

The Media Failure of Religious Liberals

Thomas E. Boomershine

The Paradox

A puzzle of contemporary American culture is the paradoxical response of religious conservatives and liberals to the electronic communication revolution of the 20th century. Religious liberals have been highly conservative in their response to electronic media and continue to write books and publish journals at a feverish pace. Religious liberalism is virtually absent from the world of electronic communication. Religious conservatives have been highly progressive in radio and TV and dominate religious media. They have become the dominant presence in American religion. As a result, the primary meaning of "Christian" in American popular culture is cultural conservatism, biblical fundamentalism, and right wing politics. It has become embarrassing for liberals to be Christian in America.

This is a paradox because it is so apparently contradictory. Liberals think of themselves as being progressive and oriented toward the future. At the core of a liberal, left of center identity is confidence in constructive change and optimism about the future. This may be true of the response of the religious left to the sexual revolution, the emergence of feminism, the black civil rights movement, and the need for global economic and political institutions. But in relation to religion on radio and TV, the religious left has disappeared. It is simply absent with virtually no presence whatsoever. With the exception of the Odyssey channel, most of whose explicitly religious programming is Southern Baptist (hardly a bastion of religious liberalism), all of the religious stuff on TV and radio, both Catholic and Protestant, is conservative. Furthermore, in this regard, the religious left is not a victim of evil right wing forces. A steady stream of liberal intellectual leaders such as Neal Postman and recently Marva Dawn keep publishing books attacking electronic media as an evil development that any self-respecting religious liberal could only use at the cost of his intellectual and spiritual integrity. In relation to communication systems, religious liberals are fiercely conservative. Their absence is a decision, not an imposition.

The symptoms of this paradox are all over the place. Conservative churches are installing screens, developing electronic bands, and forming global broadcasting systems while liberal churches remain wedded to high literate manuscript sermons, pipe organs, and newsletters. Conservative seminaries have been far more progressive in the integration of information technology in their classrooms than so-called progressive liberal seminaries. Turn on the radio or the TV and listen for the words "religious" or "Christian" and 99% of the time it will be something conservative. In relation to religious media, conservatives are progressive and liberals are flaming reactionaries.

The Stakes

This paradox would be of only passing interest if the stakes of this race were not so high. The growing dominance of right wing religion is directly connected with the growing dominance of right wing politics and economics. The power of the corporations to shape the institutions of society in their own interest is steadily growing. Witness the steady triumphs of the gun industry, the tobacco industry, and the health insurance and managed care industries in the politics of the Clinton years. Their victories over the public interest are politically understandable in the context of the enormous power of well-orchestrated media campaigns. But those victories are happening with the support of self-professed Christians on radio and

TV such as Rush Limbaugh and Pat Robertson. As Christian right-wing militias and the Ku Klux Klan continue to grow in presence and power with more frequent guerilla attacks on blacks, gays, Jews and office buildings, there is no one to the left of center saying "This is not Christian" in the dominant communication system of the culture. The growing gap between the rich and the poor and the poverty status of 40%-50% of America's children as a result of the most extensive redistribution of income in the history of the country is being supported by the religious leaders of radio and TV. The German experience of the 1930's leaves no doubt that the growth of highly conservative politics with the symbolic support of religion that verges on and then spills over into fascism deserves the attention of the liberal community early rather than late. The stakes of an unbalanced dominance by conservative religion on radio and TV are high.

The present response of the liberal community to the dominance of the religious right in the media of the electronic age reminds me of the Polish cavalry. In the late 1930's as the threat of German armored tank divisions steadily increased, the generals of the Polish army continued to invest their money and energy in building up the Polish cavalry. They continued to invest in the sources of power in an earlier age, namely, the power of the cavalry in 18th and 19th century European warfare. When Hitler invaded Poland, the Polish generals sent divisions of cavalry against the German armored tank divisions. The battle was over in two weeks. The fields of Poland were littered with the bodies of horses and men whose leaders had not recognized that the development of new technology changes things. In a remarkably analogous manner, religious liberals have been utterly defeated in the public arena and have withdrawn into literary forts from which they take pot-shots at their conservative opponents. But most, in self-defense, rarely use the "L" word in public anymore.

The Reasons

Why then has religious liberalism become so strangely conservative in the emerging electronic culture of the late 20th century? Some of the reasons are clear when the present is seen in the frame of the history of communication, religion and politics. Religious liberalism in its present forms has its sources in the high literate culture of the Enlightenment. In the conflicts between science and religion over issues such as the solar system and the history of creation, the liberals of the 18th and 19th century accepted the findings of science and modified their understanding of the biblical and theological tradition. Conservatives fought, indeed, continue to fight these modifications, particularly in relation to the theories of evolution versus creationism. In these conflicts, the primary liberal weapon has been the dispassionate analysis of objective information presented in literate essays. The Scopes trial was a classic instance of the contrast between liberal and conservative religious rhetoric. The way in which religious liberals won these battles in courts, scholarly debates, and in the press was to be more scientific, more objective, and more literate than their conservative opponents.

These conflicts happened in the context of a radical change in the culture of communication. Reading was being transformed from the ancient method of reading aloud to a process of reading in silence. The book and the essay were likewise being transformed from a rhetorical text for reading aloud into a document written for the reader's eyes only. And both systems still existed, the old system of writing for hearing and the new system of writing for seeing. Thus, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain were making tours of America, reading their fiction aloud to packed audiences, while Jane Austen and Henry James were writing novels for more sophisticated silent readers sitting alone in their easy chairs. In the world of religion,

conservatives continued to read the Bible aloud, to memorize and recite its sounds while more progressive liberals studied the Bible in silence. Indeed, this media mix of literary cultures is present even in this journal. A rare reader will read this essay aloud but many, hopefully most, readers will reproduce and hear the well-orchestrated sounds of the poetry of Lisel Mueller. Reading aloud now is relatively rare and is reserved for culturally marginal occasions such as poetry readings, Scripture readings, and story readings to children. But in the 19th and early 20th centuries, learning to read and write for the communication system of the silent print world of the Enlightenment was a silent, largely unrecognized, cultural revolution. For many Americans, that was the epistemological shift associated with college.

Religious liberals were the avant-garde of the culture of silent reading in the world of religion. As this higher culture became the dominant center of literary, religious and political power in the 20th century, the values of this communication culture became inextricably connected with the values of religion. To be objective and dispassionate about ideological conflicts became a religious lifestyle as well as a cultural value. It also was a political strategy that was highly effective as long as the communication system of silent print was the dominant system.

The emergence of electronic communication systems, first the radio, records, and films, then stereo, TV, and computers, changed the cultural and religious equation. While the communication system of silent print still exists and has political and religious power, it is a gulf in a vast electronic ocean rather than being the ocean itself. Radio and records are sound media and TV is a medium of images and sound. They are not media for long, documented, and dispassionate analysis. As a result, there has been a profound reversal in the politics of religious communication. The "liberal" styles of communication have been ineffective on radio and TV whereas the "conservative" styles of communication have worked. As a result, the conservative communities that preserved the epistemology of reading aloud have experienced an immense renaissance in electronic culture while the liberal communities that internalized the values of silent reading have gone into decline. Religious conservatives have embraced electronic communication because it was more compatible with their habitual styles of communication. But religious liberals have found the world of radio and TV an alien and uncomfortable world.

For the religious left, therefore, the maintenance of their commitment to the hard-won values of silent print culture is a religious as well as a cultural commitment. To enter the world of electronic communication in radio and TV would be to go back to a lower, less sophisticated culture. It would violate a deeply-held religious commitment. Thus, the conservatism of religious liberalism makes perfect sense in the context of the history of religion and communication systems. But while spiritually understandable, the consequences of this conundrum are, as we have seen, potentially disastrous.

The Future

In order to move into the future with power, Enlightenment religious liberalism needs to be connected with the broader spiritual stream of progressive religious movements in earlier periods of media change. Early Christianity is a clear example. The spirit of Jesus and the community of the early church was a truly liberal spirit. It was characterized by generosity to those who were oppressed and impoverished by the political and economic structures of the Greco-Roman world. It was inclusive in crossing boundaries of race, class, and gender and formed new communities across those boundaries. It transformed the impact of the new

communication system of literacy by developing new literatures and new educational systems. Early Christianity was truly progressive in its orientation toward the future rather than culturally reactionary and conservative. And it was a highly effective force for peace and justice in the ancient world.

At the time of the printing press, the Protestant communities were similarly progressive. The extension of the power of reading to the majority of persons in the culture generated a political and economic revolution that transformed the structures of feudalism and monarchy. Elizabeth Eisenstein's recent study, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Social Change*, shows the close relationship between the printing press and Protestantism as the agents of social change in this period. At the core of this liberal spirit was the open inquiry into the meaning of the Scriptures in the original Hebrew and Greek texts and the mass printing and distribution of the Bible for private reading by small groups and individuals. This apparently simple action undermined the rationale for the monarchical and ecclesiastical regimes of Europe and inaugurated widespread change.

This liberal spirit is then a spirit of openness to change, of inclusivity, and of generosity. It is also a spirit that is not naive about communication systems but actively works to transform their effect in the broader culture. The Achilles heel of liberalism is misplaced optimism that ignores the potential of personal and structural evil. In the present situation, there is real danger in the optimistic assumption that continuing the high literate strategies of the past will be as politically effective now as it was then.

The way forward that emerges from this analysis is relatively simple to identify. It is to continue the progressive spirit of earlier religious liberals in the midst of the electronic communication revolution and its culture. In general, the need is to maintain maximum continuity with the broad traditions of religious liberalism while seeking to form a new liberal culture in this new context. Specifically, this would mean:

- To leave behind the media conservatism of religious liberalism and to take positive and aggressive steps to develop a new generation of religious radio, television, films, CD's, computer programs, and web sites at all levels: local, regional, national, denominational, and international
- To start reading out loud regularly and memorizing and performing the Bible
- To revivify the oral arts of storytelling, poetry, and rhetoric
- To develop an extensive network of grass roots electronic media religious production of the stories, poetry, and songs of local communities in churches, colleges, and universities
- To invite visual artists, musicians, poets, dramatists, and the masters of computer graphics to practice their arts within the context of the worship of liberal churches
- To empower and enable poor and marginalized people and especially children to master electronic communication in the context of church education, just as poor people learned to read in Sunday School in the past
- To form new radio and television networks for liberal religious communication
- To put liberal money and creativity into electronic media production and development.

All of this media formation needs to be an integral part of a new communication system for progressive activism working for justice and peace in the global community. In the context of the new politics of the electronic age, political and religious progressive movements that are

not media savvy will usually lose. At this point in history, religious conservatives have built a major media army. Religious liberals need to get some media tanks.

A further dimension of the shift from the high literate culture of the past to the electronic culture of the future is the reconceptualization of literature. In order for religious liberals not to feel like Judas when relating positively to electronic media, the concept of sophisticated writing needs to be broadened. Literature and literate commentary needs now to be seen as an integral part of electronic communication culture. A first step is to reestablish the relationship between literature and sound. Journals such as this need to be linked to web sites, related to poetry readings and storytelling festivals, and be the grist for television documentaries. The liberal spirit needs to reach back to its oral sources and out into its electronic future. The tradition of religious liberalism needs to broaden its conceptual and its experiential identity. Liberal writing is for all of the media cultures of human civilization: oral, manuscript, print, document, and electronic.

Thus, the underlying reason for the decline of religious liberalism is that it has become too conservative. It has sold its progressive birthright for a pot of high literate cultural stew. Its future is to reclaim its identity as a progressive force that preserves the best of the past by forming a new community to transform the media world of electronic culture. Liberals, remember the Polish cavalry!