

# **Communicating in a Secular Society: New Opportunities for the Church**

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## **Introduction: A Secular Society**

When religious people speak of today's secular society they often do so in negative terms. The implication is that a secular society is necessarily opposed to a recognition of the sacred. That what is meant by the secular society is one in which religious ideas and practices are being marginalized, pushed out of the public square by legislation or social pressure.

There is a good deal of force in this assertion but this reality can also obscure some important truths. The first is that the concept of the secular realm is in itself largely a product of Christianity. It was St Augustine who most famously distinguished between the 'city of God' and the 'city of man' and who emphasized the proper autonomy of the earthly city. Secondly, on a more practical level it is the very existence of the realm of the secular that has enabled freedom of religion to thrive in diverse cultures; the secular society, with its separation of church and state, most famously in the United States, has liberated the Church to pursue its own objectives, free from the constraints of state policy or political manipulation.

So the scope of Church communication in a secular society may be less constrained or adversarial than the use of the term "secular society" at first seems to suggest. A secular society may challenge the Church to justify its participation in the public sphere but a secular society also provides opportunities for the Church to find new ways of communicating its message to new audiences.

Another important concept, linked to the emergence of the 'secular society' is that of pluralism. Modern secular societies are largely pluralistic, culturally and religiously diverse. This means that hitherto widely accepted cultural, social and ethical assumptions about, for example, the nature of life, social and sexual relationships and religious practice, etc are today more often sources of controversy and dispute. In fact, a pluralistic society is a competitive society: a society in which a wide variety of opinions, assumptions, attitudes and values are struggling to find wider acceptance.

In this process the role of the media is central, in modern secular, pluralistic society, individuals and groups, including the Church, are in competition with each other to communicate and promote their values, beliefs and vision of the good life through and in the media.

But what do we mean by 'communication'? One definition is that communication is the process of sharing meaning and values. So, one way of posing the issue which is expressed in the title of this talk would be to ask: How can Church interact with the media to share meaning and values with people living in a secular, pluralistic society? In other words, how does it frame its messages so that they make sense to different publics and how does it express its values in ways that are attractive and appropriate to different audiences?

These questions go to the heart of the challenge facing Church communications. The core challenge is not primarily a matter of will, or finance or technology – it is rather of audience, content and style. Spending more money on new technologies to convey badly expressed messages to indifferent audiences is not only wasteful, it is foolish. But too often the Church, like other institutions, has fallen into this trap. The title of this presentation refers to “new opportunities” – and the temptation is to reduce these opportunities to technologies or channels – to wax lyrical about the power of the internet or the growth of social networking or even the rediscovery of the power of radio or the press. But though these are opportunities, they are less important than the opportunities for the Church to better understand its audience, to reconsider what it wants to say and to adapt the style and manner in which it communicates. Getting these aspects right will enable the Church to use the technological opportunities now available in more creative and effective ways.

### **Understanding the Audience**

The first opportunity the Church has is to better understand the audiences it wishes to reach. We live in a secular, pluralistic society, which is also media saturated. We are constantly bombarded with messages. We are daily encouraged to buy, sell, vote, believe, care, laugh, cry, be angry, be fearful, be sad or just generally anxious. Our mobile phone is our lifeline, we are worried when we can't read our emails, we wake to the radio, watch the TV news, go to the movies, download music, decode endless advertisements. Our senses and our minds are almost overwhelmed. There is no time to think!

So any new message is going to struggle to make an impact. Too often, Church communicators

assume they know what people need or want to hear – the result is that the messages they craft are perceived not as full of meaning, or even full of information – but as full of noise! So, the first task of those responsible for Church communications is to watch and listen. To try to understand what people are really concerned about, what their real hopes and fears are. Only when people sense that what is being said or presented corresponds to what they care about will they pay attention.

In this task the Church communicator is actually helped by the proliferation of media. The media hold up a mirror to society, and in a more or less truthful way reflect back to society what it thinks about, cares for and understands. So the media (adverts, chat shows, films, phone-ins, blogs, letters pages, news headlines) are a resource for the Church – a ever changing data bank of images and words that reveal what kind of people we are. Above all, the very diversity and quantity of media reveals how diverse and heterogeneous the audience is. There are many different publics and they are catered for by a rich variety of media channels and tailored messages. So, in conjunction with personal interaction and life experience, the media can help enrich the communicator's understanding of the complexity of the audience and widen his or her sympathies with their concerns.

### **Reframing the content**

The second opportunity for the Church is to rethink and rework what it wants to say. There is no simple slogan or one size fits all message that will be sufficient. The messages will be many and various, reflecting the needs and expectations of the diverse audiences to which they are addressed. Of course, this is a commonplace of communication theory but it is surprising how often it is not put into practice. Why else would so much of Church or religious communication via the media be regarded as boring or irrelevant. The truth is most people expect church people alongside politicians (Barack Obama being the exception) to send them to sleep. In the UK, for example, religious broadcasting is consistently identified as the public's least favourite form of programming – apart from arts programmes.

But paradoxically, though audiences are mostly suspicious of what is packaged as “religious”, they are in fact interested in religious and spiritual themes and very ready to engage in ethical and moral debates. Some TV programmes dealing with religious issues in the UK have been and are popular with the general public – but the public don't identify or label them as “religious”, the moral debate programme, *Heart of the Matter* being the most famous example. So there is an opportunity for the

Church to engage with people about religious and moral issues but it must do so in a language that is accessible and understandable. A language which confounds their expectations, challenges their assumptions, captures their imaginations and reaches out to where they are.

If the Church wants to take up that challenge, today's multiplicity of communication channels offers it the chance to craft a whole range of messages directed at a multiplicity of audiences. We are moving from the age of mass media with large captive audiences to an age of ever more differentiated media with smaller and more fickle audiences. In the age of digital broadcasting and the internet, consumers can pick and choose at all hours of the day and night the content that best suits them. But they make up their minds very quickly whether or not they will pay attention to what is on offer. This is the age of 'grazing', 'surfing' and 'browsing'. So the Church not only has to be present across a range of communication channels it also has to adapt its communication both to the demands of the channel and the expectations of the audience. It has to catch and hold the attention of demanding, impatient audiences, whether they be within or outside the Church.

### **Developing a new style of communicating**

Ancient manuals of rhetoric set out the various techniques that orators could employ to win the hearts and minds of their audiences. Today the Church needs to learn and employ a rhetoric in new ways— the arts of communicating in a secular, pluralist and multi-channel environment. The first prerequisite is that Church communicators understand and are comfortable with the media, and those who work in them. Though the Church has made great strides in learning that the media are not always its enemies, it has yet to fully embrace them as friends. The opportunities for reaching out to people through the media also require that Church people learn how to build and sustain relationships with media people. Of course, all relationships are two way processes so this is also a challenge to those media to overcome their prejudices and assumptions.

The second necessity is that Church communicators master the language and the characteristics of whatever media they are using. Again, this is a commonsense requirement but many times neglected. To take the simplest of examples many Church press releases unfortunately show quite clearly that the person writing had no understanding of what will catch the attention of a journalist! And, of course, the examples multiply when one considers the skills required to use radio, or TV or the internet effectively. So training in communication and media skills is essential.

Apart from mastery of the techniques, the would-be communicator has to master the far greater skills of adapting his or her language to the audience, of creating images and messages that are compelling and memorable, of becoming a storyteller. The modern media are great storytelling machines, producing an endless stream of stories: everything from the news to the latest blockbuster film or video game. Stories are a response to the basic human need to organize experience, to find sense and meaning in the flow and ebb of everyday life and to express the deepest fears, hopes and values. In a secular society most people do not look to the Church to tell them the stories that orientate their lives, they look rather to the media, TV above all. So if the Church wants to be heard it needs to learn once more to tell stories and to tell stories in a variety of media settings to different audiences.

The Jesuit thinker, Fr Walter Ong has said that today we live in a 'secondary oral' culture. It is probably truer to say that we live in oral/visual culture. People spend many hours each day speaking or listening – TV is as much an oral as a visual medium, radio is on constantly, the iPod and the mobile phone ensure that there is rarely silence in most people's lives. Talk, comment, music, chatter fills the airwaves. At the same time, the eyes are bombarded with images – everywhere we look a message is being conveyed through an image – right down to the brand of sportswear or sunglasses. Too often it seems that Church communication is more comfortable with the written word than with the spoken word or the visual image, in spite of the fact that the Church has such a rich inheritance in communication through liturgy, music, art and architecture.

In the unfolding world of modern communications, in which sound and image are so often intensely linked the Church has a great opportunity to rediscover the lessons of its past and to relearn the arts of communicating in a multi-layered way, for example, by using the resources available on the internet to create websites that are well designed, visually attractive, and use video and audio to supplement the written word. Indeed, in his latest Communications Day message, the Pope has exhorted priests “to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis.”

But even more important than building relationships with journalists, or training in techniques is the understanding that in this society the audience will in the end only listen to those people that it trusts. The public is intensely sceptical of claims to authority, especially by institutions. Trust in the major institutions (political, religious, social, business, media) of most democratic societies has

been steadily eroded over the past half century. Credibility and trust does not come easily. Institutions have to win the public over by deeds not just words and, as the catastrophe at Toyota illustrates, reputation built up over many years can be destroyed in a matter of days.

A secular public is also a more demanding public. It demands to have its voice heard and so the media are being challenged more and more to open up possibilities for interactivity and dialogue. The advent of the web has made it possible for more and more people to become 'public' communicators. Nowadays, a comment posted on Twitter can spark a major news story or pictures taken by members of the public using mobile phones can lead the TV news. TV and radio programmes encourage their viewers and listeners not only to phone in comments but to email or post on social networks. Readers of online newspapers expect to be able to post comments. In this environment the Church has to learn to engage in dialogue, promote interactivity and encourage real participation in debate.

A more interactive, dialogical model of communication makes more demands upon the communicator. The communicator has to earn the right to be listened to. In modern societies the personal credibility and authority of the communicator is far more important than institutional position. Force of personality and perceived integrity gain people's attention and win their allegiance. This is not a new phenomenon in itself, as history shows, but the unparalleled access to the public afforded by the media has made personality (and celebrity) ever more powerful elements in shaping public opinion. In the UK, for example, the influence of Cardinal Basil Hume would not have been so strong save that the public saw in him personal qualities that transcended his official position – some people seem to have thought he was actually the Archbishop of Canterbury! When the Church finds such communicators it would do well to value and support them.

## **Conclusion**

I end this talk with three brief observations. First, the opportunities for communicating effectively in a secular society are primarily linked to a change of mind set, not to changes in technologies or media. The major challenge is to rethink and reframe Church communications in terms of audience, content and style.

Secondly, ignorance, fear and distrust of the media can be bigger handicaps to seizing the new

opportunities available than perceived or even actual media indifference or hostility. The Church needs both to reach out to and building relationships with the media and journalists and to have confidence in its own capacities and creativity. The opportunities are there to be taken.

Finally, the secular pluralistic society thrives on debate, dialogue and sometimes confrontation, but this is not a state of affairs that the Church should fear. People are still searching for meaning and values and they will respond if they encounter Church communications that is truly an invitation to dialogue and exploration.