TELEVISION AS RELIGION

By George Gerbner

Whoever tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time has effectively assumed cultural roles of parent and school. If that story-telling process also includes most of what we know in common about life and society and, in addition, can have its pulpit in every home, it has also replaced the church in its ancient role in the partnership of church and state. That process and power is television.

After more than ten years of intensive research into its social functions, I have concluded that television is best seen and studied not as a selectively used medium but as a ritual, as a virtually universal new religion that tends to absorb viewers of otherwise diverse outlooks into its own "mainstream."

These conclusions come from findings of our long-range ongoing research project, called Cultural Indicators, and those of independent investigators in the U.S. and abroad. They are published in the current issues of the scholarly quarterlies Journal of Communication and Journal of Broadcasting. In the Journal of Communication article, my colleagues Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorielli and I propose what we believe to be the most coherent data-based theory of television's role in society. Here I will describe the theory in non-technical terms, illustrate it with some key findings, note the controversy surrounding its methodology, and point out some of its political, religious, and cultural implications.

We begin with the fact that television presents a synthetic but coherent world of fact and fiction which most people experience relatively

non-selectively. Most people do not watch television by the program but by the clock. The set is on in the average home over 6½ hours a day. The ritual has its daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms. The most recurrent dramatic patterns of this ritual deal with social types, relationships, fate, and power. They bring the famous and beautiful as well as the infamous and the evil into every home, no matter how remote. For the first time in history, the rich and the poor, the urban and the provincial, the cosmopolitan and the isolated, the very young and the very old share a great deal of cultural imagery in common, although none of it is of their own making.

Relatively few people have witnessed real trials and even fewer have watched surgical operations. But most television viewers have a vivid image of how surgeons work and see an average of 30 cops, 7 lawyers and 3 judges a week -- every week -- on television. An so with saloons and penthouse apartments, the jailhouse and the White House, and a tightly programmed world of human types, situations, and fates. The most recurrent patterns of the ritual, as in any religion, tend to be absorbed into our framework of knowledge; they become assumptions we make about the world.

What is that world like? By now we have analyzed about 1500 programs, over 4000 major characters, and some 14,000 minor characters appearing in prime time and weekend daytime network television. Our cumulative computerized data base can generate many types of information about the world of common images and messages in which our children grow up and with which we continue to live throughout life. Basically, it is a world in which men outnumber women three to one; young people comprise one-third and old people one-fifth of their real numbers;

professionals and law-enforcers greatly outnumber all other working people; crime is about 10 times as frequent as in the real world; and an average of five acts of violence per hour (four times that many in children's programs!) victimize more than half of all leading characters each week.

What do we learn from that world and how do we learn its "lessons?" Here we depart from conventional research methods which investigate the effects of specific programs or viewing habits -- with few consistent results. If most people have grown up with a ritual which has already conditioned their view of reality, and if most viewers watch non-selectively, with heavier viewers watching more of everything, it is useless to look for general effects of individual programs. It's the total pattern that counts. So we measure how much television people watch and relate that amount to their responses to questions about the world. The questions are based on the most recurrent and pervasive patterns of the world of television. If the "heavier" viewers living under similar conditions in the same socio-economic groups as the light viewers respond to our questions significantly more according to the way it is on television than do the light viewers, that difference reflects the contribution of television to their conceptions of reality.

Our research has found that television indeed makes specific and measurable contributions to viewers' conceptions of reality. However, the contributions are not necessarily the same for all groups. The lessons relate not only to what television preaches but also to viewers' real life circumstances and outlooks. Our theory of these relationships is based on specific findings about viewers' conceptions of family life, education, risks of life, occupations, aging and other issues. The synthesis of these

findings goes under the heading of "cultivation theory" because it assumes that for most people long-range exposure to total patterns of the television ritual, rather than individual programs and selections, cultivates stable conceptions about life.

Some of these conceptions hold for all groups. For example, heavy viewers consistently exaggerate their risks in life, and mistrust strangers more than light viewers. But other aspects of the television world affect different groups of viewers differently. We use two new concepts to explain these differences. They are called "mainstreaming" and "resonance."

"Mainstreaming" shows, on the basis of our data, that the ritualistic use of television's most ubiquitous dramatic patterns has become the mainstream of American culture. Television tends to absorb viewers of diverse backgrounds -- holding otherwise different views -- into its relatively standardized and homogenized mainstream. For example, a college educated group shares fewer of the "mainstream" stereotypes of the television ritual than a less educated group -- but only as long as the college educated are light viewers. Those of the college group who are heavier viewers join the television mainstream, sharing many assumptions with those of the less educated. Conversely, some groups are so "out of it" that they hold even more sharply stereotyped views than is common in the world of television -- but only if they are light viewers. The heavier viewers among these groups are also absorbed into the television mainstream: they are more "enlightened" than are the light viewers in the same group. So different groups exhibit not only different amounts of susceptibility to television but also learn different lessons. Some critics say that these conflicting lessons cancel each other out. But our theory resolves the apparent conflict by postulating that the different lessons represent a convergence upon the television "mainstream," even if they seem to be from opposite directions.

Therefore, researchers who fail to measure television viewing within each subgroup and only look for overall differences may overlook important cultivation effects. These may not be much among those who are already in the "mainstream" regardless of the amount of viewing, but emerge markedly in the different susceptibilities of groups who may otherwise hold more diverse views than is typical of the relatively standardized television "mainstream."

This differential susceptibility leads to a second aspect of our theory: "resonance," which holds that certain special circumstances of life may lead to extraordinary susceptibility to the lessons of television. For example, viewers who live in the inner city appear to be even more susceptible to television's image of a mean and dangerous world than those who live under less threatening circumstances. Researchers who failed to observe that striking difference between heavy and light viewers within the group of urban residents concluded that, on the whole, the circumstances of urban life alone accounted for the "television difference" and viewing had nothing to do with it. While it is true that city dwellers are more likely to exhibit what we call the "mean world" syndrome of the television ritual than suburban and rural viewers, they are not only not immune but may virtually "resonate" to the television message of a mean and dangerous world. City dwellers of course feel more insecure than their suburban and rural counterparts. But among urban residents heavy television viewers seem to feel even more apprehensive than do their light viewing neighbors.

We have found such "mainstreaming" and "resonance" in adolescent IQ and reading scores (the more viewing the lower the scores in general, but television leads to some improvement in the lowest IQ groups), perceptions

of aging (out of sight on television, out of mind of viewers), the role of women (heavy viewers are generally more "sexist" except for those groups in which light viewers hold strongly traditional views about women's roles and heavy viewers are more "enlightened") and in other issues.

Considering television as the ritual of a new religion rather than as a selectively used medium, such as books or films, enabled us to isolate its general trends and contributions to conceptions of reality. We have also found that those under 35, the "television generation," are more imbued with its view of life than those who grew up before television.

Understanding the dynamics of television as ritual helps to make some puzzling aspects of the current scene fall into place. Simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures -- political or religious, or both -- appeal to the anxious and alienated who are perplexed by and resistant to change but powerless to prevent it. The electronic church with its formal trappings of traditional religion speaks to them. The "moral majority" and its political allies speak to them. The actual majority finds television itself the most attractive choice available each night. Its reliable ritual speaks to them -- confirming the fears, feeding the hopes, cultivating the assumptions television shaped in the first place -- and dominating the cultural climate in which political parties, traditional religions, and all other institutions must now find their way.