

## RELIGION TELEVISION COMES OF AGE

Dear Dave,

Thanks for alerting us to watch your department's "The Search for Spirituality" [6-7am ABC/TV today out of Boston]. Your letter says "Even though I wasn't directly involved with its production, I am very excited about the result....it looks descriptively (but with some depth) at the various ways people are feeding their spiritual hungers today." Your description of the program is accurate & (as is your style) modest. I would call it a splendid achievement, worthy of this Thinksheet's title. Not to mind, please, that my response to your letter is open rather than private: why should I not do a bit of promo for you, NCC/TV, & the program while I'm at it?....Thanks, too, for taking the time to give us all that personal news of your tribe.

Pastoring is holding people up, upholding them, providing them with personal & social means of support. Then, after they're up there, preaching is hitting them. What a betrayal of biblical prophecy, & distortion of the gospel, only to hold them up, or only to hit them! We take a hit every time we truly pray the Lord's Prayer, & the hit is to be passed on as the Kingdom of God cuts across the grain of the kingdoms of this world, including ecclesial kingdoms congregational, denominational, & ecumenical. So I must think up some negative things to say about the program, as a prayer that future such programming will be even better.

1 Since it's what you leave out that wrecks you, what did the program **leave out**? My experience of it is less than an hour ago, so I may not think of everything at the moment, but here's a start:

(1) **Mainline white male spirituality.** You (not you personally, but your department) are so eager to glue eyeballs to the tube that you avoid including the spirituality you think your vidience (which will be in the next dictionary, on the model of "aud-ience") will ho-hum about....Since NCC is historically largely a creature of mainline white males, one may see here a sort of kenosis, though inauthentic.

(2) **White evangelical.** Allergy to this spirituality is part of the ethos of American ecumenism as I've experienced it from the Federal Council of Churches through to today's National Council of Churches. (I remember how tough it was to convince NCC to let Billy Graham speak at the '66 Triennium, & my debating him was a condition of his welcome.)

Other blindspots may occur to me before, during, or after church this morning. You're so sharp on these matters, you may be way ahead of me anyway.

2 **Badmouthings** are a liberal bad habit, & I caught two of them:

(1) The opening line, badmouthing on-beat religion as flaccid, implicitly announced that the program will be what it proved to be, viz mainly off-beat. Ken Woodward's recent NEWSWEEK coverstory on prayer was more even-handed. (I presume it was serendipitous that you both used extensively the same Christian monk, Steindl-Rast.)

(2) A cheap-shot profeminist aside against the prefeminist church's supposed neglect of women (in connection with your segment on a national meeting of Presbyterian women). In American Protestantism, women have normally been hugely influential; & one baleful influence of the women's movement was to reduce that influence by killing just such gatherings as that of those Presbyterian women! It became fashionable in the mainline churches to badmouth "segregating" women into women's groups at the congregational & all other levels. For one, the former women's missionary societies were powerful. I remember Florence Partridge, a great woman of God, who headed "women's work" pre-Friedan in the E&R church, & who sent me around the country to do Bible studies for their state conferences (often 1,000 women, though the denomination was small). (As the decades pile up, more & more one sees "new" as meaning "ignorant of the past.")

3 No ads except for upcoming ABC programs. This is, I hope, good news. Religion television (not "religious television," please, for so much of it, & not only so much of the televangelists, hasn't met my criteria of "religious") has come upon harder times since the free-time cutbacks & the collapse of Pam Eylot's CBS religion department. I thank God for your savvy as well as your spirituality, & your success more in spite of than because of your courage in producing balanced & mature programming.

4 There's a freshness in the presentations of high-name-recognition personalities. Eg, Mt. Fox came on not with his usual creation-spirituality pitch but with a cry of deep grief for our almost lost plant, for the fouling & wasting of our common & only home. And Bede Griffiths, speaking in his Ashram of the Holy Trinity in India, spoke movingly of being what for many years I've called "OO," orthodox but open to learning from "other sheep who are not in this pen" (Jn.10.16)--the only position, it seems to me, that has promise for religion teaching in our public schools.

5 The title "Search for Spirituality" got the program off to a **prejudiced** start. In our three Western religions, humanity's (active) searching for a (passive) God is a molehill compared with the mountain of revelation, God's (active) self-disclosure to a (largely passive) humanity. (The Qur'an is even stronger on this than are the Torah & the Gospel.) (A recent booktitle: RELIGIONS OF THE AGGRESSIVE GOD: JUDAISM-CHRISTIANITY-ISLAM; & this at the heart of our UCC Statement of Faith: "God has come to us.") Augustine was not the only early Christian to subsume search under revelation: we'd not look for God if he hadn't already found us. We are the feminine, the church as the bride of Christ: your title makes us the masculine, seizing the divine initiative. In this perspective, spirituality is as much a vaporization of religion as philosophy is an abstraction from it.

More when I see you anon. Grace & peace, *William*