The Impact of the 'Electronic Church' On the Local Church

Who watches TV ministries? Does giving to them cut contributions to local churches? How does TV viewing affect religious values? After two years of investigation, a commissioned research team gives their answers.

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Editor's note: *The idea that the "electronic church" is responsible for declining participation in mainline churches was contradicted by recent research findings. The television ministries that attract millions of viewers and contributors are influential with their audiences but watching religious programs doesn't keep people from going to church. Those who support evangelical broadcasters also attend and contribute to local churches, according to a two-year study of religion and television released by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications. The Gallup Organization of Princeton, New Jersey, also participated in the study.*

The Annenberg researchers studied a sample made up of 101 national and local religious programs broadcast in Atlanta and Philadelphia over a three-week period in 1982 for a total of 75 hours. They also interviewed 1300 viewers and 1300 non-viewers of religious programming in the Northeast and Southeast to measure influence on viewers by religious TV.

The Gallup Organization of Princeton, New Jersey, was engaged to conduct a national survey (Phase II) to develop a complete profile of the religious television viewer and compare it with the profile of the non-viewer. The study would be both demographic (such as age, sex and education) and psychographic (such as attitudes and responses) in order to develop a profile of the religious television viewer.

The Gallup Organization conducted a national personal interview survey of 954 viewers and 1,049 non-viewers of religious programs.

This report was an outgrowth of the February 1980 Consultation on the Electronic Church at New York University. The discussion was jointly sponsored by various religious broadcasters. At its conclusion, Dr. William F. Fore of the National Council of Churches and Dr. Ben Armstrong of National Religious Broadcasters agreed to invite a broadly based group to consider developing a major cooperative research project.

Some 39 organizations participated in funding the $175,000 project. The Annenberg School research team was responsible for writing this integrated final report:

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 evangelicalism, and our distinction as the world's heaviest users of television (7 hours a day in the average television household, and still rising), we may indeed be considered fertile ground for some sort of electronic revival.

This study was conceived against a background of ferment and change in traditional religious involvement coinciding with the rise of commercial television and later of the religious television ministries. There was a general lack of information but abundance of speculation about the role of religion on television and in the lives of viewers.

Many questions were asked. Is religion on television more television than religion? Is the "electronic church" a central or peripheral current of religion, and society? Does it reach out to new groups or does it preach mostly to the already converted? Who are its viewers

Jim Bakker
PTL Club

Kenneth Copeland
Believer's Voice of Victory

Jerry Falwell
Old-Time Gospel Hour

and what attracts them? Do the television ministries siphon off members and money from mainline or other local churches (and church programs on television) or do they recruit members and contributions by reaching broader constituencies? What is the world view presented by religious television programs and how does it relate to mainline churches and to general commercial television? What are the social and political as well as strictly religious messages and lessons?

In the report that follows, we have attempted to address these questions. The answers came from a comprehensive and intensive study of religion and television as integral parts and organic expressions of significant currents in American life.

The Audience

The audience for religious programs on television is not an essentially new, or young, or varied audience. Viewers of religious programs 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 any religious programs of any denomination 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 television) 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.

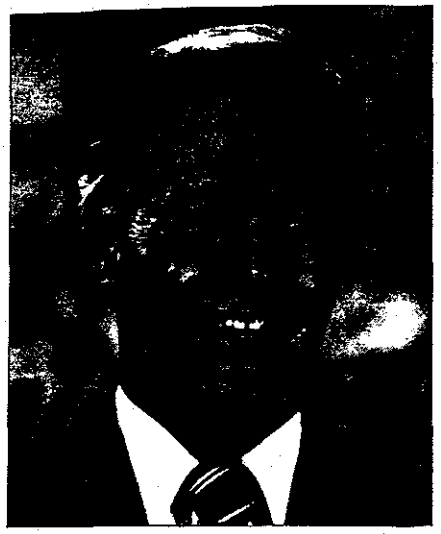
Those who do not watch religious programs on television—the majority of the younger and more "upscale" television viewers—are more likely to be disinterested than hostile. Only one in four express any objections (mostly to the emphasis on solicitation of funds), but three in four switch channels rather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

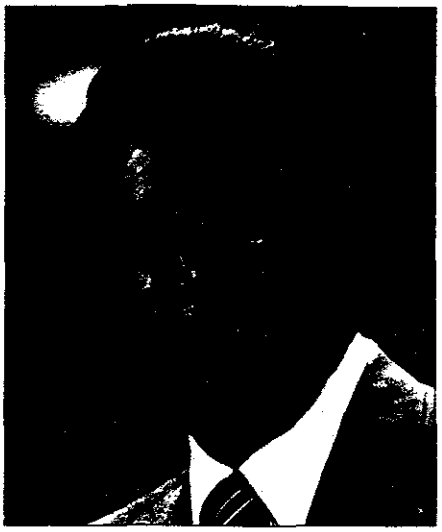
Therefore, social, political and moral (including sexual) as well as strictly religious issues need to be examined to find the role and significance of religion on television and in the lives of viewers. Before we do that, however, we need to deal with the institutional relationships between religious programs on television, particularly the most prominent television ministries, and the local churches. That examination will also lead us to look at the relationships of religous and general television.

Effects on Local Churches

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



Rex Humbard
Rex Humbard Ministry



Oral Roberts
Expect a Miracle

Pat Robertson
700 Club

the only reason advanced for local church attendance that television ministries could not serve.

In other words, religious program audiences find no conflict between syndicated religious television programs and more traditional forms of worship. They see them as complementary and mutually reinforcing activities rather than as substitutes for one another. Further, those who contribute more to these programs do not correspondingly contribute less to their local churches.

Patterns of viewing specific "types" of programs confirm these findings. Viewers of religious programs who are less "fundamentalist" or belonged to mainline churches are no more attracted to "local" than to syndicated programs. The most prominent syndicated weekend television ministries find the broadest audience for religious television.

Religious and General TV

If no basic or perceived institutional conflict exists between religion on television and religion in the local churches, that does not necessarily mean that religious programming with its evangelical and fundamentalist mainstream is the universal or central current of American life. A conflict with established forces exists. The central expression of those forces, however, is not so much (or no longer) mainline religion and local churches as that newer and pervasive cultural arm of secular society: general television.

Religious programs on television express and cultivate a fairly stable and coherent world view of ideas, images and conceptions that competes less with mainline religion or the local church than with the equally stable and coherent, but broader and in some important respects divergent, world of commercial television itself.

Our research project of over 15 years on the nature and functions of television, called Cultural Indicators, has demonstrated that its central dynamics can be seen as the cultivation of relative stability and homogeneity of outlooks that tends to absorb otherwise divergent conceptions into its mainstream. We call our theory "mainstreaming" to describe the tendency of viewers of television coming from otherwise divergent backgrounds to respond and act in relatively similar ways, compared to light viewers from the same groups. In other words, television tends to erode or overcome demographic, geographic and other differences that traditionally distinguish different groups of people. Successive generations of heavy viewers of television, drawn from groups whose outlooks traditionally differ, tend to be more similar: they "converge" upon television's mainstream.

We have found in this study that there are, in fact, two somewhat overlapping but also fairly distinct television "mainstreams," the religious and the general. We have examined the mechanisms and issues of their divergence and convergence. That examination consists of two parts.

The first part, called message system (or content) analysis, observes the clear-cut and unambiguous features of the world of ideas and people presented in our samples of television ministry and mainline church programs. These features form potential "lessons" for viewers. The second part of the examination consists of what we call cultivation analysis which is the attempt to ascertain which of these lessons, if any, television does in fact cultivate in the attitudes and behaviors of different types of viewers.

First we shall summarize the highlights of our message system analysis and then discuss the various features of religious and general television programming in connection with the conceptions and behaviors that the two "mainstreams" tend to cultivate.

The Messages of Religious TV

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

James Robison
In the Word

Robert Schuller
Hour of Power

Jimmy Swaggart
Jimmy Swaggart Telecast

Hispanics, are under-represented in these programs relative to their numbers in the general population.

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 of 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 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 TV

As we might expect, a higher percentage of heavy viewers of religious than of general programs say that religion is "very important." Furthermore, groups (such as the younger, more educated, etc.) who, when they are light viewers, are the least likely to attach great importance to religion, show the largest margin of difference between their estimation of religion's importance as given by light versus heavy viewers. In other words, they "come into the religious television mainstream" from the greatest distance.

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 important, such as older, lower-income, lower-education and non-white respondents, distance themselves the most as heavy viewers of general television from that high estimate of religion's importance. When viewers sharing these characteristics do not watch religious programs on television, they blend into the heavy viewing general television mainstream which seems to displace, if not replace, religion as an important part of their lives.

Overall, more than one out of four religious programs mentions local churches and 13 percent urge viewers to attend. Television ministries tend to mention local church services even a little more than do mainline local programs.

It is not surprising, therefore, that watching religious programs goes hand-in-hand with both attendance at and financial contributions to the local church. Nor is it unexpected to find that heavy viewers of general television are less likely to attend and contribute to the local church than are light-viewing members of the same groups. The differences are again especially striking for the groups that otherwise attend and contribute (and also watch religious television) the most; as heavy viewers of general television they are the most distant from their light-viewing counterparts in terms of church attendance and contributions.

Expressions of confidence in leaders of local churches (and to a lesser extent of organized religion) conform to the directions of the two mainstreams. Heavy viewers of religious television programs express greater confidence in both than do light viewers. Those who watch general television express lower confidence levels regardless of the amount of viewing.

Equally apparent is the tug and pull of the two mainstreams in cultivating a "religious experience." Viewers of religious television are of course more likely to report having had such an experience, by margins of about a third of all groups of light versus heavy viewers of religious programs. But heavy viewers of general programs are *less* likely than light viewers to have had a "religious experience."

Now we come to those features of religion that seem to find some resonance on both religious and general television. Praying "frequently" to God, taking the Bible literally, believing that "Jesus Christ will come again," and agreeing that miracles do occur today are of course sentiments cultivated by viewing religious programs. However, they are not necessarily countered by commercial television and, for some groups, they become even more likely. For example, college-educated respondents are on the whoe, less likely than most other groups to pray frequently and to believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible or in miracles and the second coming. But heavy viewers among their college-educated groups are significantly more likely to do so than light viewers, by margins of about 7-9 percentage points. For some groups, these religious beliefs

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may find supporting lessons in the world of general television. However, for matters of religious importance, experience, participation and dollars, the churches' principal competition is not the television ministry but general television.

We have seen that the features that set the two mainstreams apart do not necessarily set them on a collision course. In some respects, religious television programs extend tendencies farther than general television can go, and in others general television shares certain features for certain groups with religious programs. A further examination of these two types of relationships was made in the summary of our finding on social, political and sexual attitudes.

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 vigorous cultivation of traditional sexual values is one of the most distinctive features of religious programs, and especially of the television ministries. General television does not appear to cultivate as consistently, if at all, the traditional sexual values associated with religious program viewing. The pattern appears to be more that of mainstreaming, with older and younger groups of heavy viewers positioned closer to the middle (and to each other) than their light-viewing counterparts.

Similar patterns were found for conceptions of the role of women in the family and in society. The viewing of religious programs supports belief in more traditional female roles. The viewing of general television suggests more of a mainstreaming pattern, in that it tends to cultivate a less traditional concept among older and a more traditional concept among younger heavy viewers.

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. ■

Research Clusters of Questions Used by Annenberg Research Team

Demographic Analysis
(Who is watching?)

1. What are the demographics of the audience for religious television? How many watch? Who? How much? Under what circumstances?

Content Analysis
(What are the messages?)

2. Are the social concerns of religious TV presented more in terms of charity or of justice?
3. What kinds of God and gospel are portrayed by the religious TV to the audience?

Uses and Gratification Analysis
(Why do people watch?)

4. How is religious TV perceived by its audience? Is it more or less interesting than the local church? What needs are being met?
5. What are the appeals of the program elements—personalities, music, message content, personal communication, etc.?

Effect Analysis
(How is the viewer's behavior affected?)

6. What effects does religious TV have on people's support of and involvement in the local churches?
7. What is the extent of interaction in the process of viewing? What is the subsequent interaction in the family and community?
8. What brings people to a faith commitment, that is, a significant deepening of religious faith? Does religious TV bring people to a faith commitment? How? How many? What does this faith commitment lead the viewer to do?
9. What effects are specific programs having on support and involvement in those programs' ministries? Do the programs generate support and involvement?
10. Where do people turn for spiritual leadership and help, especially as between the local church and religious TV ministries?
11. What is the impact of political suggestion on political action? In what kinds of political involvement is the audience stimulated to engage?