

THEOLOGY AND THE NEWS MEDIA

A Response to Michael Lacey

I've been asked this evening, as the second speaker from outside your field, to shift the focus somewhat away from the area of Michael Lacey's concern—Catholic theology within the broader intellectual culture—and toward a neighboring, even slightly overlapping, area, that of Catholic theology as it is perceived in the news media, which is the world that I inhabit. When I first read Mike Lacey's remarks a few days ago, I saw that we shared a sense of the marginality of theology in our respective worlds. I also realized that the reasons for this are probably more straightforward in my world than they are in his, and no doubt just as resistant to substantial alteration. But I had to acknowledge, finally, that my world has been subtly changing in recent years in ways that are not completely unhelpful.

But first, the marginality. There is no question but that Catholic theology is barely countenanced in the broad world of the American media. So is religious thought generally. So is religion. Oh, theology is not completely absent. There was a widely reported story in the papers a few years ago describing how Mario Cuomo, objecting to some policy proposal that presupposed a too-optimistic view of the capacities of human nature, snapped to a reporter: "But that's Pelagianism." Cuomo aside, though, the pickings are pretty slim when it comes to religion and theology. One recent study done by Robert Lichter and his colleagues at the Center for Media and Public Affairs looked at the virtual totality of the coverage of religious issues since 1960 on the CBS Evening News and in *Time Magazine*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. They found not only that the number of news stories on religious subjects was diminishing steadily with each passing year but also that larger and larger percentages of the news stories that did get published were characterized by a "linguistic tone that was generally (and increasingly) unfavorable." A few days ago I took down a recent volume of the *New York Times Index*—it was from 1989—to see what a year's coverage of Roman Catholicism looked like. I didn't expect to see much of a theological nature under the rubric "Roman Catholic Church"—and there wasn't much. I was surprised, though, to see that the total volume of coverage of the church of every kind required scarcely more than a page worth of citations—about the same amount found under each of the rubrics "electronic mail" and "Republic of Sri Lanka." The category "Religion and Churches," seemingly broader, was even sparser—equivalent in importance, judging from the number of citations, to "Teeth and Dentistry." I bring up *The Times*, a newspaper for which I have great respect, not to tweak its nose but because it arguably offers some of the best of what reporting there is on religion that is available in the American news media. It treats religion as a subject of national significance, not simply as a local story or something to

be relegated to the Saturday religion page (as even the *Washington Post*, unbelievably, often does). The situation among the second rank news media, or fifth or twelfth rank, is disturbing to contemplate. In a perceptive article that appeared several years ago in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and was quoted recently in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the columnist Jon Carroll wrote frankly of the general unwillingness of his colleagues in the media to acknowledge the reality and power of religious belief in America, and of the institutions and activities associated with it. Carroll posited a situation in which a reporter is talking with a baseball player and hears the ballplayer attribute his success to God. What is the reporter's typical reaction?, Carroll asked, "Does the reporter then ask a probing follow-up question on the order of 'Do you mean the personal God of Christian fundamentalism?' or 'Is God a moment-to-moment presence in your daily life?' He does not. In all likelihood, *he pretends that he hasn't heard the answer.*"

Carroll has the reaction just right—or almost just right. The vaguely embarrassed indifference displayed by his symbolic reporter represents the most widespread stance toward religion and theology in the media—the centrist position, if you will. There is also, admittedly, a small cheering section to one side. But to another side there is a very large section characterized by cynicism and even hostility.

How are we to explain this state of affairs? Part of the explanation—the tiniest part—no doubt involves theology and theologians. The enterprise is vast and disparate, and extremely daunting to outsiders. Much of the work is not readily accessible even to those who might be tempted. You know all this, I'm sure. The greatest part of the explanation, however, lies in three or four facets of the media culture itself. The first of these has to do with the type of people who hold influential reporting, editing, and management positions in the print and broadcasting media. These people do not represent a broad cross-section of the American population. Catholics, for example, are greatly underrepresented among their ranks. Whatever their sectarian affiliation, it is in most cases nominal: they are by and large irreligious. Their profession frequently makes them rootless, and it makes even more skeptical a group that is skeptical by self-selection. The nature of their work, moreover, is empirical in nature, almost reductionist. It demands facts, data, evidence. This is the enterprise, after all, that is always looking for the "smoking gun." And while that work may require a broad grasp of history, philosophy, and sociology, almost nothing about it calls for even a dash of theology. An abiding ethic of the media business, furthermore, is to hold nothing sacred, except perhaps the first amendment.

The conceptual structure that the media demand of reality, or impose on it, exacerbates the situation. Daily journalism in particular, whether in print or on the airwaves, depends on a limited number of templates in order to quickly give structure and meaning to a story. Of all those templates, the real workhorse is conflict: us versus them, veterans versus upstarts, good guys versus bad guys. One result is that any contemplative tendencies that manage to survive in the media environment are largely engulfed by the pursuit of conflict. It is no accident that when Catholicism, theology, and religion in general receive coverage in the press, some sort of real or perceived conflict is at the heart of the matter. Thus, there is no end of stories about the Pope meeting with Kurt Waldheim, or Leonardo Boff's dis-

missal from an editorship, or the building of a convent at Auschwitz, or Charles Curran's difficulties at Catholic University, or Archbishop Hunthausen's difficulties with the Vatican, or Cardinal O'Connor's difficulties with everybody. There is no shortage of stories about contentious power relations within the church, about feuding prelates and politicians, about conservatives and liberals, about any issue involving gender or sexuality. This sort of thing is the media's stock-in-trade. If you leave aside accounts of the Pope's travels and routine institutional announcements, the Lichter study found, some sixty percent of the media's coverage of the Catholic church involves such things as abortion, dissent, homosexuality, and the church's role in American politics. The point here is not that many of these things aren't important or that none of them impinge on theological territory. Many are, and many do. But they are written about almost exclusively as political stories—the way one might write about factionalism within the Democratic party, say, or the Gambino crime family. And, by their very prominence, they siphon away attention from other matters, the way a city's bright lights may occlude our vision of the stars.

A third big factor that helps to account for the absence of theology from the American media is that odd strain of parochialism one often finds in the most cosmopolitan segments of society—among the people who in any other country but this one would be called members of the intelligentsia. These people (and most participants in the journalism business would include themselves among them) tend to be so terribly well informed, so conversant with what has happened in the world during the past twenty-four hours, so up-to-date on incremental change along a broad front, that whole sectors of normal human life just get missed.

Finally, in those instances when religion and theology *are* acknowledged by the media to be important, it is usually not because they are acknowledged to be important in and of themselves. They are deemed to be important because they may be motivating people toward certain actions that matter in the here and now. The attitude of many who write in the press about religion in our own country at times seems to be roughly similar to that of the American man-in-the-street toward Islam in the Middle East; that is, the *what* that people believe is not as important as the fact that tens of millions of people happen to believe it. Is Jesus Christ the Risen Lord? That question never seems as interesting to people in the media as, say, this one: Will people who believe that He *is* tend to vote for George Bush next time around?

I am not offering here a very enticing picture, from your point of view, of the workaday habits of my profession. I am painting it because it provides the context necessary to bring two points into relief.

The first one is simply that, given the nature of the media in America, there are real limits on how much interest it will *ever* show in theology. And, given the enormities the media is capable of inflicting, I would argue that theology is in some respects lucky. This is not meant as mere whimsy. There are many who govern major institutions or oversee important activities in American society, including most members of the Massachusetts congressional delegation, who would kill to have the exemption from serious attention in the media that Catholic theology has secured. And to a certain extent, this lack of attention does no harm and in fact probably does some good. Much—perhaps even most—of your work not only does

not need to be done in a public fishbowl, in the glare of the klieg lights, but also benefits from not being done there. The media in America have never been very good at the skillful handling of ideas: they break a lot of them by mistake and love many others to death. Besides, few institutions in America possess means of communication alternative to the media as extensive as those of the Catholic church. The fact that theology per se is rarely encountered on some of those alternative byways is another story. Perhaps someone at this meeting next year can discuss the absence of Catholic theology from the pulpit.

The second point is this: There are exceptions to the picture of the media that I have painted, and there is every reason to believe that the number of exceptions will grow. More people of my generation and the one that has followed it into jobs in the media are personally interested in religion than were those in the media before us. Among colleagues in both print and broadcast journalism I am forcefully made aware of this heightened level of interest all the time, usually by accident—by the offhand remark that leads to a meeting of eyes, a tentative probing question, a long conversation. This state of affairs is reflective, I think, of a similar one in the larger society, particularly among the well-educated, and ultimately the media will prove sensitive to that. The *New York Times*, as always, is something of a harbinger in this regard, with the prominent use it has been making of Peter Steinfelds and Ari Goldman, and the inauguration of the biweekly column called "Beliefs." This is symptomatic, I think, of an awareness in some outlets of a palpable demographic tug. Bill Moyers let it be known some time ago that he is giving up for good the more traditional public-affairs programming that was his forte for two decades in order to devote more time to programs on religion and spiritual life. My own publication has long attempted to take religion and theology seriously, and to take them on their own terms, and not simply because they are forces to be reckoned with.

One of the articles that I am proudest of our magazine for publishing appeared a year and a half ago and was called "Can We Be Good Without God?" by the political philosopher Glenn Tinder. In his article Tinder raised an issue that will of course not be new to you, but the mere raising of it was considered to be something of a provocation, given where the article was published. Noting that many of the virtues that underlie pluralistic, liberal democracy—such as respect for the dignity of the individual and a belief in the essential equality of all human beings—have their roots in the political and spiritual vision of Christianity, Tinder wondered whether these social virtues are capable of surviving if detached from those roots. The response to Tinder's article was unexpectedly large. A significant number of letter writers did take umbrage, on the grounds that in this day and age it was really rather sad that a publication like ours would devote ten thousand words to an article of this kind. But a significant number of letters also came from readers expressing gratitude for a piece that profoundly engaged them: worried them, moved them, inspired them. I know editors at other publications who have been similarly surprised when similar chords were struck. That is why I believe that among publications which are of general interest and have a serious side to them there exists a new openness to questions such as people like you are equipped to address—not the technical ones, of course, but those that combine theology with issues of great personal or social moment.

Finding the right way to combine theology and public purpose in a way that can reach thinking people with a predominantly secularist outlook is not easy. A few of you, I know, have done this magnificently. There is an opportunity, though, for greater engagement. Exploiting it may require a more supple familiarity on your part with some aspects of the larger American culture, particularly popular culture and the media culture. It may require finding new and unfamiliar ways of writing, a sense of distance from your craft, and an increased willingness to communicate with people who, being outside the guild, don't matter to you professionally. But it is important that you do so—on a personal level, first of all. People have questions and yearnings, and many are looking for more help than they get. There are also issues in the land of broad moral and social concern from which the national leadership has coolly averted its gaze. Indeed, sadly, in this centennial year of *Rerum Novarum*, there are all too many such issues. Perhaps—perhaps—a more-public theology can help open some eyes.

CULLEN MURPHY
Managing Editor,
The Atlantic Monthly