

The Parable of the Ring Around the Collar

This and the following essay are among several in this book dealing with television. Their purpose is the same: to shed light on the relationship between the form and the social consequences of certain kinds of television programs. It is worth noting here that one difference between Americans and Europeans is that the latter take television seriously. Europeans seem to understand that media change is ecological, not additive; that when a powerful new medium like television enters a culture, the result is not the old culture plus the new medium, but a new culture altogether. The effect is similar to what happens if you add a drop of red dye to a beaker of clear water: you end up with a new color throughout. I have been close to obsessed about television, for it does not seem to me that my countrymen have yet taken its measure. We speak about America as if television has merely been added to it and little else has changed. Americans watch television, but we have not yet reached the point where we watch ourselves watch it.

Television commercials are a form of religious literature. To comment on them in a serious vein is to practice hermeneutics, the branch of theology concerned

with interpreting and explaining the Scriptures. This is what I propose to do here. The heathens, heretics, and unbelievers may move on to something else.

I do not claim, for a start, that every television commercial has religious content. Just as in church the pastor will sometimes call the congregation's attention to non-ecclesiastical matters, so there are television commercials that are entirely secular. Someone has something to sell; you are told what it is, where it can be obtained, and what it costs. Though these may be shrill and offensive, no doctrine is advanced and no theology invoked.

But the majority of important television commercials take the form of religious parables organized around a coherent theology. Like all religious parables, they put forward a concept of sin, intimations of the way to redemption, and a vision of Heaven. They also suggest what are the roots of evil and what are the obligations of the holy.

Consider, for example, the Parable of the Ring Around the Collar. This is to television scripture what the Parable of the Prodigal Son is to the Bible, which is to say it is an archetype containing most of the elements of form and content that recur in its genre. To begin with, the Parable of the Ring Around the Collar is short, occupying only about thirty seconds of one's time and attention. There are three reasons for this, all obvious. First, it is expensive to preach on television; second, the attention span of the congregation is not long and is highly vulnerable to distraction; and third, a parable does not need to be long—tradition dictating that its narrative structure be tight, its symbols unambiguous, its explication terse.

The narrative structure of the Parable of the Ring Around the Collar is, indeed, comfortably traditional. The story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A married couple is depicted in some relaxed setting—a restaurant, say—in which

they are enjoying each other's company and generally having a wonderful time. But then a waitress approaches their table, notices that the man has a dirty collar, stares at it boldly, sneers with cold contempt, and announces to all within hearing the nature of his transgression. The man is humiliated and glares at his wife with scorn, for she is the source of his shame. She, in turn, assumes an expression of self-loathing mixed with a touch of self-pity. This is the parable's beginning: the presentation of the problem.

The parable continues by showing the wife at home using a detergent that never fails to eliminate dirt around the collars of men's shirts. She proudly shows her husband what she is doing, and he forgives her with an adoring smile. This is the parable's middle: the solution of the problem. Finally, we are shown the couple in a restaurant once again, but this time they are free of the waitress's probing eyes and bitter social chastisement. This is the parable's end: the moral, the explication, the exegesis. From this, we should draw the proper conclusion.

As in all parables, behind the apparent simplicity there are some profound ideas to ponder. Among the most subtle and important is the notion of where and how problems originate. Embedded in every belief system there is an assumption about the root cause of evil from which the varieties of sinning take form. In science, for example, evil is represented in superstition. In psychoanalysis, we find it in early, neurotic transactions with our parents. In Christianity, it is located in the concept of Original Sin.

In television-commercial parables, the root cause of evil is Technological Innocence, a failure to know the particulars of the beneficent accomplishments of industrial progress. This is the primary source of unhappiness, humiliation, and discord in life. And, as forcefully depicted in the Parable of the Ring, the consequences of technological innocence may strike

at any time, without warning, and with the full force of their disintegrating action.

The sudden striking power of technological innocence is a particularly important feature of television-commercial theology, for it is a constant reminder of the congregation's vulnerability. One must never be complacent or, worse, self-congratulatory. To attempt to live without technological sophistication is at all times dangerous, since the evidence of one's naïveté will always be painfully visible to the vigilant. The vigilant may be a waitress, a friend, a neighbor, or even a spectral figure—a holy ghost, as it were—who materializes in your kitchen, from nowhere, to give witness to your sluggardly ignorance.

Technological innocence refers not only to ignorance of detergents, drugs, sanitary napkins, cars, salves, and food-stuffs, but also to ignorance of technical machinery such as savings banks and transportation systems. One may, for example, come upon one's neighbors while on vacation (in television-commercial parables, this is always a sign of danger) and discover that they have invested their money in a certain bank of whose special interest rates you have been unaware. This is, of course, a moral disaster, and both you and your vacation are doomed.

As demonstrated in the Ring Parable, there is a path to redemption, but it can be entered only on two conditions. The first requires that you be open to advice or social criticism from those who are more enlightened. In the Ring Parable, the waitress serves the function of counselor, although she is, to be sure, exacting and very close to unforgiving. In some parables, the adviser is rather more sarcastic than severe. But in most parables, as for example in all sanitary napkin, mouthwash, shampoo, and aspirin commercials, the advisers are amiable and sympathetic, perhaps all too aware of their own vulnerability on other matters.

The Innocent are required to accept instruction in the spirit in which it is offered. This cannot be stressed enough, for it instructs the congregation in two lessons simultaneously: one must be eager to accept advice, and just as eager to give it. Giving advice is, so to speak, the principal obligation of the holy. In fact, the ideal religious community may be depicted in images of dozens of people, each in his or her turn giving and taking advice on technological advances.

The second condition involves one's willingness to act on the advice given. As in traditional Christian theology, it is not sufficient to hear the gospel or even preach it. One's understanding must be expressed in good works. In the Ring Parable, the once-pitiable wife acts almost immediately, and the parable concludes by showing the congregation the effects of her action. In the Parable of the Person with Rotten Breath, of which there are several versions, we are shown a woman who, ignorant of the technological solution to her problem, is enlightened by a supportive roommate. The woman takes the advice without delay, with results we are shown in the last five seconds: a honeymoon in Hawaii. In the Parable of the Stupid Investor, we are shown a man who knows not how to make his money make money. Upon enlightenment, he acts swiftly and, at the parable's end, he is rewarded with a car, or a trip to Hawaii, or something approximating peace of mind.

Because of the compactness of commercial parables, the ending—that is, the last five seconds—must serve a dual purpose. It is, of course, the moral of the story: if one will act in such a way, this will be the reward. But in being shown the result, we are also shown an image of Heaven. Occasionally, as in the Parable of the Lost Traveler's Checks, we are given a glimpse of Hell: Technological Innocents lost and condemned to eternal wandering far from their native land. But mostly we are given images of a Heaven both accessible

and delicious: that is, a Heaven that is here, now, on earth, in America, and quite often in Hawaii.

But Hawaii is only a convenient recurring symbol. Heaven can, in fact, materialize and envelop you anywhere. In the Parable of the Man Who Runs Through Airports, Heaven is found at a car-rental counter to which the confounded Runner is shepherded by an angelic messenger. The expression of ecstasy on the Runner's face tells clearly that this moment is as close to transcendence as he can ever hope for.

Ecstasy is the key idea here, for commercial parables depict the varieties of ecstasy in as much detail as you will find in any body of religious literature. At the conclusion of the Parable of the Spotted Glassware, a husband and wife assume such ecstatic countenances as can only be described by the word "beatification." Even in the Ring Parable, which at first glance would not seem to pose as serious a moral crisis as spotted glassware, we are shown ecstasy, pure and serene. And where ecstasy is, so is Heaven. Heaven, in brief, is any place where you have joined your soul with the Deity—the Deity, of course, being Technology.

Just when, as a religious people, we replaced our faith in traditional ideas of God with a belief in the ennobling force of Technology is not easy to say. Television commercials played no role in bringing about this transformation, but they reflect the change, document it, and amplify it. They constitute the most abundant literature we possess of our new spiritual commitment. That is why we have a solemn obligation to keep television commercials under the continuous scrutiny of hermeneutics.

