

Experiences from Indonesia:

United Media Presence

By Ruedi Hofmann SJ, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

1. What kind of media?

Considering the fact that about two thirds of the Indonesian population can be categorised as poor and that according to the National Socio-economic Survey of 1997, 59.2% listen to radio and 78.2% watch television, we can assume that a large part of the poor population is exposed to these two media. Print media, on the other hand, does not seem to reach a large percentage of the poor, since in 1997 only 22.8% of the whole population answered “yes” to the question whether they had read a newspaper or a magazine during the last week.

Among the two most popular media, radio is still on the decline. Since 1981 the figures have gone down by 15% whereas television viewing has increased by almost 30%.

However, is Indonesian television as we know it today really with the poor? In most cases we would have to say “no”. The world reflected on the television screen is not the poor people’s world. It is the world of the affluent. And this is how the owners of television want it to be. The local Nielsen ratings are only interested in the five largest markets and it can be assumed that the diaries upon which the research is based are placed only in middle to upper class households. If the poor watch the programs that’s fine. But advertisers are not interested in the poor. For them the target audience should have maximal purchasing power. This consideration certainly affects the content of the programs. One area where rich and poor can easily meet is religion. We do not have statistical data on the number of poor people who watch religious television. However, even without such data we can say that today it is very important to make religious programs attractive to the poor and to get the poor involved in the production.

2. Why interreligious?

It is not only appropriate but necessary for Christians [...] to act; in more direct co-operation with other religions, to ensure a united religious presence in the very heart of mass communications. (AN 3)

This passage from the Pastoral Instruction “Aetatis Novae” shows that it is not just the Church which has to be present in mass media, but a “united religious presence” should be ensured.

On the six national television channels, each of the five officially recognised religions gets a slot.

Typically this allotted time is used by the religions for an exclusive transmission aimed at a particular segment of the audience. Members of other religions are not supposed to watch the program. This system can hardly be called a "united religious presence". It also contradicts the very nature of television as a medium which is basically open to all.

Much more suitable would be an interreligious program aimed at believers of all religions and focused on issues rather than on denominations. For example, there could be a program about peace from a religious point of view with stories, verses, comments, and songs from the scriptures and traditions of various religions. Such a program could be very powerful, since it would show that all religions support peace and none of them promotes violence.

Unfortunately, the television stations are not yet ready for this type of dialogue. The religions have been put into compartments as if they were in competition with each other, whereas in fact more often than not the religions share a common cause. They are all against inequalities, consumerism, excessive luxury, slavery, discrimination, and domination. All of them favour love, compassion, care, and friendship with all creatures.

Even if the television stations are not willing to open their channels for common interreligious productions, the Christians can at least "ensure a united religious presence" utilising their allotted air-time for interreligious dialogue hoping that gradually others will follow suit.

In the remaining part of this short paper I want to report about our experience with this method during the last four years.

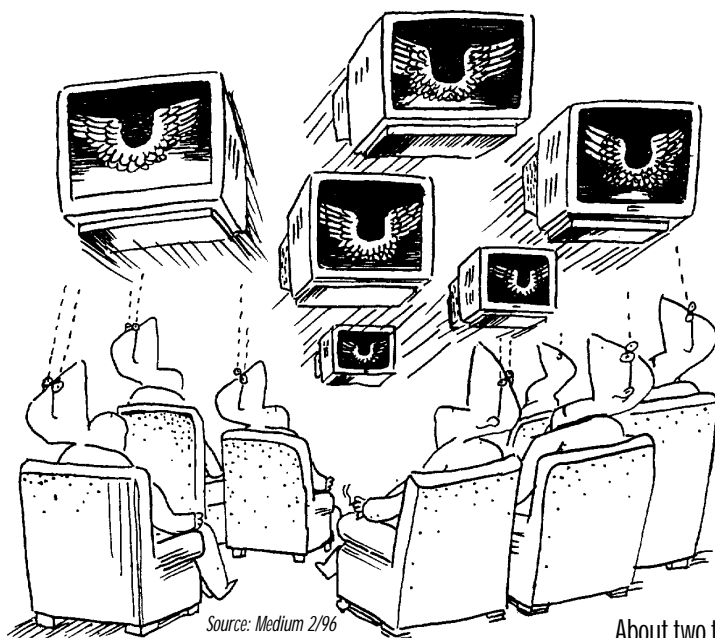
3. Controversy with censors and viewers

Censorship both by the government and by the television stations is quite strict. However, dialogue with the censors is sometimes possible. Our first attempt to invite other religions to our program involving a Gandhi ashram was rejected. We were told that our program should be confined to Catholic faith only and that we were not allowed to speak in the name of other religions. After we explained that our aim was friendship with other religions, and that we did not intend to speak in their name, the same program which had been rejected could finally be shown at a later date. Since then many programs were censored, but mostly for political rather than religious reasons.

Sometimes we also receive protests from viewers. Once even the Indonesian Secretary of State phoned the station because we had shown the arrest and trial of Jesus in a drama which according to him was too "contemporary". His protest had nothing to do with our interreligious approach.

In a letter to the editor of the Catholic weekly HIDUP a viewer complained that while he was expecting comfort from his own Catholic faith that when he tuned into our program he was forced to sit through a Buddhist performance. Since then we have tried to be more sensitive making the contributions from other religions shorter and more acceptable to conservative Catholics.

The Catholic travel agency RAPTIM invited our team to cover a pilgrimage tour to the Holy Land. After we had shown some of the pictures with the religious sister who accompanied our team as a commentator, a popular Moslem daily newspaper published a letter to the editor written by a Moslem who resented the way the city of Jerusalem was presented: "While a beautiful mosque



could be seen in the film, the nun did not even care to mention it". We apologised for this shortcoming and prepared a new version in which we included comments about Jerusalem as a holy city also for the Moslems. This version was shown a few weeks later.

Gradually we are learning from our experience. The number of letters which are sent to our office at present is about 250 per broadcast. Among them there are many who ask for more information about contemplative life. Answering these requests in several consecutive programs we showed a number of monasteries, including Taizé, centred around an interview with an Indonesian monk who lives there. In one of the programs we presented a Trappist monastery on a mountain in Central Java followed by the report about a Buddhist monastery near the temple of Borobudur. This particular program was appreciated in many letters. A Buddhist viewer commented: "I am convinced that this program has made many people happy, Buddhists as well as Catholics." This is exactly what we try to achieve with our interreligious approach: we want to make people happy.

About two thirds of the Christians in Indonesia are Protestants. So we want to make them happy too. The minister of a very small Church called "Nazarene" sent us a letter offering his choir to sing in our program. When we listened to the songs, one of my colleagues commented: 'We can't use this. The songs are so exclusive and fundamentalist. They contradict our interreligious approach.' - "Never mind, I said, these are not bad people. Even if we don't agree with their theology, we can still give them a chance to appear on television. However, we shall put the choir in the proper context. Let's make a little report about this Church congregation." It turned out that the whole congregation consisted of less than 100 very simple people. But the joy of being filmed for television was so great, that the Nazarenes now belong amongst our closest friends. When the program was finally broadcast, the fundamentalist theology did not hurt anybody, but the sincerity of the Church members was quite impressive.

In Irian Jaya (West Papua) there are some excellent choirs. When we showed one of them which happened to be Protestant, a Catholic man from Jakarta by the name of Rudolf sent us a letter complaining that he felt humiliated, because a Protestant friend had teased him: "You Catholics don't even know how to sing, so you have to invite a Protestant choir." Rudolf felt very strongly, that as a minority we should assert ourselves and we should never cede our precious air-time to other religions. During the next broadcast Rudolf's letter was read by our presenter. Among the many comments we received about his letter, the overwhelming majority was in favour of our interreligious approach. But on a following program we purposely read the few letters which supported Rudolf, besides some others, of course. This created a new wave of reactions, most of them urging us to continue the interreligious dialogue. To Rudolf we sent a bag with our interreligious symbol as a present. This was a great surprise for him. In a recent letter he confessed that he now likes our program very much and that he never misses it.

Under military rule, Indonesia has experienced compartmentalised religion for more than four decades. As a result, hundreds of churches, but also dozens of mosques and other places of worship have been burnt by angry mobs. Of course, behind these riots there are political motives, and the mobs are stirred up by provocateurs. Nevertheless, I sometimes ask myself whether such things could have happened, if from the beginning the aim of our Christian mission had been friendship and happiness for all.