments. Overall, women in religious programs have little authority and power, much like women in prime-time drama. On the other hand, as on prime time, men are in charge. They have roles of authority, are the clergy, quote the Bible, and do not suffer from as many ailments and/or personal problems as women.

The conservatism of religious programs is also apparent in the condemnation, much more frequent than on commercial television, of abortion, homosexuality, and other behavior perceived as deviant. "Sinful sexual conduct," for example, was addressed in one out of every four religious programs.

The emphasis on personal problems and ailments (placing an unequal burden on women) focuses on family tensions, financial and health problems, unemployment, and



Religious News Service Photos

physical handicaps. The most prominent television ministries tend to dwell most on these personal problems and ailments, and prescribe spiritual solutions or (in one out of four programs) financial contributions.

*The lessons of television  
—religious and general*

General commercial television viewing may supply or supplant (or both) some religious satisfactions and thus lessen the importance of religion for its heavy viewers. Demographic groups whose light viewers of television are most likely to find religion "very important" distance themselves the most as heavy viewers from that belief. Viewing general commercial television seems to displace, if not replace, religion as an important part of life.

The religious television mainstream tends to run conservative and restrictive rather than permissive. The general television mainstream tends to run politically "moderate," also more restrictive than permissive, and populist but not puritanical.

Heavy viewers of religious programs are more likely than non-viewers to describe themselves as conservatives, oppose a nuclear freeze, favor tougher laws against pornography, and report voting in the last general

election. Heavy viewers of general television tend to describe themselves as political moderates, are more likely to favor a nuclear freeze, are not as concerned with pornography (or, as we have seen before, with the "moral climate"), and are far less likely to say they voted in a general election. The coherent mobilizing power of religious television, rather than its reach or scope, represents its political clout.

The "electronic church," with its prominent television ministries, expresses a fairly stable, coherent, and conservative world view that serves more to rally believers than to recruit or convert others. Its regular viewers tend to be older, more "fundamentalist," and lower in income and education than non-viewers. They are greatly dissatisfied with what they perceive to be contemporary morality and interested in spreading the Gospel more than social justice. For them, watching religious television is an expression of belief and an experience that is not inconsistent with, and may even complement, local church attendance and contributions.

The world presented and the world view expressed on the television ministries may compete more with commercial television than with mainline religion. Television itself may cater to needs that religion used to satisfy while presenting attractions and gratifications that counter some religious beliefs and absorb others in its broad and popular mainstream. ●