

“Why Is Christian Faith so Fearful of Media Entertainment?”

ABSTRACT

For centuries, Christian churches have been struggling against entertainment: dance, songs, theatre... It is not surprising that they were against the media from the very beginning. Now they are more open; still they keep on wrestling with any “intrinsic the ological value of entertainment” (John Forrest). My point of view, as Mr. Foresst’s, is that of the media, not of the Churches: we are both media practitioners first. And, from this point of view, the question becomes: why are the Christian churches so fearful of media entertainment?

“The Medieval Church employed drama and dance” (Steve Saxe), architecture and visual arts to expose its faith. But, since the 18th Century, even while denouncing it, the Churches adopted a “rational” approach of persuasion (through the rhetoric of demonstration), far removed from art and narration, far from any kind of entertainment. As a result, far from the media?... The media usually makes use of a precise type of public speech: narration, story-telling. This is one of the major characteristics of the rhetoric of entertainment, a common denominator of every media, written press included.

Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*) denounces entertainment as a new slavery. Church leaders perceive entertainment as a danger (as Forrest explained). For example: “Entertainment does not tolerate silence” so important for spirituality (Jim Taylor). Entertainment is not serious, is too superficial. Is it true? Are theatre, movies, dances etc. only superficial? If not, how could they be spiritually meaningful? How can we speak of religious questions in the public forum in a seriously, but not boring, way? Is it possible that important meanings be simultaneously profound and entertaining? What are the criteria for a better discernment?

My point of view is that, taking into account a few precautions, any imaginary approach can be a vehicle of religion. This is what I wish to propose regarding rhetoric of entertainment. My presentation will focus on “how entertainment can become a vehicle of spirituality”.

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“Help!”, said BBC producer John Forrest, at the Edinburgh Congress, where the *Media, religion and culture* network met in 1999. Help me, please, I have a great problem in convincing Church authorities to be present in the media; because for them media means only entertainment, that is: superficiality, loss of time. I need any reflection to help me to persuade them of the “intrinsic theological value of entertainment” (he said). A very difficult work, indeed!

I am not so naive as to claim to give a full answer to his preoccupation with the “intrinsic theological value of entertainment.” My approach will be more limited. I just want to try answering the following questions: Why are Christian churches so fearful of media entertainment? Could that be changed in any way?

Compared with the English word “entertainment”, the French word *divertissement* can be translated in English by such different words as: recreation, relaxation, distraction, entertainment and diversion (diversion is the original Latin meaning). That implies many crucial nuances. I will use “entertainment” here as a reference word, but may I suggest that you bear in mind the nuances contained in the French word.

The fear or aversion of entertainment has a long history. We can go back to the early Middle Ages to understand that laughter was often considered dangerous when opposed to the seriousness of faith and life. You probably remember the famous book written by Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, a novel whose plot concentrated on Aristotle’s book on laughing, to which the monks were forbidden access.

We find in history many examples of those difficult relations between the Christian Churches and entertainment. Just recall what was said for a long while about singing, dancing, theatre, carnivals, etc. In the “small catechism” I learned by heart when I was young, there was a question about *divertissement* (no. 533): is it permitted? The answer was: no, unless it could be called necessary and innocent (what does “innocent” mean?!)

Denunciations today of the dangers of entertainment

Today, there are many authors who denounce the entertaining approach used by the media to catch public attention... and the best ratings (with their advertisement budgets). Three classical examples among others.

Neil Postman (in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*) denounces media entertainment as being a non-sense situation, applying superficiality and triviality to any topics it touches: culture, education, politics, morality and most of all, religion. Jacques Ellul argues the same way (in *The Humiliation of the Word*), particularly when he denounces audiovisual media as incapable of transmitting any coherent religious message and, worse, opening wide the doors to idolatry. In England, a very brilliant and famous journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge (in his book *Christ and the Media*) compared media entertainment to pure “fantasy”, opposed to the reality represented by Jesus. For his demonstration, Muggeridge uses

Pascal's approach to *divertissement*: to make a diversion, that is, to escape from the main questions of life to engage in distraction, entertainment and amusement. Remember here that Pascal, while being an extraordinary mathematician and one of the greatest French authors, was at the same time a Jansenist, who tirelessly denounced Molière's theatre. (I think Shakespeare had quite the same treatment with the Church of his time in England.)

Is entertainment a new slavery? Entertainment looks like a danger to Church leaders (as Forrest explained well). It does not tolerate silence - silence and stillness - which are essential to spirituality.

For sure, we remain ill at ease with some goals of *divertissement*: how to spend one's free time, how to avoid facing hard facts of life, evil and death, suffering and destiny... These are the preoccupations we try to escape by means of entertainment. As Pascal believed, the depth of the infinite would leave us in terrible distress, or our finitude would kill us prematurely or would paralyse us. So we enjoy entertainment, we appreciate *divertissement* because it gives us the opportunity to take a short break from our human and daily situation.

But the Church was feeling more ill at ease yet with fun and amusement. Why? One can think that it is due particularly to feasts, masquerades, popular carnivals and so on. All kinds of situations leading to drinking, and – worse - to sex. (In French Canada, a few preachers used to say that we should watch out for three dangers: religious swearing, drunkenness and “creatures” or females...) That gives a warped idea of entertainment!

It is easy to guess what was to happen with the arrival of the media. Generally speaking, the press was rather serious-minded but mostly hostile towards religion. So Christians founded their own very serious papers. But, when the Churches had to cope with the coming of cinema, then it became a kind of war, for many reasons: the movies were shown on Sundays, they were showing values or visions of the world completely different from Christian ones, and finally the immoral action in the dark rooms was not necessarily only on the screen... TV accelerated this process of presenting new visions of the world, and also artistic approaches open to sensual expression (my parish pastor recommended to put the set off when female dancers were appearing on the screen in *tutu*).

So, the arrival of the media simply amplified existing prejudices about fun, entertainment, and *divertissement*.

Could media be serious, while being entertaining?

Could media say serious things in a funny and entertaining way? This is a difficult question. I will present here a contemporary witness, who tried to cope with that precise question: Jean-Luc Godard, the famous French film director.

Godard's ambition has always been to produce serious movies on philosophical themes. How? Without using narration, that is without story-telling, killing with the same stone both diegesis and psychological transferences. However, he later discovered the importance of drama, as being a crystallization of reality, much more important than the dull daily life; as he says through one of his film characters: "Fiction brings us near to reality"; "The imaginary is not the reflection of reality, but the reality of the reflection" (in the film *La Chinoise*, 1967). Hence the value of the "semblance" or "sort of" to communicate. The "entertaining" form could perhaps convey crucial stances on life.

Paul-Marcel Lemaire (in his book *Culture et Médias*, 1989), argues the same way: simulation is not the equivalent of dissimulation. To wear a mask doesn't mean necessarily to provoke a masquerade or to hide. On the contrary, it could be sometimes a wonderful means of touching the most sublime themes of human existence: often one says more about reality behind a mask than in a face-to-face situation.

An old Latin proverb also says: *Castigat ridendo mores*, "one improves morals laughing at them". Does anyone doubt the seriousness of the different themes touched on in the movies of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, two great humorists? Does anyone doubt the seriousness of Shakespeare's or Molière's works, even if it happens to be very funny? Or of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, or of Cervantès' *Don Quixote*? And so many others. We could refer the same way to numerous entertaining film directors such as Bergman, Olmi, Bresson, Kieslowski, Almodóvar, etc.

So where is the problem? The problem is, that I am citing now the best authors, the classical works, what David Tracy calls the "Uncannies". But we don't always enjoy the best in the media. In fact, we can face everything: from the best to the worst. This is not peculiar to the media; it is the same in life. And the decision to choose our *divertissement* is not an easy task: in audiovisual media we don't know the product in advance, we can be dazzled by a poor but flashy product, or we can be repulsed by an extraordinary production which is too difficult for us to understand.

And so, I think I can conclude this section on the fact that media can indeed say serious things through fun and entertainment.

But then we are pushed in another direction: What are the characteristics of the language and expression of entertainment? Do they share in common with the faith?

Narration at the heart of languages

To delimit the heart of this question, I think that we have to go back again to Jean-Luc Godard's intuition, when he rediscovered drama. There are many ways to describe reality, one of them being information and notional approaches, another one being poetical expression, and another being story-telling, narration. These last languages are obviously

the most often used language in the media. Media are recognised as the best story-tellers. Where is the connection to the faith then?

Do we find narration or story-telling in Christian culture? Definitely. In no way do I depreciate notional and theological languages. We all know that humans communicate through both emotional and notional languages: two essential bridges between us. Through notional perceptions, we succeed to put our ideas in order, to organize our own relation to reality and life. But at the same time, we need emotions, we cannot be purely intellectually-oriented.

What is interesting in story-telling is the fact that narration conveys both kinds of expression at the same time: intelligence through emotions. This is why testimony was the first kind of manifestation of Christian faith, personal and collective. Witnesses didn't explain theological aspects of resurrection first; no, they asserted the fact: Christ has risen, we are witnesses. And then they narrated what happened.

“Kerygma, instruction and testimony, present at the very beginning of the Church as major means of expression, were associated as forms of narrative genre. In these forms, a special place should be given to testimony, especially in the Acts of Apostles, where the condition of being “witnesses to the resurrection” was the best way to define the status of Apostle” (Assemblée des évêques du Québec, 1999).

Among major modes of communicating the faith, story-telling should be given a special place. Too often we hold as identical Christian faith and a series of dogmatic propositions about the “revealed truths”. However, in the Old and in the New Testaments, faith expressed itself primarily according to another mode: narration. We ought not forget that notional propositions (theology, dogma) developed through a passage from narration to concepts. But at the beginning, there were always witnesses and stories.

One can go even farther saying that faith confession expressed in biblical documents is not separable from discourse forms, that is, from its narrative structure. So when we approach Christian faith in this way, we are following the historical path: faith is not first of all a doctrine but a history.

This approach commends itself for an interaction with the media even in entertainment. “To develop languages where narrative style, testimony and symbolic expression prevail” looks like being a crucial key, not only in relation to the media, but because it is the way to meet with the languages of youth today, the Québec bishops think. So we feel a kind of merging point here between the mode of entertainment and evangelical narratives.

Andrew Greeley expresses the same concepts, even trying to open the whole question to more imagination and creativity. “I do not want to deny the importance of intellectual religion. I am merely saying that religion takes its origins and its raw power from experiences, images, stories, community, and ritual, and that most religious socialization

(transmission) takes place through narrative before it takes place in conceptual, analytic form (Greeley, p. 22). Formal religious instruction, the writing of theologians and the pronouncements of the Vatican are among the voices he or she hears, but these largely propositional voices are heard long after the more imaginative and poetic voices of parents, family, neighbours, parish clergy, and local community (Greeley, p. 23) You had listened to the stories before you encountered the institution (for which you may want to add “Thank God”), says Greeley (p. 23).

If religion is image and story before it is anything else and if Catholicism [and Christianity] has the richest imaginative tradition of any of the religions of the Holy One, then we might expect to find artists, poets, and writers in residence on Catholic [and Christian] campuses, men and women who would manifest concretely how the religious imagination works, he continues (p. 26). Am I daring to suggest that the sociologist is more important than the theologian, the college professor, and heaven save us the bishop? Not at all. I am saying that all are equally unimportant (though still equally necessary) when compared with the poet, the artist, the storyteller, the mystic, the saint (Greeley, p. 26). The prose writer must listen to the poet. The institutional leader and the theologian must listen to the storyteller (Greeley, p. 26)”.

Greeley is provoking us as Christians: we need more poets, artists, storytellers, mystics, saints... he says, more witnesses. We must concede that there are not so many artists in our Churches. But there is much creativity in the media, not necessarily controlled by the Christians but on many occasions open to spiritual dimensions through narration.

What is entertainment?

Still we face the underlying question of dangerous entertainment. Where is the danger?

I think that a discussion of the value or inappropriateness of entertainment must take into account certain factors, says Tom Boomershine on the Net. First, how is the word “entertainment” being used? If it is merely a pejorative term that connotes a lack of substantive content, then the objection is likely to be based on the idea of entertainment as distraction. If “entertainment” is understood, rather, as effective communication (in the sense of using media that are able to engage the audience more fully), then a different conversation is likely to ensue. “The problem for some who oppose the use of drama [or “electronic media”] in the church is the idea that drama [media] is merely “entertainment.” These people assert that “the church should be about the task of saving souls, not about entertainment.” Yes, drama is entertainment, but this fact does not need to be a negative - even in church. Those who object to “entertainment” in the church usually have a limited definition of it. To them it connotes that which is cheap, glitzy, and worldly - the worst of Las Vegas. But entertainment can also be truthful and enlightening. Good drama [media] can bring out wholesome laughter or move us deeply. [...] Entertainment that touches someone's heart and makes that person more open is not only valid, it is desirable, Tom Boomershine concludes.

So should we face only glitz and spectacle and technological toys as the definition of entertainment: entertainment, then, would be only an invitation to thoughtlessness? Or could it be an invitation in a light form (less notional or dogmatic) to a real depth? How then to reconcile or blend the exigencies of the “spectacular” with the highly interior nature of spiritual experience?

We need to go further in our reflection about *divertissement*, entertainment, and play to understand their mechanisms. What is play? What is entertainment, what is *divertissement*, what does that imply, to play, to have fun? If we want to get out of this trap of fearing fun and particularly media entertainment, we need to clarify the meaning of this reality called “play”.

Let us begin with a classical author, the anthropologist Johan Huizinga (in *Homo ludens: essai sur la fonction sociale du jeu*, 1951), who tried to delineate the main characteristics of play. Play is always outside of normal daily life, regulated in a given space and time. It proposes rules, followed up voluntarily by all, so that the game should be fair. It is a time of rest, to get out of routine, of course, but much more as well: a moment for creativity, personal and collective expression, and even for spirituality, he says, because we are then time-free. Surprisingly, it could be at the same time both fun and seriousness, explains Huizinga, and he gives many examples: to play with words (language), to play violin (music), to play with ideas (philosophy), to play at war (as they used to do in the Middle Ages), to play stories (theatre, films), even to play the sacred (rituals). The sacred has to be played to be received, he argues. When we play, we live a double-level situation: we know that we are playing (that creates a distance), but at the same time we agree to play fairly and seriously. “The most sublime then can happen...” This appears to be a very good approach to explain that fun can also be serious.

The German philosopher Eugen Fink (in *Le jeu comme symbole du monde*), taking Huizinga’s intuition further, insists on the fact that play should be received as an extremely serious behaviour, because it is giving - as in a mirror - the meaning of the world we are living in. The Greek philosophers (e.g. Plato) disregarded poetry as a danger, because poetry (through mythology) gave to gods power over humans, who were treated as slaves subjected to them and acting out that submission in rituals. Plato represents a first step to “disenchantment” of the world. Modernity achieved the second step of “disenchantment”: relegating all spirituality to the domain of myths, continues Fink. Meanwhile, we have accepted to repatriate - from the gods to history - the control of what is happening to humans. This is why play today has never been more important: to express who we are and what our cosmos is about, even at the spiritual level.

This approach complements Huizinga’s. These authors shed more light on the power of imagination and representation. But, is it really applicable to spirituality and to religious questions? Caillois (in his book *Le jeu et les hommes*) refutes Huizinga’s point of view that play was used as dramaturgy in rituals, even in Christian liturgy; he opposes Huizinga,

saying that precisely those rituals were no more a play, but vital gestures to save one's own life and the group's life from the gods' wrath: there were no more fun or play in there.

I disagree with Caillois, because I believe that both functions can stay together. When touching spiritual matters, should any kind of play and representation be no longer a play, because it is too important for life? If so, we return to compulsory religious seriousness. That would represent a dead end. I prefer Godard's intuition, that should prevail here: "Imaginary is not the pure reflection of reality, but the reality of the ordinary normal daily life", a kind of crystallization of humans situations and choices, and values.

The mediators' and the receivers' point of view

We are now facing our last questions: What is the difference between a good and a bad media production? Is there a way to differentiate masterpieces from pure consumption products that our authors precisely denounced at the beginning? How to perceive the difference between the "uncanny", the classical, and all the rest, junk or entertainment without value?

This is a very practical and difficult question. David Tracy (in his book *An Analogical Imagination*) gives us many clues about that. In my book *Médias et foi chrétienne: l'image à l'épreuve de l'idolâtrie*, I describe ten criteria useful to judge media productions. Here are my ten criteria:

- ? two criteria from the communication sciences: (1) answer to the key questions and (2) good use of rhetorical and metaphorical expressions;
- ? three criteria from psychological sciences, each representing polarities: (3) the major lures as we find in Jesus' three temptations in the desert, (4) idolatry or basic freedom, (5) returning to reality, or remaining in the perverse imaginary;
- ? three criteria from the symbolic approach: (6) use of mediation as a milieu for communication, (7) language as the paradigmatic means (within this milieu) of the encounter of the "I", the "You" and the "He-She-It", (8) use of symbolic exchanges;
- ? two last criteria, more theological in nature: (9) complementarity between the three main Christian traditions of manifestation, proclamation and prophecy, (10) theological judgment on the application of these nine first criteria.

But here all is complicated due to the fact that, most of the time in the audiovisual world, we discover the products when listening or looking at them (we don't have references in advance to guide us in our judgment).

And we are facing two different behaviours: the mediator's, and the public's feed-back. The mediators' point of view refers to the way the different media workers (from the director to the actors to the prop maker) are doing their jobs, which should be creative and "uncanny". On the whole, media present easy entertaining productions, because producers are invited to go for easy stuff, with minimal means. And that produces minimal results...

so much so that people are wasting their time. One clear remedy to that? Media literacy. And then we are drawn back to the awakening of one's behaviour and to the prevailing criteria.

Indeed, public feed-back is crucial. It will determine what kinds of productions are expected: easy ones, superficial, cheap, glitzy... or better ones. So we can hear extraordinary witnesses through entertainment periods like talk shows, or songs, or dances, or happenings... or very bad ones. In a way, it is the "wheat and weeds" parable of the Gospel applied to the media: should we try to pull up the weeds? ask the disciples. No, Jesus replies, "pull up the weeds and you might take the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until harvest " (Mt 13, 24-30).

The more poetic and profound the media productions are, the more such manifestations can engage the person, while being pleasant at the same time. Fiction can take us further yet. It can give us psychological and spiritual shocks that can change our life. We have to understand that media always work through narration: story-telling, witnesses. And the impact will be stronger in as much as the rhetorical and metaphorical approaches are well controlled by the artists and media workers.

That brings us back again, as a conclusion, to artistic work. For Michel (in his book *La parole et la beauté*, p. 437), God is always nearer through poetic expressions than through notional ones. It is impossible for him to separate beauty and poetical expressions. "Nothing is more sacred than Beauty", he concludes.

Entertainment could become a wonderful way to touch the spiritual, the religious and the divine. On the condition, however, that we learn to choose our productions and to practice our discernment about all forms of spiritual presence in the media.

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