the Dial
Public Television's new national magazine

THE EDGE OF APATHY

Not enough people vote. Is TV to blame?

by Robert MacNeil

Now is the time when they start the ritual keening over the sickness of American democracy, a sickness presumed from the unwillingness of so many citizens to vote. It is the time when television stations and other saviors of the Republic exhort people to exercise their sacred right.

Since the sacred right leads this year to a choice that leaves millions indifferent, the exhortation may be to no avail. Commentators may work themselves into a lather for nothing. On November 4, there is a good chance that the electorate may carry apathy to new heights.

In every presidential election since 1960, the percentage of voting-age Americans actually casting votes has fallen. When John Kennedy shaved past Richard Nixon, in 1960, 62.8 percent went to the polls. In 1976, only 54.4 percent thought it worth the effort to make the choice between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Terrible? Well, not that terrible. In the great watershed election of 1932, when Franklin Roosevelt defeated Herbert Hoover, the turnout was only 52.4 percent.

Clearly, Americans are not really heavy voters. The West Germans and the French achieve turnouts of around 90 percent. The Japanese, the British, and the Canadians regularly pass 70 percent. In real numbers, it is true, American participation is rising. In 1976, 81.6 million Americans voted for president, the largest number ever.

Even so, the disturbing truth is that nearly half the people who theoretically could vote do not. Moreover, the percentage turnout has been steadily falling, not during a period of calm *(Text continues on page 36)*

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but over two decades of the most turbulent and electrifying political events in American history.

For millions, there may be valid excuses: real difficulties in registering, being newly resident, ill, or unable to get to the polls. But for millions more, absence *must* mean indifference. In 1976, 10 percent of the stay-at-homes told the Gallup Poll they had no particular reasons, another 10 percent said they were not interested in politics, 14 percent said they did not like the candidates, 38 percent were not registered. Together they represent some fifty million people who didn't know or didn't care or didn't believe that their vote for president was worth the effort. The political process was irrelevant to them. Whether Nixon or Humphrey, Nixon or McGovern, Ford or Carter, got into the White House did not make, as George Wallace claimed, "a dime's worth of difference."

Sy Levin;
Vansant Dugdale & Co.; Baltimore

Politicians, understandably, deplore this sullen refusal to take them seriously, and every election year an army of social scientists, pollsters, and journalists obligingly deploy themselves to explain it. Such concepts as voter apathy, alienation, estrangement, and disillusionment become fashionable each election. It has become a minor industry, divining what deep psychic wound has turned the voter off in any particular year. It is a difficult and frustrating business that I gratefully leave to those who make a living at it.

But one question has tantalized me for years: Is television implicated in this voter apathy?

It is a fact that these two decades of increasingly turned-off voters have been two decades of increasingly turned-on television. Just as election turnout was declining, television was becoming the dominant cultural force in American life and the principal medium of news and political communication. It must be more than a coincidence.

Since 1960, television has transformed the political process and all political institutions—the parties, primary elections, national conventions, campaigning, even the offices politicians seek, especially the presidency.

Television has become the nation's mass journalism. In February 1980, The Roper Organization found that while 76 percent of Americans had watched the news on television during the previous twenty-four hours, only 47 percent had read a morning newspaper.

The same survey found that 91 percent of all Americans had watched some TV during the same period. The average adult, according to Roper, now watches three hours and eight minutes of television a day, more than people devote on average to anything except working or sleeping. How could anything so pervasive not be implicated in voter indifference?

There is now much more reliable evidence on who the nonvoters actually are. In *Who Votes?*, a book published this year, two political scientists, Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, analyze the largest sample of voting behavior ever studied in this country—over 88,000 interviews conducted by the Census Bureau. They discard a lot of myths; for example, the myth that rich people vote more than poor people because they have a bigger stake in the system.

Their principal finding is that two factors really determine how likely you are to vote: how much education you have and how old you are. The person not voting is more likely to have a high school education or less or to be under thirty-one years old.

Tracing those same people back to Roper's data on television habits, you find that younger and less educated people watch roughly the same programs as older and better-educated people but that the younger ones watch somewhat less news. The younger, less educated also read fewer newspapers or magazines.

That connection between how much news people consume and how likely they are to vote is followed through seven presidential elections in the *American National Election Studies Data Sourcebook, 1952–1978*, produced this year by the Center for Political Studies, at the University of Michigan. It tracks how different demographic groups varied in voting habits and in exposure to election information from television, radio, magazines, and newspapers.

Voting patterns closely followed media exposure. To me the figures indicate that the more news people consumed, the more likely they were to vote, or those most likely to vote were people who consumed more election news and did not rely solely on television. Conversely, those least likely to vote appeared to rely most heavily on television.

Interestingly, there was one year in which the

correlation broke down: the Jimmy Carter-Gerald Ford election, in 1976. The media exposure for all groups went up from 1972, but the turnout for all groups did not.

One obviously different factor that year was the first televised presidential debates since Kennedy-Nixon, in 1960. What happened? The statistics are mute. An intriguing possibility is that the debates attracted a lot of people who then found the two candidates so uninteresting that they couldn't be bothered to vote for them.

So from this hard data, we emerge with only one clue: that people who are more dependent on television for information are likely to be people who vote less.

And there we have to cast off from the facts and sail into speculative waters. How *might* television be implicated in lower voter turnout? Curtis B. Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, thinks that the mass media, especially television, affect voter motivation by "creating confusion in the minds of some."

Michael J. Robinson, of George Washington University, argues that television news "helped to foster and amplify the changes in our political culture—changes such as the increasing levels of cynicism, pessimism, alienation, and estrangement." Robinson, who has written extensively on the subject, also believes that television has helped to "shift our frustration toward Washington" while also "deromanticizing both government and social institutions."

It is very difficult to prove any of these conjectures, but let us pursue such speculations a little further.

Indisputably, television has brought the electorate into more intimate contact with politicians than had ever been thought possible. Most Americans alive when he was president never actually saw Abraham Lincoln. Now millions can see and hear Jimmy Carter every day, as close as if they were sitting beside him in a Cabinet meeting. All that close exposure to politicians is clearly not inspiring some people to go and vote; it may well be inspiring them not to.

It is arguable that seeing politicians regularly deglamorizes them, provoking that "he's no better than you or I" feeling—not the stuff that myths are made of. Familiarity breeds if not contempt not admiration either.

Television had an important role in creating the "imperial presidency" by using one man to personify federal government. His life, his family, his proposals, his trials with Congress and foreign leaders, have become the television shorthand for an entire administration, and adept White House press secretaries have been manipulating the shorthand for years. In the Sixties, that appeared to work. Presidents could appear on television and seem dynamic and decisive. Now, they increasingly appear frustrated and ineffectual as the imperial presidency is dismantled and intractable issues stalemate the system. "If the president can't make a difference," a voter might ask, "why should I bother electing him?"

Then there is the faintly sneering tone of television news when talking about politicians. It is a way of implying, "You know what politicians are," of putting a cynical little gloss on things as though if the information were uttered without such coloration, the audience would think the reporter naive about politicians. It is a subtle put-down of politics, it is pervasive, and it may well put voters off.

There is the distressing matter of television commercials. Imagine being the media adviser explaining it all to Abraham Lincoln. Yes, there is a marvelous machine that lets you make campaign speeches to all the voters across the nation at once—but you don't do that, Abe. You let experts package your message into brief advertisements to be shown along with advertisements for sanitary napkins and breakfast cereal. It sounds like a Bob Newhart routine, but it is the truth.

Running for president through a barrage of slickly packaged half-truths reduces the political dialogue to a commercial proposition. You'll like this car better than that one; this deodorant will keep you drier than that; this president will never lie to you; that president will stand up to the Russians. The context cheapens, and the oversimplification cheapens. Deciding on a president is made no more important than deciding on what to wash your kitchen floor with—actually less important. You *have* to wash the floor.

Finally, it may be that because of television, millions of people now perceive politics as part of a cultural stratum they do not belong to. Politicians become stars, wearing clothes, speaking a language, associating with people that ordinary Americans know only through television. They may feel spectators only, not participants.

Isn't Jimmy Carter's story after all, to most people, a kind of soap opera that has been running now for about five years? And Reagan's soap opera—hasn't that been on forever? The trouble is, as with all soap operas, you don't have to watch them very often to keep up, and unless you're a real fan, they don't matter.

All this speculation may be nonsense. Television may not be turning voters away from politics. What is sadly obvious is that it has not turned many voters on either. □

INGA THORSSON

Disavowing violence

The arms race now runs at a pace at which expenditures approach half a trillion dollars a year. The madness of this race to oblivion, as it may well prove be, seems to elude comprehension. Since belief in the devil, to which the wickedness of the world could formerly be attributed, is outmoded, we shall have to look to ourselves for the causes of the present situation.

Why is it that we seem unaware of the threat to our very existence? In actual fact, it can be argued that, with the exception of competent and dedicated but fairly small groups of people, worldwide public awareness in the field of armaments is at an all-time low.

It is a mystery that this unusually well-planned journey toward nuclear holocaust can proceed without massive popular protest. Why is there not a mass movement for nuclear disarmament?

A look at mass perceptions may provide an answer. The definition of national security, as traditionally perceived, is less than adequate in today's world. Of old, the objective of national security has been met by military means. Since World War II resource allocations for armaments have seen few restrictions, and they have been justified by referring to needs of the security of the nation and its people. But since the 1970s it has been increasingly obvious that national security can no longer be equated with military might. Rather than a guarantee for national security, the arms race is one of the most imminent threats to the survival of humanity.

Let me refer to these grave threats in terms of crude headlines:

- the arms race itself;
- the present crisis of the main production systems of the world, including worldwide unemployment, worldwide inflation, and the worldwide monetary crisis;
- the energy crisis;
- the endangered environment and the ecological balance; and
- the demands emanating from the preservation of glaring economic and social inequalities between—and within—nations.

The concept of a neutral, value-free science has led to the separation of reason and emotion, and military research and development has, unfortunately, a prominent place in science. It seems as if military technology, moving forward at an accelerated speed, is pushed ahead by an invisible, dehumanized hand.

More than 30 years of peace in Europe, although a very short period in European civilization, may lead to an erroneous perception of safety. Erroneous it is, because the dynamism in arms development is a constant challenge to the stability of the balance of terror, which is not fail-safe in the first place. Erroneous also, because of the many wars that have raged in other continents.

The armaments debate deals with facts and figures which transcend what can easily be grasped. Who can understand the proportions of a reality where the present worldwide storage of nuclear weapons corresponds to 1,300,000 Hiroshima bombs? Language itself has been corrupted by means of the euphemisms which have entered the vocabulary of the armaments community—bonus-kills and megadeath, for example. Everybody knows what a cannon or a gun is. But what is the general cognitive value of a mini-nuke or a MIRV?

The step by step approach to disarmament negotiations necessarily engages in highly technical matters and issues, which unfortunately tend to obscure the very purpose of the whole process and restrict participation to experts and governments.

There is also the possibility that the lack of palpable progress imposes a sense of despair on those who actually perceive the true nature of our present predicament.

Given present perceptions we are short of a credible model for a peaceful world. Some psychologists maintain that a non-armed peace would be experienced as a defenseless situation, because nations do not yet know of any substitute for war as the last resource in international relations.

The necessary disavowal of violence as the ultimate sanction in international conflicts, therefore, seems to me to presuppose that national sovereignty be no longer associated with unlimited freedom in foreign policy. The first such freedom which should be disposed of is the freedom to possess nuclear weapons.□

Inga Thorsson, chairwoman of the Swedish Disarmament Delegation, is the Under-Secretary of State of Sweden.

The mystery in our midst

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"... many are looking for a theology which helps make sense out of our complex experience, for a way to find meaning in our ordinary activities, for an approach which respects the darkness and ambiguity of life..."

By JAMES J. BACIK

IN MY WORK as a campus minister, I speak with many people who want to discuss serious matters.

A graduate student in philosophy describes his desire for a contemporary model of what the good life is like. A young woman speaks of her repressive sexual training and her need to learn how to relate better to her boyfriend. A recent graduate tells me about his disappointment with the corrupt practices of the business world and seeks advice on finding a more fulfilling career. A shy fellow wants help in learning to be more comfortable in communicating with people.

A vibrant woman admits that she is often distracted as she flits from one new experience to another, and that she needs help to focus her attention on what is at hand. A group of business majors, tired of accounting classes, asks me for a book about important life issues to read and discuss. An activist professor reports the many demands on his time and says he needs to find deeper roots to sustain him. The wife of a professor describes her emptiness and hunger for deeper meaning. An angry husband recounts his deep hurt and his need for healing before he can respond properly to his wife.

These are typical of a growing number involved in a religious or spiritual search, even though they may not call it that. It is not simply a matter of improving one's prayer life, or discovering the Bible, or learning a meditation technique, or finding a more vibrant liturgy — although all of this may be involved.

Their spiritual quest is for meaning in the midst of absurdity, for commitment in the face of multiple options, for a deeper life amidst the temptation to superficiality. It is a search for an ultimate concern which overcomes the dullness of life, for a wholeness which pulls together a fragmented existence, for an overarching framework which provides a context for daily concerns. For many today, the emphasis is not on the other world, but this one; not on sin or guilt, but personal growth; not on limiting the human, but discovering a richer way of living humanly.

Unfortunately, our dominant culture seems to lack the resources for responding to these deeper longings of the human heart. We live in a world suffering from an eclipse of mystery. Mystery is that which eludes rational control, which defies logical calculation, and which exceeds all imagining. Mystery is that which sustains and draws us while remaining forever inexhaustible. When it is perceived as friendly, we commonly name it God. For many today this gracious mystery is hidden or forgotten or distorted or encased in a zone of silence. Life becomes a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be contemplated.

In such a culture it is difficult to find a language for discussing the most significant matters. Sin is reduced to neurosis, sex becomes a matter of performance, death is ignored or disguised, time is money, the future is predictable. A "cult of the computer" becomes a real danger when people view science as a religion and expect technology to solve all our human problems, when they trust data more than personal insight, abdicate responsibility to experts and even begin to think of themselves on the model of a sophisticated machine.

Such a one-dimensional world generates its own critique. Some people feel suffocated, subject to the blahs, strangely apathetic, tired of the rat race, at loose ends, without roots, excessively anxious. In this situation there is a natural tendency to grasp for security or to look for the simple answer, to reject complexity and to break out of the ordinary. We find examples of this in the interest in the occult, the fascination with astrology, the appeal of soap operas, the desire for simplistic political and economic solutions, and the rise of religious fundamentalism.

There seems to be a growing number of people who report striking conversion experiences, who prize spectacular gifts such as speaking in tongues, who speak of unmistakable messages from God. Periodically individuals describe to me their feelings of guilt or inadequacy because their "born again" friends keep stressing the importance of special gifts such as healing, tongues and prophecy. It is as though a "cult of the spectacular" is created where only those with striking religious experience walk in the light and those with a more pedestrian piety are relegated to the darkness.

It is not unusual for me to encounter solid Christian parents who are terribly hurt because their "born again" son or daughter has accused them of not really being close to the Lord and of not being saved. Unfortunately, these exclusivist tendencies on the part of some "pipeline believers," who speak as though they have a direct, immediate, unambiguous communication with God, obscure for many the positive aspects of contemporary evangelical and charismatic renewal.

Many of the people I talk to are both dissatisfied with the superficiality of the computerized culture and leery of the excesses of the "cult of the spectacular." These people need another alternative, a contemporary spirituality which draws on the insights of modern theology, an indigenous spirituality which is rooted in our experience as citizens of the United States and a dialectical spirituality which takes into account the paradoxical complexity of human life.

Contemporary theology has provided us with a theological framework for building

(Continued on next page)

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such a spirituality. It begins with a theological anthropology which stresses that we humans, in all our longings and struggles, are supported and drawn by a gracious mystery which we call God.

This holy mystery wills wholeness and final fulfillment for all of us and offers itself to every human being for this purpose. This creates in us an inner word, an attunement to the divine, the call of conscience, the impulse to good. When we respond positively to this universal revelation, we act as people of faith and move closer to our God.

All of our experiences can mediate or bring to mind this presence of the gracious mystery. There are hidden depths in reality, surprising resources in our hearts, signals of hope in our ordinary experience which can be disclosed, revealing the divine presence to us. We live and move in a grace-filled world where all things are potentially revelatory. Our genuine experience of self is precisely our experience of God. Thus the task is to be on alert so as to be able to find the light in the darkness and the extraordinary in the ordinary.

For us Christians, Jesus Christ is the never-to-be-surpassed high point of the divine-human encounter. His story illumines and directs our lives by shaping our consciousness according to his values, by attuning us to the presence of the Father, by assuring us that our efforts are ultimately worthwhile. Putting on the mind of Christ means that we actually experience life in a renewed way, perceiving depths previously eclipsed and hearing demands formerly ignored.

The theology sketched here is just one approach among many and it must be expanded, expressed in understandable language and related to our specific culture and historical setting. However, the important point is that any viable spirituality today must be rooted in a solid theology which respects both the tradition and the specific characteristics of our own time and culture.

With this theological framework, it seems possible to give further help to those seeking guidance by suggesting various ideal characteristics which should comprise a contemporary and indigenous spirituality. These attributes take into consideration our common experience of struggling to bring apparently opposite and competing tendencies into an integrated synthesis. At our best we strive for a wholeness which refuses to negate authentic aspects of our human existence.

The following list of characteristics can be thought of as a partial outline for a "dialectical spirituality" since it emphasizes that we humans are constituted by competing tendencies, recognizes that we are involved in a dynamic lifelong struggle for integration and tries to disclose the hidden, often paradoxical connections between apparent opposites.

1. Committed-Openness. We must guard against both a mindless relativism which judges one position to be as good as another and a narrow exclusivism which tries to monopolize truth and goodness. We should strive rather to root ourselves so firmly in our religious tradition that we possess the confidence to be open to truth and goodness wherever it is found. A commitment to our heritage which is based on a genuine understanding and appreciation of both its strengths and weaknesses is precisely what will enable us to enter into fruitful dialogue with other traditions.

2. Reflective-Spontaneity. In our culture we are in danger of falling into either an excessive and paralyzing introspection or a superficial, unexamined immersion in the busyness of life. Our ideal instead should be to combine a spontaneous immersion in the present moment with periodic self-examination which in turn frees us to live more fully in the now. We want to live in a self-forgetful way, but this requires self-examination. It is desirable to be attentive to our current experience but this seems to be facilitated by regular meditation. Our goal is to participate wholeheartedly in the events of our lives, but we need insight and understanding to do so. We need to find a proper frequency and method for our reflective times, so that they don't increase our anxiety and preoccupation with self, but rather help to free us to listen to the God who speaks to us in the present moment.

3. Hopeful-Realism. Our culture seems to present the temptation to swing from a naive optimism to a cynical pessimism as ideals are tarnished and dreams are unfulfilled. In reaction we must strive for a spiritual maturity which is in touch with reality, including its dark and tragic dimension, but which maintains a lively confidence in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. At the same time we must be aware of the signals of hope in our everyday experience which remind us of God's final victory over suffering.

4. Enlightened-Simplicity. Some people find themselves fixated in a childish religious outlook which ignores the ambiguity of life and runs on emotion divorced from reason. Others are trapped in a pseudosophistication in which a little bit of knowledge has obscured the whole point of authentic religion. We ought to avoid these tendencies by striving for a spirituality which includes a purity of heart founded on an adequate theology, a humble charity based on insight, an uncomplicated lifestyle intelligently chosen and worked out, an utter dependence on God matched by a creative use of our talents. We want to have an adult understanding of our faith, but one which recognizes it as the simple good news that there is a gracious God who loves us despite our unworthiness.

5. Prayerfully-Prophetic. It is not uncommon today to find people very serious about prayer but lacking concern for the needs of the oppressed and disadvantaged. On the other hand, some people serious about improving our world find prayer irrelevant to that task. To avoid such one-sidedness it seems important to develop a prayer life which intensifies our awareness of social injustice and moves us to prophetic action on behalf of those enslaved. At the same time involvement in the struggle to humanize our world should send us back to prayer where we recall our dependence on God and seek new energy and strength for the struggle.

These characteristics of a dialectical spirituality are not exhaustive and obviously need further explanation and exemplification. However they do set a tone, map a direction and indicate a task. I believe there is a growing number of people who find this dialectical approach closer to their experience and a more reliable guide in their quest for meaning, commitment, integration and a richer human life.

The "cult of the computer" can dominate much of our daily lives and the "cult of the spectacular" gets the headlines, but many are looking for a theology which helps make sense out of our complex experience, for a way to find meaning in our ordinary activities, for an approach which respects the darkness and ambiguity of life, for a message of hope which sustains us in the daily struggle.

Many people today are already living out such a dialectical spirituality and theologians have articulated various aspects of it. It is important that the whole approach continue to be developed and made available to more people.

2 Of all the clean animals you must take seven of each kind, both male and
3 female; of the unclean animals you must take two, a male and its female (and
of the birds of the air also, seven pairs of each kind, both male and female), to
4 propagate their kind over the whole earth. For in seven days' time I mean to
will rid the earth of
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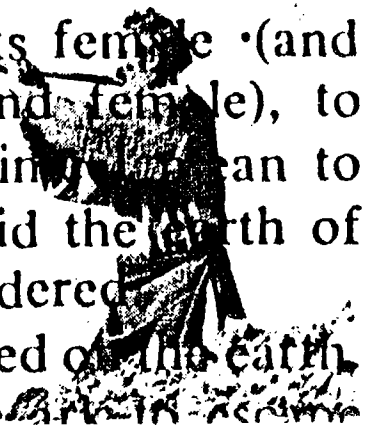
What media for mystery?



By MICHAEL J. FARRELL

THE WORD "religion" embraces a spectrum of realities, connected but distinct. It includes the churches, their representatives and other visible manifestations. It includes theology, the mind wrestling with the relations between God and humanity, searching for scientific understanding. And it includes mystagogy (see page 9) — the area of mystery, spirituality, transcendence, where the mind boggles and falters and instinct, will, emotions and imagination coagulate for the leap of faith into the dark beyond our understanding.

The question being raised here is whether books are the best way to deal with this latter aspect of religion. Is something lost by writing it down in words? It seems that how we experience reality — secular or religious — makes a profound difference on our thinking, reactions, behavior. Experiencing the core of religion only through written words would leave it lifeless as dry bones.

Victor Hugo wrote that the stained glass and the cathedral statuary were the books of the middle ages, the recorders and transmitters of the spirit of the people. Medieval people, therefore, belonged to a visual culture.

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This had wider implications than the stained glass and the statue. It was an age of non-readers, without all the subtlety of words that books brought later. Experience and communication were more simple and direct. But if the versatility of words was less important, visual awareness was at a proportionately higher level. In interpersonal communications, body language was as important as what was said. And while body language was less subtle in dealing with intellectual nuances and distinctions, it was much more effective in expressing what people felt and what they were.

The oral tradition, repository of folklore and faith, was part of that visual culture — the storyteller or preacher was physically present to cast a spell larger than the sum of his words.

Johann Gutenberg's invention changed all that. As the Hungarian critic Bela Balazs wrote, "The thousands of books tore the *one spirit*, embodied in the cathedral, into thousands of opinions. The word broke the stone into a thousand fragments, tore the church into a thousand books!"

The more palpable visual culture was changed to a culture of abstract concepts. And because of the permanence of the printed word, people became much more precise in its use. If you were careless with it, the printed word could be used against you later. The result was that every idea and concept acquired its own proper word or set of words, wrapped around it like a string to limit it. Gesture, facial expression or physical demeanor were no longer allowed to add that extra residue, just in case.

Balazs comments: "In the epoch of word culture, the soul learned to speak but had grown almost invisible. . . . There was no longer any need for the subtler means of expression provided by the body. For this reason our bodies grew soulless and empty — what is not in use deteriorates."

Then came further inventions — radio, cinema, tapes, television. These did not replace books but in this century they have made us again a visual breed.

The cinema is a good example of the transition. For the first 30 years or so the cinema was unable to talk, so the millions who flocked to it had to learn again to see more than was shown. The titles that were flashed provided only basic information. It was thus incumbent on the actors to speak with their bodies. Charlie Chaplin could make a whole poem with one lifted eyebrow. And it was incumbent on the directors to organize reality into a readable book. But the book hinted at more than it said.

Today the cinema and its offshoots pervade our lives. In business, education, advertising and elsewhere, goods are sold, information is imparted, attitudes are formed, ideals created and destroyed, by film and TV, microfilm and videotape, slides and filmstrips.

The message can be more than the medium, Marshall McLuhan notwithstanding. Different media serve different kinds of messages better than others. The printed word is still an excellent medium where precision is required, where the word ought to mean no more and no less. This would be true of scientific disciplines generally. And it would be true of systematic or scientific theology.

In areas, however, where learning converges more closely with life, there may be more effective ways. The dry word on the page is further removed from life than the inflected spoken or recorded word. When we want to reach the will, the affections or emotions — as well as the mind — the visual image is more potent still, especially when combined with the spoken word.

Dziga Vertov, a great film pioneer and director of the Russian film industry after the revolution, wrote: "The only film form for the new Russia is the factual film, and the only true function of film is to bring

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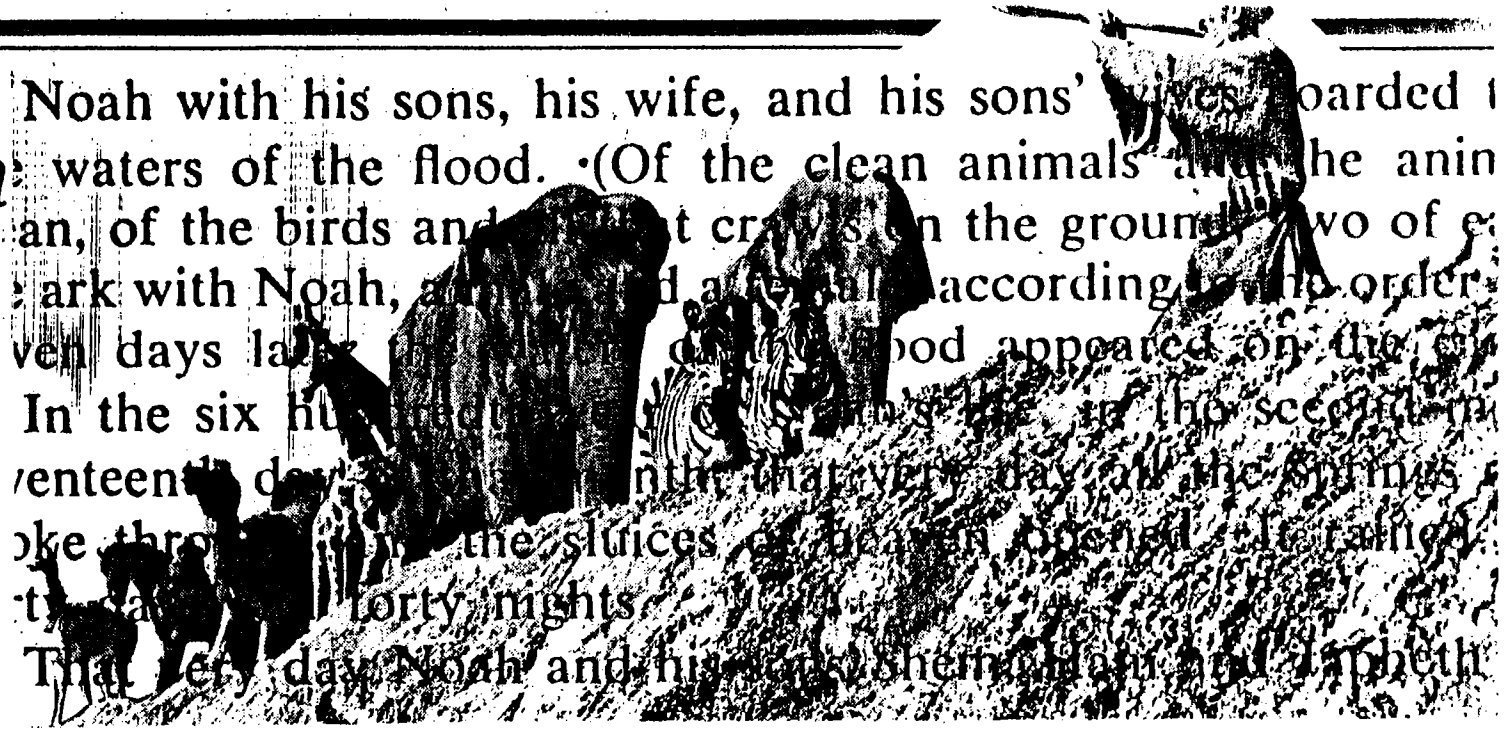
What media for the mysterious message?



MEDIA CONTRASTS: Biblical and film versions of Noah and the flood.

(Continued from page 11).

the facts of the new society to the people who are helping to build it."

Vertov was both right and wrong. The film was the right medium, but it was not the "facts" of the "factual film" that were successful. What the facts symbolized and pointed to moved the masses. It was that something extra hinted at, the inspiration, the appeal to the emotions.

Returning to the original thesis: the dry word for the narrow concept is no match for the soaring arc of imagination and spirit on which transcendent or mystical religion thrives.

True, there have been exceptions in the past: Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, the works of St. John of the Cross, Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven" and more. But in a way these only prove the point — they were poetry that refused to be confined to the word and the page.

In the search for and transmission of the element of mystery in life, the most effective means ought to be direct and personal confrontation: word, expression and gesture, personal sincerity and spiritual energy, all brought to bear. This would explain the appeal of the primitive shaman, the Irish *seanchai*, the African witch doctor and their various counterparts. It also indicates the opportunity and responsibility of today's minister. And it probably evokes both privileged occasions and chances lost.

The various media became an extension of those privileged occasions. When the great gurus were unavailable or maybe dead, the book they wrote preserved something of them. But no one would pretend it was the same as the dynamism of their presence. The audio tape preserved a little more, made them more present. The video tape — or TV or film — added a further dimension, not only to preserve the guru's charism but also to create more effective inroads to the psyche of the audience.

These work, of course, only to the extent that the guru or priest or parson has something to give in the first place. Maria Falconetti, the star of Carl Dreyer's 1919 "The Passion of Joan of Arc," shot almost entirely in close-up, so drained herself in the performance that she was never able to make another movie. How many ministers of the word are prepared to "put out" as much?

These new, more effective media, therefore, call for new talents, new training and new commitment. What are the churches doing about it?

The great concentration is still on books, and it is probably fair to say they were never better. But they have only limited appeal to the new visual generation.

Cassettes are flourishing, a big step forward, and the best people in this field are stepping forward to be recorded. Yet, in this religious sphere, the cassette revolution is still in its infancy.

Television, although even more untapped, is also leaping forward. But if the mainline churches don't wake up soon, they will find the airwaves beyond their reach and in the clutches of the more fundamental evangelical sects. Norman Corwin reported recently in *Westways:* "On a single recent Sunday, among 16 TV stations from San Diego to Santa Barbara, there were 98 religious broadcasts. Weekday programs on the same channels averaged 46."

There is a challenge here for the churches, and a special problem for Catholics: how to render the message worthily. Talking heads won't suffice as they do, say, for fundamentalist Protestants with their emphasis on the literal word. The Catholic emphasis on symbol and sacrament calls for something more oblique and abstract. But because no way has been found does not mean there is no way. It will take talent and money but first it will take conviction.

Books will not go out of fashion. They will continue to do what they do best. But to capture or transmit the mystery in life and beyond, those who care will demand more and may follow the guru who follows the times.

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